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Connecting Experience and Economy—Aspects of Disguised Positioning

Bo Allesøe Christensen

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Abstract The focus of this article is the use of experience made within the literature of the “new” economical discipline of experience economy. By combining a methodological individualism with a causal and dehumanising picture of the process of experience, this discipline conceives economic interactions as acts of autonomy. These acts, it is claimed, are part of economical instrumental reason restructuring itself by using experiences as tools in convincing consumers that they are free to pursue their respective paths of lives. Described through the use of positioning theory, however, this turns out to be a result of an effort of equipping consumers with a new economic norm of forced positioning disguised as deliberate self-positioning.

Keywords Positioning theory · Experience economy · Rom Harré · Consumerism · Disguised positioning

Introduction

In the introduction to his excellent book, *Songs of Experience*, Professor Martin Jay (2005, p. 6) observes a paradox inherent in the use of most concepts but particularly explicit when it comes to the concept of experience, “...experience is both a collective linguistic concept, a signifier that yokes together a class of heterogeneous signifieds located in a diacritical force field, and a reminder that such concepts always leave a remainder that escapes their homogenizing grasp.” Hence, no meta-narrative is possible when it comes to writing a history of the idea of experience, i.e. no single point from where or towards which this history unfolds or can be unfolded. As a consequence Jay (2005, p. 3) aims at uncovering and exploring the “...multiple, often contradictory meanings...” of all the songs historically sung about experience, instead of presenting yet an account of *what* experience really is. This article,

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essayistic in spirit, explores one remainder, to iterate Professor Jay's wording, in need of being reminded: the connection between experience and economy. Specifically, how experience is conceived when it is connected with the allegedly new experience-economy, a marketing theoretical economy focusing on how experiences are conducive in the buying and selling of things.

Now even though Professor Jay did not explore the connection between experience and economy in the aforementioned book, in a later interview (Goodman 2003) he suggests how this theme should be explored. Asked by the interviewer what the growing commoditization of experience signifies, Jay gives the following answer. Intrinsic to the concept of experience is a distinction, explicitly made in German, between *erlebnis*, an intense, subjective experience, and *erfahrung*, both the experience handed down in cultural traditions and the creating of new experiences able to be handed down. An example of this distinction would be the difference between the intense experience of driving a car for the first time (the *erlebnis*), and the skills, norms and rules in play when driving, plus the experience coming from the continuous practice of driving (the *erfahrung*). Jay suggests, upon accepting this distinction as a meaningful categorization, experience, when connected to consumption, is predominantly emphasized as *erlebnis* putting "...intensity in the place of meaningful duration." (Goodman 2003, p. 117). The same conceptual pair is used in the literature, Boswijk et al. (2007), of the new experience economy, which will be the object of our study. This will show us how, from this economical perspective, experience is conceptualized and related to human being and doing. Particularly, these authors (see also Jantzen and Jensen 2006; Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007a; Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007b) emphasize the continuous role of the consumer in the creation of experiences, with the intention of describing a more complete picture of the experiencing individual. Contrary to Jay's claim, then, *erfahrung* is initially included in the concept of experience within this economy (see also Zwick et al. 2008). But, as will be seen, part of it is still downplayed strategically when it comes to positioning the consumer as an experiencing individual. Only those *erfahrungs* conducive to facilitating a purchase by the consumer are emphasised. To give an example, one slogan of a famous coffee selling company goes, "It is not just what you're buying, it is what you're buying into", where this into is more than not just a service, it is the experience (see Žižek 2009, p.53 for the full text of the advertisement). It is comprised of "good coffee ethics", "good coffee karma", plus nice surroundings with comfortable chairs, good music, free online access and so on, "to dream, work and chat in". Consuming in this place is partaking in a staged setting involving certain experiences like the intense smell of fresh grinded coffee beans, or having a good conscience doing something right through consuming. It excludes certain experiences as well, like leaving your everyday obstacles outside the door, forgetting a bad smell or questioning in what sense the horizon under which the consuming act is subsumed is actually ethical. Hence, a joint process of exclusion and inclusion is part of the creation of experiences in experience economy, including those experiences capable of working as instruments in achieving the goal of this economic rationality, only.

Now this sounds like old news, since capitalist economical systems are based on optimising the conditions for reproducing themselves either by excluding or incorporating anything opposite to them (see Boltanski and Chiapello 1999 for a recent

analysis of this). So where is the pertinence in highlighting this, then? First of all, it indicates a reconfiguration of parts of those socio-economic processes dealing with the daily consumption practices by using some *new* instruments, the *erlebnis* and *erfahrung* just described, for achieving the economical goal of selling. As Žižek (2009, p. 35) claims, the basic ideological *dispositif* of capitalism “...call it “instrumental reason,” “technological exploitation,” “individualist greed,” or whatever we like—is separated from its concrete socio-economic conditions (capitalist relations of production) and conceived of as an autonomous life...” thereby leaving these relations of production intact. Experience economy is part of this *dispositif*, it will be argued, since it produces means for this “instrumental reason” to separate itself from certain socio-economic conditions (see Sato 2011 for another critique of de-contextualising economical transactions, which, however, does not discuss the economical strategic point in doing so). Second, through this process, norms for understanding this separation as a process of increasing autonomy of the consumer are introduced. Hence, the autonomous life spoken about in the quote above is supposedly manifested through the consumer expressing his or her capability of self-steering or being autonomous through acts of experiential consumption *staged* by companies. Experiences, both *erlebnisse* and *erfahrungen*, become the instruments by which the consumer manifests this (economical) autonomy. The socio-economic conditions, then, are deliberately separated from the consumers through excluding certain parts of the experiences, and this vacuum of exclusion—a dehumanisation—is then filled up with the “new” norm of self-steering or autonomy through consuming.

This process of mutual exclusion/inclusion will be analysed, using positioning theory, within a philosophical informed setting of how experience should be conceived. Positioning theory is here understood in the sense given to it by Rom Harré and others, as a tool within the broad theoretical frame of discursive psychology (Harré and van Langenhove 1998; Harré and Moghaddam 2003) or more recently, hybrid psychology (Brinkmann 2011; Harré 2012). The concept of positioning is a strong alternative to the more static concept of role, where the relationship salesman-customer, for example, is predetermined. Hence, the concept of role fails to describe how these roles are experienced and enacted by the participants dynamically *in their own way*. Instead positioning theory draws explicitly on an emergent ontology of social entities dispersed between different generic orderings of a spatial, time-related, material and normative character (see Martin and Gillespie 2010, for similar insights within the broad framework of a neo-Meadian approach). Within this ontology, social acts, including speech acts, physical acts of sitting or driving, for example, and other expressions of *experiencing*, are seen as the ‘matter’ of social reality—expressing how different positions are enacted in different dynamical ways. An early precursor of connecting psychology and economy in studying human being and doing is Simon’s classical articles (1955; 1956). In contrast to Simon’s predominantly individualistic methodology, positioning theory, however, furthers the awareness of the complexities, the boundedness of economic rationality as Simon terms it, involved in and across different related situations of both economical and non-economical character.

So in the following an explorative analysis is made from a joint philosophical and discursive psychological perspective. Explorative in the sense that it is in congruence with the positive valuation of scientific indeterminacy (Clegg 2010; Elstrup 2010;

Kohler 2010), where the purpose of the analysis is not determining some causal model or representation of a part of human life, but recognizing agency and genuine possibilities of acting. Hence, the aim is more critical in showing how experience is used as an instrument instituting the new economic norm of seeing consumption as an expression of freedom. Conditioning this instituting is a certain methodology deployed by experience economy for setting up the process of allowing only some experiences and constraining the effect these experiences could have. This methodology starts by emphasising the consumer's role in creating experiences and proceeds from the experiencing individual to the social embeddings of this individual. The social, then, becomes a category for describing the addition of these experiencing individuals only—confirming the initial separation from the socio-economic conditions described above. Hence, experiencing is primarily an individual endeavour with the obvious over-individual elements (the surrounding world) involved in all experiencing denigrated to a secondary influencing factor. One important assumption underpinning this methodological individualism is the appeal to a “causal picture of human life”, as Rom Harré terms it. This picture is implicit in the epistemology of creating experiences, as we will see, and serves the economy in the guise of instrumental reason well. The parts comprising the epistemology can namely be incorporated as means to the specific experience economic end of reaching the freedom of the consumer by staging the process of exclusion/inclusion. Using positioning theory, however, this process can be described more as a *forced positioning* disguised as a *deliberate self-positioning*. Learning to pretend expressing freedom by engaging in consumption practices is the norm, which the experience economy tries to teach the consumer. For example, in a consuming situation, I am supposedly free to choose between different things. But staging the situation, making my choice an experiential act, positions me with a duty of imagining this choosing as my free choice, not the company's, regardless of the socio-economic conditions involved.

The article proceeds in the following manner: first, an example of experiencing is presented and will be used throughout the article. This example introduces some initial considerations as to what is implied in the concept of experience and serves as a contrast to how experience is conceived within the experience economy. Second, a short description of the development within experience economy will be presented. Third, this will set the stage for presenting, how experiencing and experience is conceived within one of the newest presentations of experience economy. Assuming the discipline of experience economy is fairly unknown, this description will be fairly detailed. Finally, the general characteristic of experience and experiencing, as it is presented within the economical perspective, is presented using positioning theory and exemplified by the author's own experience of buying a car. Hopefully the contours of a new positioning of the consumer, as part of the reconfiguration of the aforementioned *dispositif*, will appear.

Experiencing: One Famous Example

Let us start with a very famous description of experiencing, Marcel's experience of eating a madeleine cake in Proust's *In search of lost time* (Proust 2000). It runs

through several pages in the end of the part called Combray in the first book, and the following is an excerpt:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin... Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? ... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea . . . as soon as I had recognised the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me.

The case of Marcel's childhood memories starting to flow when he tastes this madeleine cake dipped in linden tea has been the object of plenty of literary investigations. What is interesting here is Proust's description of experiencing in both its aspects. That is, as an intense, subjective experience, *erlebnis*, and as an experience based on pre-given social practices, creating new experiences of learning in its aftermath, *erfahrung*. Now, even though Proust's description is done from a first person perspective it is a common experience—we can all understand how this experience actually takes place (it is a realistic description) and how this experience would unfold if it were our experience (how I would shudder, smell the tea or taste the cookie or describe the experience). Hence, there is something general, philosophically, about this description, in the sense in which Tugendhat (2010) interprets Kant's anthropological question "What is man?" Tugendhat observes that the concomitant questions Kant poses (in his *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*) are asked from a first person perspective (What can *I* know, what should *I* do and so on), but the answer is presented from the third person perspective. The reason for this is, according to Tugendhat, that Kant implicitly articulates a general tension between the world conceived from a subjective perspective and the possible general validity of this subjective perspective. Hence, as a characteristic of human understanding there exists:

a tension between a subjective and a common perspective; it is this tension which forces us to enlightenment, and makes it inevitable that every act of self-understanding is to be seen in the widest horizon of how we understand ourselves as humans. Because of this dynamic, everything I judge to be so and so is directed at a We and this We is directed at the widest understanding of us as human beings. (Tugendhat 2010, p. 39)(Translation, BAC)

Now, even though Tugendhat's way of putting it, that my understanding is in some way ours as well, is correct, the conception of We as a general validity of my perspective is too close to an enlarged I. That is, pretending that the subjective conviction is universally binding for all of us. This denigrates the sense in which understanding and experience is connected to *participating* concretely in different practices, particularly how different language-uses makes understanding of experience possible, replacing it with a sense of being spectator to the practice instead, as

Pippin (2010) puts it. This philosophical concept of a spectator view of experience must be kept in mind, though, since it will return later as part of the implicit background of the causal explanation of how experience works—what Harré calls the Cartesian view of mind. Connecting experience and understanding to a given practice and, furthermore, agreeing with Tugendhat's intention that it transgresses a pure personal understanding, we can use Pippin (2008; 2010) as inspiration. Hence, the first thing to stress is that understanding and experiencing are activities. Understanding and experiencing are characteristics of agency connected to participating in and not to a side-ways watching of these practices. Agency, then "...is much more like a socially status instituted and sustained by relevant social attitudes shared in a community at a time than it is like being a unique sort of entity, one either exempt from causal laws of the spatio-temporal universe or possessed of a distinct psychological structure and mode of causation..." (Pippin 2010). The widest understanding of us as human beings, then, is connected to how our participating in a given practice involves both self-relations *and* relations to others, and not just a rootedness in a singular perspective. Second, the mutual recognition of this by the participants in a given practice, presupposes that I am able to identify with my activities and projects within this practice in such a way that they can be experienced and understood as being mine *but* from the other participants perspectives. Understanding and experiencing, then, is shared between participants in concrete practices, by holding one another accountable in accordance with the right criteria for expressing this understanding and experiencing.

Implicit in both points is, of course, that language—made explicit in different language-uses—is a major condition in bringing this mutual experience and understanding about. In this way the given practice embodies both the first person (my wording) and the third person plural perspective (in our language) through an "...achieved form of individual and collective mindedness, and institutionally embodied cognitive relations..." (Pippin 2008, p. 39). Agency, then, embody a sense of autonomy or self-steering only *within* these cognitive relations, that is, as a transaction between different participants in shared practices. Hence, my autonomy and independence is dependent upon others recognising this and vice versa. This mutual recognition is, of course, never without tensions, and a "harmonious" balancing between the participants, therefore, is a possible but not a necessary outcome. The tension will, furthermore, express it self qualitatively in different ways, ranging from the uneasiness accompanying a pretence to the dire consequences of a full-blown quarrel. This philosophical description of the dependence of experience and understanding on mutual recognition in shared practices, complies with the general tenor of developmental psychology in terms of cognition and language-use acquisition (for example Martin and Gillespie 2010; Tomasello 1999; 2005). To put it bluntly, only by learning to use and by using symbolic resources first through emphatic identification with primary caretakers, and later through additional participation in different social practices and institutional settings, is the development of human agency as self-determining fostered.

Opposing this cognitive basis of human agency would be excluding certain socio-economic conditions, thereby inhibiting the possibility of establishing the inherent cognitive relations of a given practice. Furthermore, it would transform the status of agency from cognitive to instrumental, replacing transaction between

the participants with interaction between spectators as isolated entities, thereby conceiving experiences as means to reach pre-given ends. This instrumental character of agency will be understood as a dehumanising of the connection between agency, practice and experience in the following. As we will see in the next couple of sections, the connection between experience and the practice of consumption as emphasised by experience economical literature, has, in general, these characteristics.

First and Second Generation of Experience Economy: From Product to Self-Development

Even though preceding attempts to accentuate the importance of experiences in our society exists (see Boswijk et al. 2007, p. 2; Schulze 2007; Toffler 1973), the idea of a “mature” experience economy is usually considered the result of a growing awareness, through the 1990s, of the limits to a continuous growth in the service sector within organizational and management fields. The experience economy books we will be referring to here, gives the impression that they function as guides in helping companies adjust to this new post-service economy. Joseph Pine and Gilmore (1999), the *locus classicus* of the first generation of experience economy, was the first expression of this awareness. As Boswijk et al. (2007, p. 2) explains,

Their [Pine & Gilmore, BAC] thesis is that as soon as a country has reached a certain level of affluence, the attention shifts from goods and services to experiences. The abundant supply of material goods and services will continue to grow, and this will set off a pattern of cost reduction and commoditisation, there will be more and more competition in terms of price, and this will in turn force companies to look for new ways of bringing goods and services to the attention of customers.

Pine and Gilmore terms this dialectic between commoditization and the creative invention of new experiences, a natural progression of economic value. This progression traverses extracting commodities, producing and selling goods from these commodities, delivering services in connection with selling the goods, staging special experiences around the goods to differentiate it from other manufacturers producing the same kind of good and, last, the special case of guiding an experience process as a transformation of the customer.

The second generation of experience economy, including Boswijk et al. (see also Jantzen and Jensen 2006; Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007a; Jantzen and Rasmussen 2007b), claims that in the perspective of the 1st generation, “...the initiative lies with the supplier and hardly at all with the customer. The latter is consistently viewed as a more or less passive target for the company.” (Boswijk et al., p. 6). Instead the second generation of experience economy contends that a societal tendency to move from a system of social rules to what is termed communicative self-direction exists. In the first generation the company decided the rules in the sense of determining what the customer can buy and what he will experience. The customer is here directed from the (social) outside it is claimed. But with the new logic of communicative self-direction people are not directed from the outside, they “...communicate with companies about what they would like to experience, and companies would do well to take heed and act on the basis of this information.” (Boswijk et al., p. 7) So, a shift to a condition disengaged

from the social and interpreted as ‘autonomous’ or self-steering, seems to be the desired experiential consumerist attitude, “Here, things are not fixed in rigid rules determined from on high, but a dialogue arises between the parties: communication. This obviously also implies that the parties are on the same level; there is no longer a party that determines the rules and gives commands and a party that obeys them unquestioningly;” (Boswijk et al., p. 7) Even though this, arguably, could be interpreted as opening up a way for full-fledged egoism and assumes rather than shows that the parties are on the same level, the authors’ intentions are different. Their intention is to picture the consumers as a necessary element within the relations of production, “... instead there would be a kind of cooperation between the individual and the company. In fact it is precisely this development that one can see taking place within the field of organizational dynamics and the economy.” (Boswijk et al., p. 7) This new self-directed form of personalised economy is the basis of the co-creation between the company and the customer, of either personalized value or meaningful experiences, as the authors claim. Hence, the focus upon creating value for the customer “...leads to fundamental shifts in the value chain. Value creation no longer takes place within the company’s value chain, but with the customer and in the networks centring on the customer.” (Boswijk et al., p. 10). The company is now more of a guide in creating personalised value than a supplier—because the consumer now is the primary supplier to herself. One consequence of this is, as Jantzen and Rasmussen (2007b p. 41) explains, that in cases of unsuccessful selling “...the blame is not just on the good or the supplier. The experiencing person’s lack of abilities bears just as much blame.” (Translation, BAC). Besides unrealistic expectations the primary ability lacking, then, is the consumer’s capability of understanding consuming as an expression of autonomy or self-steering. Hence, the move from 1st to 2nd generation of experience economy is interpreted as an increase in the consumer’s capability of creating experiences to the point of complete independence (see Fig. 1.)

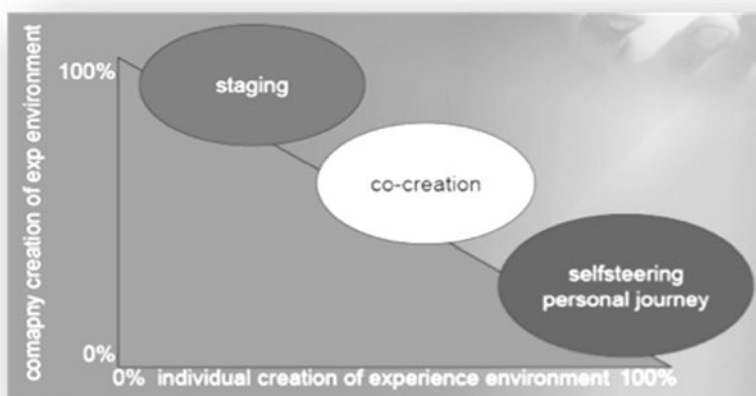


Fig. 1 This picture is reproduced with permission from a powerpoint presentation uploaded on the homepage of European Centre of Experience Economy. The same pictures occur in Boswijk et al. (2007, p. 10) as well

The authors propose a twofold definition of experience behind this experiential based autonomous self-directing. Experience consists both of professional skills, like a pilot's experience in doing his job, and the sensation or feeling released through the act of encountering or undergoing something. This corresponds roughly to the distinction presented in the introduction between *erfahrung* and *erlebnis* and it is the latter definition, the process of undergoing something, which is primarily emphasised: "A simple example is letting a potential customer test-drive a car. Cars are rarely sold anymore without the purchaser making a test-drive. The rational choice for the car (the brand) is supported by the emotional experience of driving it." (Boswijk et al., p. 11) The idea is simple, letting the potential buyer experience the car by driving it supplies her with the primary premise (the experience of undergoing something) in the argument of reaching the conclusion of buying (the rational choice) the car. The "genuine" choice this self-steering and autonomous buyer has is sought shrouded in experiential positive emotions with feelings of self-steering and self-invention understood as the most authentic. Buying a car is not an investment for life, as the car salesman told this article's author when he bought a car - it is an investment in life. The logic of buying and selling of cars, then, encourage "...not only the idea of consumer choice but also the ideology of the self-made man, which allowed the individual to start seeing his own life as a series of options and possible transformations." (Salecl 2010, p. 19) Choosing the car then, is a visible expression of the self-made woman or man, a very tangible expression of freedom and transformation.

The expertise or "worldly wisdom" we normally think of as *erfahrung*, also a result and part of recognitive processes in different societal contexts, is more or less denounced. In its place—as we will see in the next section—is put a process of emphasising only certain parts of the *erfahrung*, those conducive for engaging the consumer in what is perceived as a freedom-evolving and self-transforming process of joyful consumerism. This seems to confirm Salecl's (2010, p. 24) claim that "The more isolated we become from a real engagement with the social and political sphere, the more we are propelled towards self-mastery." That is, consumerist self-mastery is duty-free, free from any duties and consequences involving the social and political spheres. This devaluating or reducing of *erfahrung*, the bypassing of the recognitive processes occurring in and across different contexts, is part of the de-humanizing of the experiencing subject we characterized as the process of exclusion above.

Creating Meaningful Experiences: A Causal Epistemology

Denouncing the social context at the outset is, furthermore, reflected in the epistemological considerations the authors put forth by going "...deeper into the matter and from an individual psychological perspective to investigate and discover what meaningful experiences are and how they form an inextricable component of our lives." (Boswijk et al., p.19). The strategy behind their investigation, is *methodologically* to start with a description of the experience process seen from an *individual* perspective, and from thereon move towards the different contexts, personal, socio-cultural and physical, within which the experiencing individual is acting. Despite the fact that the individual is not the only category carrying any explanative force here, the social is only used as a category for describing the adding up of individuals. Hence, this

methodological individualism (Arrow 1994, p. 1) still implies that all accounts of economic interaction should fundamentally be based on individual behaviour. Hence, one result is a partial description of the agency involved (Warde 2005, p. 132), leaving the recognitive relations and agency as transacting behind. The authors fail, therefore, in engaging with the significance of, first, how social relations are influencing our choices, for example how a social class aspiration potentially influence our (consumerist) choices. Second, of how the individual perspective is intertwined with common meaningful practices. As in our interpretation of Marcel's cookie-experience the possibility of understanding the experience lies not in the individual mind, but through the participation in public practices and foremost among these is language. Furthermore, abstracting the individual from the different situations in which the individual always finds herself embedded in, is reflected in the depiction of the experience process as seen in Fig. 2. The contrast to the recognitive basis of experience and understanding, as described above, is here revealed in the spectator view of experience and understanding, starting with individual (empiricist-causal) sensing triggering the epistemological process, instead of the common recognitive practices rendering this process meaningful in the first place.

The experience process and the shortcomings just touched upon could be described by interpreting Marcel's experience employing Fig. 2. Experiencing the cake, Marcel's senses enable him "...to take cognizance of that part of physical reality that forms *our* world." (Boswijk et al., p. 20). In contradistinction to a purely receptive process, perception is an active form of giving meaning, albeit unconsciously, to the world around us, it is claimed. The madeleine cake, in this sense, reveals to Marcel his intentions, expectations and his personal history (Boswijk et al., p. 21). This triggers an emotional response, containing both an affective and a cognitive component, which determine any possible change on the individual's part. Furthermore, these emotions manifest themselves "...in four ways: through feelings, expressive behavior, motivated behavior and physiological changes." (Boswijk et al., p. 22) In the case of Marcel, the sensory perception of tasting the cake soaked in tea causes a pleasure and a shudder running through his body, making him ponder the effect of the sensation. The whole cake-experience qualifies as an *erlebnis* defined as "An immediate, relatively isolated occurrence with a complex of emotions that make an impression and represent a certain value for the individual within the context of a specific situation." (Boswijk et al., p. 22) Recalling past situations, as when Marcel

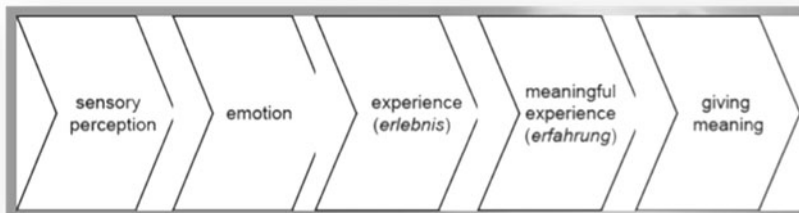


Fig. 2 This picture is reproduced with permission from a powerpoint presentation uploaded on the homepage of European Centre of Experience Economy. The same pictures occur in Boswijk et al. (2007, p. 10) as well

realizes that his sensation is connected to his childhood experiences, is part of *erfahrung*. Included here is the possibility of both the fulfilment and non-fulfilment of expectations as well. Hence, “The meaningful experience in the sense of *erfahrung* involves an important learning component—an aspect of awareness—and differs in that regard from an experience in the sense of *erlebnis*.” (Boswijk et al., p. 24) The learning component derives from the subject questioning what a particular *erlebnis* means for him. This reflecting on specific *erlebnisse* constitutes the experiencing subject’s route to insight of himself, and the way in which he “...might want to change or transform himself.” (Boswijk et al., p. 24) Hence *erfahrung*, as a learning process of action and reflection, of cause and effect “...gives the individual a different outlook on the world and/or himself.” (Boswijk et al., p. 24) The last stage in the process—of giving meaning—concerns the role of the individual’s needs and motives expressing the self-directedness in different situations. The self-steering individual is here conceived as directing herself through attribution of meaning and looking for meaning, and *choosing* to enter into meaningful and flexible social contexts. Here, however, Marcel’s cake-experience doesn’t make sense within the perspective of Boswijk et al. anymore, because Marcel is not looking for the possibility of exercising his will. The cake experience is just one of a series of involuntary memories leading up to Marcel’s *recognition* of the different histories the characters in the novel have, making his own history and memory a *transaction* with these characters in and through time. Opposite to this is the experiential epistemology of Boswijk et al., where “...people, social connections and organisations attempt to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances. The individual adapts himself, adapts his social and economic networks and strives to provide for himself in a way that makes sense to him.” (Boswijk et al., p. 43) This comes close to what Salecl (2010, p. 38) sees as consumerism in denial, that the unrestrained and free consumer lives under the impression that their allegedly free consumption has no painful consequences. The experience economical consumer does not adapt to the economic conditions in a recognitive fashion. It is the other way around—s/he strives to provide for her- or himself in such a way that they, as instruments, adapt to her or him (A recent example of this is the magnitude of TV-shows exhibiting indebted people for whom the painful consequences of such an excessive “free” consumerism becomes a reality). *Erlebnis* as emotion becomes an instrument, a means, within the reflective learning process of *erfahrung* - of making the circumstances adapt - to the end of making my choices appear as choices made by a self-steering free-floating individual.

This, then, is very close to a picture, which we will turn to next, “...of human life as the sum of interactions of individual ‘mechanisms’ with each other and with the environment, the behaviour of each of which can be explained in cause-effect terms.” (Harré 1999, p. 43) A quote which already indicates some of the problematic assumptions behind the picture of experiencing we have just described.

Causal Versus Agential Pictures of Human Life

Readers familiar with positioning theory would probably recognise the picture of the experiencing individual described above as very close to Harré’s (1999, p. 43) description of theories presupposing a causal picture of human life. Here human

beings “...are conceived as hierarchically organised clusters of cognitive mechanisms of most of the workings of which people are unaware.” Opposed to this is Harré’s (ibid.) own view, a picture of human life as “...a collective activity, in which individuals work with others to fulfil their intentions and achieve their projects according to local rules and norms.” The opposition between these two views can be specified by a short description of those central assumptions of positioning theory relevant for our evaluation of the notion of experience. This will show positioning theory as assuming the same recognitive basis of experiencing as sketched above.

First, behind the causal picture looms the idea of the mental consisting of different processes carried out by the mind in response to external stimuli. This is very similar to what Harré (1999, p. 46) describes as the “...Cartesian picture of “the mind” as some kind of diaphanous mechanism, a mechanism which operated upon such non-material stuff as “information”.” Remember, emotions as described in the experience process above where the first modes of processing information as a result of sensory inputs. Hence, the mind, as the inner space in which the process of experiencing unfolds, becomes a processing mechanism common to all people independent of the content and context of its operations. In contrast, Vygotsky’s famous credo that any function in the cultural development occurs twice, first between people and second inside the mind, and Wittgenstein’s focus on the normative function of rules, norms and conventions within ‘language games’ serve as the basis for positioning theory’s social concept of mind (Howie and Peters 1996). From this point of view, Harré (1999, p. 52) claims that

...beliefs, attitudes, memories, emotions, ratiocination of all kinds are not mental states and processes; they are not entities of any sort, mental or otherwise. They are phenomena which have their being as attributes of public and private activities, in which people put local symbolic systems to work for all sorts of purposes.

Hence, experiencing is not a mental process occurring inside the heads of particular individuals. Instead it is part of a symbolic process rooted in particular constellations of public practices, “...consisting of a system of rights, duties, obligations and evaluative conventions which determine...the *positions* speakers adopt or relinquish in a particular society.” (Howie and Peters 1996, p. 54) Even if the concept of determining in this quote is too strong a description of the connection between public practices and persons, as will be clear below, the idea is vindicated. If we are to speak of a privatized individual experience process then we should realize that it grows out of transactions with other people and the world we share (Harré and Gillett 1994, p. 45) To put it in another way, private and public cognition are “...of the same kind, symbolic procedures, according to certain norms...” (Harré 1992a, p. 6) Hence, the mind is *discursive* precipitating from symbolic mediated transactions, discursive practices involving rights and duties, engaging with other people and the world. Speaking of the experiencing mind as something independent and separate from the context in which the experiencing occurs and as capable of being abstracted in separation from content of the experiencing is simply an illusion. But it is a useful illusion nevertheless, laying the first stepping-stone on the road to the dehumanizing of experience. Second, in outlining the different positions individuals adopt, the notion of person is of prime importance (Harré 1992b) as the connecting link between

the different cultural practices and the rules, norms and conventions guiding these. Persons engage in and with practices, with rules and norms serving more as guides than as strict determinants in accomplishing tasks and performing acts. Hence, persons are the locations for social acts where discursive positioning by persons engaging in conversations with each other is the most basic in the social realm (Harré and van Langehove 1991, p. 394) Returning once again to Marcel's cookie experience, this experience is not captured using the causal picture of the mind as a description, then, since the meaning of the experience is not something created within Marcel's mind. Instead it grows out of the particular transactions with other people and the world within public practices providing Marcel with symbolic procedures for understanding the cookie experience. A description of these transactions will show how Marcel positions himself and others through the experience by calling attention to the discursive practices out of which the story-line or narrative of the book emerges. The agential picture of human life is opposite to the causal picture of human life, then, because the latter conceives experiencing as a *privatized* individual inner process, where any connection with other people or the world is of a secondary importance only. Furthermore, any connection to other people or the world is conceived as interactions rather than transactions, since these connections are based, firstly, on causal exchanges between the mind and the world and, secondly, on causal processing between the different stages within the experience process. These two steps describe the conditions for the excluding process we have named de-humanizing. De-humanizing in the sense of methodological "forgetting" the different public dimensions involved in experiencing, creating the idea of an experiencing individual as first standing apart from the social context and then interacting with this context in a mechanistic manner. As we will see next, this use of a causal picture of mind also serves the purpose of positioning me as if I am positioning myself.

Intentional Positioning

As indicated by Davies and Harré (1990) positioning myself as a person, as well as being positioned by others, is a non-predictable result of ongoing discursive processes and participating in different practices. This, furthermore, enables experiences of contradictory positionings, for example in cases where tensions or even discrepancies between self-positioning and others positioning me occurs. This was described in a philosophical manner as part of the process of mutual recognition above. *Disguised positioning*, which we will return to below, is an example of one such tension between the experiencing individual (the consumer) and the setting of the experience (through the experience economical aspects discussed). Commencing a description of this aspect we need to pay attention to what Harré and van Langehove (1991, p. 399) describes as intentional positioning, the positioning of self and others as either deliberately or forced.

Deliberate self-positioning occurs whenever one expresses a personal and social identity either by stressing one's/our agency or unique point of view or by referring to events in one's biography/our common history. As in the example of buying a car above, a situation is produced allowing the buyer to involve only parts of his or hers former experiences with cars, thus setting the stage for realizing the car's significance

for his or hers unique point of view, and in the end describing the purchase as an expression of the deliberate agency of the buyer. Hence, presenting yourself through the act of buying, positions you as capable of offering explanations of your personal behaviour as well (Harré and van Langehove 1991, p. 400), by referring to your experiences (of riding this car compared to other cars), to your biography (I never owned such a car before) or by referring to your powers and the right to exercise them (I have the right to own this car just as much as you). As explanatory forms these can be of use to the buyer justifying his or her social identity, for example by explaining his or her act as a result of wishing to join the club of owners of this particular car or belonging to this social class, thereby expressing different kinds of rights and duties.

The prime example of *forced positioning* is how the defendant is positioned in a criminal trial. “In appearing before court a defendant is being positioned by several persons each representing specific powers (lawyers, prosecutor, witnesses for the defence, and for the prosecution, psychiatrists, social workers and so on).” (Harré and van Langehove 1991, p. 404) Each party will try to force the defendant into a specific position by using different explanations as justifications or excuses of the defendant’s guilt or innocence. On the basis of the juridical process the judge and the jury will deliver a judgement understood as yet another positioning of the defendant. Notice that the defendant’s testimony here is not a case of deliberate self-positioning, he or she *is made* to testify by the institution of law demanding an account, which makes it a case of *forced self-positioning*. The last possibility is the *deliberate positioning of someone else*, either absent or present. In case the person is absent, the positioning comes close to gossiping. When the person is present, the positioning creates a place “...in the speaker’s story-line which may or may not be taken up by the person positioned.” (Harré and van Langehove 1991, p. 403)

Recapitulating we have established that experience economy uses a process of dehumanising in characterising the process of experiencing, and behind this lurks a causal picture of human life with objects and processes used instrumentally for an end called self-steering—the ultimate personalized authentic (bought) value. Let us use the example of the car above and combine it with this author’s own experience in buying a car, and describe it using the conceptual apparatus of positioning theory.

Disguised Positioning or How to Pretend to be Free When Buying

Strolling around among the cars on display I am approached by the car salesman who, in addition to his politeness, of course is interested in positioning me, the customer, as a possible new car-owner. Nothing new is going on here. Furthermore, I am interested in purchasing a car within the nearest future as well, since I have taken the time and made the effort of going to the car dealer. Initially, then, our mutual positioning each other involves his duty to convince me of buying a car, and my right of being reluctant to his persuasion. So I position the car dealer deliberately, starting the story-line of ‘I might be looking for a new car to buy’, which the car salesman will be picking up. But he will be picking up the story-line with the aim of positioning the customer, me, in a manner which leaves me with the primary choice of buying a car. He will do so by supplying or excluding the premises needed for me to arrive at the, for him, right conclusion. In this process he will be appealing to the experience

process as described above; making sure both that I make the purchase and understand myself to be positioned in a self- deliberate manner through this purchase (it is, after all, an investment in *my* life as he will say).

Taking the car for a ride then, initiates my experiential process by appealing to my emotionality through the sensations I have of driving the car. This isolated occurrence is supposed to make an impression and represent a certain value for me within the context of this specific situation, as the definition of *erlebnis* above claims. Note the wording of the situation as isolated and specific, as described by Boswijk et al.(2007, p. 22). The process of experiencing is reduced to a focus on *this* situation, how does *this* car make me feel. Returning from the test-drive the car dealer tried to intensify the experience of *this* situation with my driving *this* car, by continuing the story-line asking, “How was it? Probably not like any car you have driven before, right”. He thereby tries to make me emphasize all the positive qualities of exactly *this* car, in contradistinction to all other cars I have driven. The picture of this *erfahrung* as a causal and internal informational processing, and hence as the effect of my reflection of the experience of the car, serves as a further reduction of the experience process by excluding reflections not relevant for this particular *erlebnis*. Hence, a causal chain is sought created leading from the experience of driving the car to the customer’s reflection on this and, in the end, supplying the customer with the exclusive premises for ‘deliberately’ buying the car. By going through the *erfahrung* part of the experience process I am positioned as reflecting on the importance of *this Erlebnis* to me and—again in the words of experience-economy—how it has the potential to transform my life by supplying me with a different outlook on myself and the world. Hence, creating a sense of “duty-to-myself” to buy exactly *this* car. In the last stage of this process, then, the customer is choosing to buy the car or not (I actually did), but the choice involves more than just the car. My sense of autonomy as a self-steering individual is supposed to be implied as well—it was at this point the car dealer told me that it was an investment in life. The very act of buying the car then, is presented as an expression of me in pursuit of a meaningful experience with which I am supposed to construct *my* own existence. It is supposed to be my choice alone, even my duty, without any obvious forced positioning on the car-dealers part.

When we sat down in his booth going over the terms for the sale and the loan I paused at one time, hence expressing some visual doubts. He looked at me and said something like, “It is your choice. I am only trying to help you”. So I started implicitly to appeal to the forms of justification characterising the deliberate self-positioning described above, *pretending* that I was about to make one of the most serious choices in my life and that the guy in front of me was just helping me, the best way possible, with my new investment in life. In my mind, I went through my experiences (of riding this car compared to other cars), and my biography (I never owned such a car before), even imagined I had a right to exercise something like my own autonomous power (which I of course have, but I was afraid others might buy it since it was on sale), so I bought it (to my wife’s astonishment, apparently I always consider buying stuff at least thrice). Now, this was a case of pretending, because I knew very well that buying this car, my alleged power of self-steering, actually involved a lot of other conditions influencing the purchase. So returning home, my supposed sense of self-empowerment was somehow undermined by a growing sense of uneasiness, of how this new financial situation would influence my life (or actually, ours).

Now, there might be other and better examples than this, but it still indicates parts of the characterisation of the economy put forward in the introduction. First of all, it was presented like an act of autonomy performed by me, the self-steering individual, and not just a simple car-deal, which it actually was. The experience process was still reduced in the effort of using it instrumentally as a premise, or cause, in the argument leading to the conclusion, or effect, of me buying the car, and picturing this as a genuine choice of my own as a life-changing experience. So the regular consumption situation of buying and selling is clothed in the guise of freedom, the car-dealer is “only” helping me in making me feel like I am making a decision all by my self. So the situation is more or less intentionally disguised (by the dehumanising) as a deliberate self-positioning on my part. Furthermore, it is this process which indicates the restructuring of the economy by its teaching us to see consumption as a kind of freedom in action. If we accept this, we can then see more clearly how the causal picture of human life works as an assumption in the making of this *quasi-forced positioning disguised as deliberate self-positioning*. The appeal to the causal picture of life, exemplified through the cause/effect character of the experience process, creates the impression that the self-steering individual chooses from a range of options in a deliberate linear fashion. What makes it a quasi-forced position is the excluding of factors not “directly” influencing the purchase, that is, factors not taking directly part in the constructed cause/effect relation. This excluding creates the space in which the car salesman can position the individual as a surmised self-steering and autonomous human being. What makes it disguised, then, is a presenting of the choice as a conclusion in an argument consisting of few and simple premises, and what gives it the glow of a deliberate self-positioning is the individual reaching this conclusion “by herself”. The idea behind this new experiential capitalism, and its restructuring through teaching us a picture of consuming as freedom, seems to be what Salecl (2010, p. 8) had in mind when she wrote, “Life choices are described in the same terms as consumer choices: we set out to find the ‘right’ life as we would find the right kind of wallpaper or hair conditioner.” Or, at least, pretending that it is so.

As a token that this is not a one-off affair, let us end with a concise comment on the coffee example from the introduction, an example showing signs of disguised positioning as well. First of all, remember that the act of buying a cup of coffee is presented as the same as an ethical act. For Joseph Pine and Gilmore (1999, p.3) this is a prime example of experience economy, proceeding from a pure service economy to selling experiences, even transforming ones, i.e. of an ethical kind. This is what one is supposed to buy into, an ethical experience. Buying the cup of coffee, then, redeems more than what is in the buying. Hence, the consumer supposedly positions him- or herself as an ethical consumer expressing a personal and social identity through the buying.

Now a kind of forced positioning follows from the “fact” that the ethical and the consuming act are or can be the same, by excluding (at least) two socio-economical conditions. Firstly, it is not clear in exactly what sense the consuming act is ethical. Is it the intention of the buyer or the company that makes it an ethical act? Or is it, perhaps, the consequences of the buyer’s or the company’s acting? If one of these is the desired interpretation, how are possible non-consumerist intentions or consequences with a more altruistic content or profound ethical effects valued in comparison? Secondly, if there is a need for ethics refining this economical system of buying and selling, in this case terminating the possible exploitation of coffee workers, will the

same kind of act(ions), i.e. consuming, effecting the exploitation in the first place, be able to erase it as well? In other words, there might be injustices of a systematic nature inherent in the economical system, which any consuming act can do nothing to alleviate but only reproduce. Excluding these two dimensions of *erfahrung*, then, makes the supposed ethical act seem more like an expression of making the circumstances adapt to the consumer. He or she (or the company, who can stop the ethical investment if the profit diminishes) can choose instrumentally to act “ethical”, rather than *recognising* the need for and the responsibilities connected with the common experience and practices of acting ethical.

Hence, like the car buying example above, this case indicates a sense of disguised positioning as well. The consumer supposedly acts ethical through buying, but without really knowing either what kind of ethics is “bought into” or what the consequences and responsibilities of this ethics actually are.

Closing Remarks

In this article the connection between experience and economy has been our concern. By analysing the way experience is conceived within the second generation of experience economy, a number of characteristics have been indicated. By drawing on a causal picture of the mind experiencing and excluding any parts of experiencing not conducive to establishing an economic transaction, a dehumanized picture of the experiencing individual is established. This picture is then utilized in positioning the potential customer as reaching the conclusion of making a purchase as an act of deliberate self-positioning and possessing a world-transforming actuality. This, however, turned out to be more of a (quasi-) forced positioning than deliberate self-positioning, since the setting for the experience of buying was created by a process of excluding of factors and pretending that this expressed a new norm of consuming as freedom. Taken together, then, these characteristics indicate a reconfiguration of some of the socio-economic processes dealing with daily consumption practices by using the contents of experience as *new* instruments in instituting this norm of consuming as freedom.

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