

The evolution of qualitative research in consumer behavior

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Abstract

This article is my response to an invitation to prepare a “heritage assessment” for presentation to the International Research Seminar at La Londe les Maures in June 1999. Such an assessment is, according to Alain Strazzieri, an authorized view of what is worth remembering from the literature about topics in consumer behavior research. This charge is an open one and I will execute it freely. My presentation of this view has been authorized by the seminar’s Scientific Committee. Otherwise, you will have to judge my authority on its merits. It does have the weight of my advanced years, giving me the advantage of having started formal study of consumers when research into their behavior was still young. My main themes are the intellectual battling and intellectual cycling that have gone on in our field, especially with reference to the role of qualitative research.

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1. Intellectual conflict: theme and variations

The perspectives I derived in the late 1940s came mainly from the topics and methods of the behavioral sciences that were the fashion of the period and that I studied at the University of Chicago. Some of my teachers were outstanding names in the behavioral sciences. I studied with or was exposed to the thinking of Robert Redfield, W. Lloyd Warner, Everett Hughes, Herbert Blumer, Edward Shils, David Reisman, William E. Henry, Don Campbell, and others. The so-called “Second Chicago School” of Sociology was flourishing (Fine, 1995) and my home base, The Committee on Human Development, provided a multidisciplinary and eclectic education. Among my fellow students and friends were Herbert Gans, Lee Rainwater, and Erving Goffman. There was great intellectual stimulation, with argumentation over philosophies, subject matter, and methods. Some of these controversial topics show how the modern roots of our present concerns reach back to the 1920s and 1930s. For instance, criticism of the work of Piaget (1926) still goes on because he generalized grandly from observing small samples of children. In basic scientific tradition, he drew inferences and conclusions from his observations and other researchers dispute his hypotheses and try to refute them. The behavioral science disciplines

grew vigorously in the 1940s and 1950s. Much of the study that goes on nowadays in the consumer research field adds some basic knowledge to the early learning; it also refines, elaborates, and, most strongly, applies what we have learned. However, the fundamental intellectual battle still goes on between the partisans of nomothetic approaches and the partisans of idiographic study.

The scholars reading this article are surely familiar with much of the history of our discipline, but I will remind us of some highlights that stand out in my mind. Major phenomena in the research area are the growth of qualitative methods and the resistance to them by people who prefer to rely on quantitative methods. Gary Fine (1995) gives an excellent account of this struggle at Chicago, describing the conflict between the advocates of quantitative methods and those committed to the prewar (World War II) emphasis upon qualitative methods and field research methodologies. He notes that Blumer criticized “those who were attempting to achieve exactitude in social science at the price of direct and naturalistic study” (p. 145) and cites David Reisman’s recollection that

the enmity was a problem for graduate students who worked with Hughes and with me, as well as for nontenured colleagues, particularly with Nelson Foote and Anselm Strauss. . . Unrealistically, if understandably, translating acidulous comments by faculty members into actual prescriptions of what would pass muster, some able graduate students feared to write a dissertation

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without tables in it...I sometimes had the dismal experience of having as a doctoral candidate someone who had been a spirited undergraduate and watching that person become more timid and less original as time went by. (Reisman, in Berger, 1990, p. 63)

More than 50 years later, when I ran a workshop on qualitative research, one of the doctoral students responded with this fretful statement:

I suppose what I mean is that there has to be a certain consistency in epistemology, ontological assumptions, and the use of techniques of data collection and presentation. Why do we have to constantly justify the use of certain techniques, and why do we willingly or unwillingly participate in perpetuating the dominance of a particular discourse of “doing research;” in other words, why are we ashamed to be purely qualitative, just as we are not ashamed to be purely quantitative? I find that I am constantly grappling with this in my own research, and would like to find a way of dealing with this issue, so that we can have other ways of collecting, analyzing, and presenting data.

One wonders about the persistence of this contentiousness, and the lack of objectivity shown by so many academicians with doctorates to their names. These remarks are true for fields other than marketing: a professor of finance recently raved in my presence that he hated the behavioral people he believed were ruining his field. This struggle has a certain one-sidedness to it as the quantitative people have the dominant paradigm and the greater power. Scholars who are interested in qualitative research usually understand the role of measurement and do not deny its value and even the need for it in the large place it occupies in the activities of the research world. They believe that they are bringing new and useful insights to the marketing field. These scholars mainly would like to be free to do their kinds of research, to get it published, and to be hired as regular members of a faculty. However, generally, the dominant paradigm people resist, show great hostility, and at many schools refuse to hire any faculty who are qualitatively oriented. They behave defensively, foolishly acting as though their livelihoods are threatened by the projective techniques and ethnographies that will replace surveys, regressions, and multivariate methods. At the 1989 conference of the Association for Consumer Research, they complained fearfully that qualitative researchers might be taking over the conference. They also attack, looking down on the qualitative people, and sneer at them as if they were chiropractors or dentists who could not succeed as physicians. At a recent conference of the American Marketing Association, one participant implied that qualitative researchers are like modern artists who do unrealistic, distorted work because they are not competent at drawing: that is, unlike Picasso who we knew could really draw, they

supposedly cannot properly measure and hold their work up to the criteria that govern scientific research. The oddity here is that an ethnography or thick description surely captures a situation more realistically than a particular statistic, no matter how large the sample or whatever the level of confidence.

2. Conflict and cycling of ideas

However, the ebb and flow of intellectual conflict is an ordinary thing, in the nature of science, and is a requirement for ideas to demonstrate their viability. It does not afflict qualitative consumer researchers only. The prewar sociologists at Chicago resisted the incoming proponents of quantitative methods, just as historians who pursue the ancient tradition of qualitative study of the past sputtered and fumed when the cliometricians arrived with their threatening statistical techniques for measuring history and their use of tables as well as tales.

Often, of course, the emotional component of the critics' reactions is so great as to have little to do with the science of the matter. Real scholars are calmer, having a comprehension of the variety of ways science goes on and understanding that ultimately it should address itself to rival hypotheses and whether they can be shown to be false. Like the presumption of innocence in law, any generalization—whether drawn from qualitative or quantitative study—may be taken as valid until there is evidence that it is not true; then, the exception does not prove the rule (except in the sense of testing it) but provides an occasion for fresh theory or insight. All researchers make observations of some kinds, draw inferences from those observations to arrive at their preferred ways of explaining the phenomena they have observed and how generally they occur. However, there are many ways of doing that. I am reminded of a research meeting at which a psychologist told the head of a pharmaceutical company that some consumers were stomach-oriented and others were anal-oriented when it came to taking laxatives. The executive asked “How many are there of each type?” and the psychologist replied, “Enough of them, sir!”—and undoubtedly there are.

The differences in approaches became apparent in the 1930s when the influx of European scholars brought to America and to the business world quantitative methods as in the survey and panel methods of Paul Lazarsfeld (Lazarsfeld, 1940) and depth techniques as in the psychoanalytic interpretations of Ernest Dichter. Hal Kassirjian (1994) describes in detail these European roots. His informative chapter appears in the valuable overview of research traditions in marketing provided by Laurent et al. (1994).

The study of consumer behavior gained momentum in the late 1940s and 1950s, especially as its value was embraced by advertising agencies on behalf of their clients. A lot of that work was proprietary and did not appear in journals—and the *Association for Consumer Research* and

the *Journal of Consumer Research* did not show up until the 1970s. However, there was the large-scale survey work by Alfred Politz and a variety of so-called motivation or qualitative research studies—many of which were reported on in the trade press. The 1950s were a kind of heyday of communications research (Klapper, 1960) and studies in persuasion (Hovland et al., 1953). The lively character of the work in that post-World War II period is especially evident in the two volumes on *Consumer Behavior* edited by Lincoln H. Clark (1954–1955). These volumes report on two conferences held at the University of Michigan that brought together scholars from several research organizations. The disciplines of sociology, psychology, and economics were well-represented, and although there were tables and statistics reported—and the University of Michigan Survey Research Center had a dominating role—the papers had a markedly thoughtful and discursive quality, suggesting some breadth of thinking and conversation that went on about the lives of consumers, their life cycles, and their decision making. Such earlier subjects and methods are like the trunk of a tree that in time grew many branches and leafed out into the variety of sessions and the flowering richness of specific topics apparent in modern journals and in the contemporary conferences of the Association for Consumer Research, the Society for Consumer Psychology, and the International Research Seminar.

I will not repeat here some of the historical developments that I have noted on other occasions (Levy, 1991, 1994, 1996). The “motivation research” of the 1950s was subsequently perceived to have died of its excesses, and the rise of the computer assisted in pushing positivism and its methods to the fore. But all along, the protagonists of qualitative research persisted, partially aided (and partially disserved) by the business world’s huge embrace of focus groups. By the 1970s, the growth of consumer research generally, in both business and academic studies, was so great that there was room for qualitative work and need for the ideas it could engender. Since then, importantly, qualitative research scholars have made names for themselves as leaders in the application of the various methods drawn from the various behavioral sciences—ethnographies, semiotic studies that include literary analyses and examination of rhetoric, inquiries eliciting projective materials, etc. Simply put, these kinds of studies contrast with surveys and experiments by turning from the measurement of variables to intensive description, interpretation of situations, and the search for meaning.

3. The need for qualitative research

Reasonable scholars—presumably meaning those who agree with me—may have read the great essay by Kurt Lewin (1935) on *The Conflict Between Aristotelian and Galileian Modes of Thought in Contemporary Psychology*, or the more recent perspectives provided by Morgan and

Smircich (1980) and Hunt (1991). Lewin points out the lingering Aristotelian influence that gives a valuative color to modes of thought and searches empirically for the lawfulness of events through their regularity and frequency. The result is a preference for understanding events that possess a certain persistence and stability and the placement of less common events and individuality as outside the realm of science. This underlying idea that the lawful and the individual are antithetical shows itself when the critics want to know if qualitative findings are generalizable. As Lewin (1935, p. 15) says, “If one shows a film of a concrete incident in the behavior of a certain child, the first question of the psychologist usually is: ‘Do all children do that, or is it at least common?’” Lawfulness as frequency means that repetition is a major criterion, and leads to the commanding role of statistics, “the most striking expression of this Aristotelian mode of thinking” (p. 16).

As a field theorist, a leader in the Gestalt school of psychology, Lewin was less concerned with frequent repetition than with the nature of the whole situation. Since all events must in truth be lawful, interest in the situation and the holistic attitude that underlies its study mean that we perceive the events of consumer behavior as dynamic outcomes of multiple forces. As Lewin sums up, “The tendency to comprehend the actual situation as fully and concretely as possible, even in its individual peculiarities, makes the most precise possible qualitative and quantitative determination necessary and profitable” (1935, p. 25).

Historically, more and more scholars have come to seek that comprehension of the situation, or at least to approximate it. Thus, despite the resistance that still occurs, this aspiration has gained a large number of adherents, more visibility, and a fairly loud voice. The more fully researchers want to understand consumer behavior, the more they are motivated to use methods that allow the interaction of multiple forces to show itself. Were this to be done ideally, a consumer event would be intensively scrutinized by a team of thinkers representing every discipline, explaining every possible antecedent and current element with any possible effect on the action at issue. Short of that, we engage in the varieties of research activity called *qualitative research*. That means going beyond the exponents of behaviorism (unlike behaviorists) who want to limit their data and thinking to explicit and plainly observable acts and events, to stimulus and response; and who focus on the degree to which the phenomena occur and the level of confidence we may have in getting the same results were the study to be repeated.

Being more broadly behavioral means the unleashing of all we can do to find out what consumers’ lives are like, especially with reference to the situations that interest us. Getting reports on their actions may seem the easier part, although some skeptical scientists want to watch the behavior rather than be told about it in an interview or a laboratory. That means going out into the field, mingling with the subjects as if being one of them, making detailed notes, creating the methods of case studies, participant

observation, autodiving, ethnography, and thick descriptions. We are also challenged to deal with consumers' inner lives, including their introspections, with all the hazards entailed in their self-expression, their truth and lies, their ignorance, uncertainty, face work, contradictions, and mechanisms of defense—all in all, their being complex human beings. Methods arise to gather this sort of information, such as depth interviews, focus groups sessions, and projective techniques. That also means we have to interpret the complexity and make inferences from what is observable to what is underlying and theoretically operative. Despite their necessity, introspection, and interpretation arouse the inevitable demon of subjectivity, on the part of the subjects, the researchers, and certainly their critics. We enlarge our vocabularies, having to learn words such as phenomenology, hermeneutic, semiotic, emic and etic, hegemonies, rituals, myths, symbolic consumption, and postmodernity. That irritates a lot of people who forget they also had to learn what partial derivatives are. However, what are we to do? We are people thinking about people and giving a lot of emphasis to how they perceive themselves and their relations to the outside world and the products they consume.

Regardless of the long history I am describing here, it is a sign of the irregular situation of qualitative research that examples of its application still turn up in the business press as if it were some remarkable newcomer. Recently, *The Wall Street Journal* (1999) reported Chrysler's "first vehicle designed entirely through an unconventional market-research process known as 'archetype research.' (Ah, Carl Jung!). . .overseen by a . . .French-born medical anthropologist named G. Clotaire Rapaille." The research involved poring over focus group protocols in which participants were asked to drift back to their childhoods and jot down the memories invoked by the prototype of the vehicle. A project about Procter & Gamble's Folgers Coffee was also mentioned in which "Dr. Rapaille concluded that aroma sells coffee more than taste does because aroma invokes feelings of home." If this was news to Procter & Gamble, perhaps the "unconventionality" and ever-renewed sense of novelty about qualitative research is due to the persisting naiveté and capacity for astonishment of corporate personnel.

Nevertheless, in the face of continuing contention, acrimony, and defensiveness on all sides, qualitative scientists have persisted and amplified their numbers. Their stream of work seems to be well established now. It has taken root and a substantial number of scholars are devotedly pursuing the content and methods of qualitative study and publishing their work. Although qualitative research is a subfield of a relatively small field, it has radiated out into the world. Sage Publications sells an active list of materials about qualitative research and such work has partisans around the globe at schools and companies. Most marketing research organizations claim to do qualitative research, even if only or mainly focus groups; the Burke Institute and the A.C. Nielsen Center for Marketing Research expose their students to

the topic. Perhaps another sign of the degree of recognition and acceptance that has occurred are publications that reflect back on particular contributors and their work. Along the way, a notable example was Elizabeth Hirschman's (1985) analysis of *Scientific Style and the Conduct of Consumer Research*. More recently, Hope Schau (1998) discussed the character of Russell Belk's ideas, Stephen Brown (1999) compared Morris Holbrook's thinking and style with Theodore Levitt's, and Sage Publications has a forthcoming volume collecting 50 years of my writing, edited by Dennis Rook (1999). Alain Jolibert is planning to edit a French volume of the intellectual biographies of 11 contributors to marketing thought.

However, looking back and summing up in this field are not far advanced and there is a need for more grand integrations and overviews. A few signs of such maturation are the volumes by McCracken (1988), Hirschman and Holbrook (1992), and by Firat and Dholakia (1998). Otherwise, the closest we come is with reviews of the literature on focal topics in single articles, in proceedings, and in edited collections of chapters written for books such as John Sherry's (1995, 1998) *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior* and his *ServiceScapes*. Textbooks serve this summary function by harvesting the findings of many individual studies, although the applied orientation of textbooks is usually so great that considerations of theory and method are less apparent. As academic consumer research studies were gathering steam in the 1960s, the landmark text by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell that emerged in 1968 organized its contents by using the common categories that continue today. These are general cultural and environmental forces, reference group memberships, and psychological components that affect consumer decision-making. The early books relied a lot on fashionable theoretical currents, such as personality and learning theory, cognitive dissonance and its reduction, involvement, and social stratification. In a doctoral seminar I taught in 1977, Kenneth Wisniewski wrote a paper on the diffusion of innovation and Deborah Roedder-John wrote one on perceived risk; both papers suggested that the concepts seemed to have been largely exhausted. Two outstanding books provided overviews of the basic theoretical resources available to researchers: *Behavioral Science Foundations of Consumer Behavior*, edited by Joel Cohen (1972), and *Consumer Behavior: Theoretical Sources*, edited by Ward and Robertson (1973).

Early textbooks often included the identical material and anthologies collected many of the same articles, but in time, there was a proliferation of studies, with fresh and diverse examples. The goals of communicating research findings, assessing them and applying them, were emphasized by Engel et al., but in their sixth edition in 1990, they added this fifth objective: To make the field of consumer behavior exciting, interesting, and relevant to both students and faculty. With advanced textbook technology, the modern consumer behavior books are gorgeous with their varied fonts, colors, pictures, charts, and boxes. Along this line, the

volume by Michael R. Solomon (1992, 1st ed.) is remarkable for the lavishness and variety of its illustrations and its comprehensive coverage. Texts on advertising relate a lot to consumer behavior and show similar opulence of design. The effect is sometimes broken up and distracting, probably in keeping with the fragmentation characteristic of post-modern organization and the students' experience with MTV, the Internet, and the provocative visualizations in the fast moving world of special effects.

4. A little study

Recent and contemporary qualitative consumer research has clearly made a place for itself and contributed to a great richness of detail in exploring consumer situations. It is so varied and ramified, it would be difficult to enumerate here all that has specifically been learned. Rather than do that, I will be a dutiful qualitative researcher and report on a modest research project I carried out in preparation for this article. To share the challenge of the assignment, I asked a few outstanding individuals in the consumer research field what they regarded as important contributions. Although I asked for accomplishments and what we have learned, I got some negative views as well. I will quote the most salient comments.

4.1. The dark side

Well, here's a dark side point of view. You might not want to hear this, but one thing I've been thinking is that marketing, at least the part about "listening to the customer," has been so enormously successful that we only have ourselves to blame for the current situation we're in. What do I mean? I think marketing helped to bring about postmodernism, where everyone thinks his or her own point of view is equally valid (cf. "the customer is always right"); that diversity is more important than quality, that quality is not a truth but an opinion. . . Rather than pursuing knowledge and beauty and goodness for all, we have numerous tiny special groups ranting "listen to us, we have special needs" as if we all do not have needs, and as if those needs don't turn out to be rather common.

This respondent is pointing out that research approaches have philosophical implications, that the emphasis on phenomenology that underlies the famous *marketing concept* is overdone and has adverse consequences. She points to the contemporary conflict of the traditional pursuit of absolutes, such as truth and virtue, versus the rampant individualism and relativism some people find so destructive. Her thought echoes the criticism of the broadening concept of marketing specified by Lacznia and Michie (1979) as promoting social disorder. In additional remarks, she continues in a more positive vein to see the benefit of marketing study of con-

sumers as qualifying the theories of economists and psychologists by showing the role of consumer behavior under certain conditions, such as branding and variety seeking.

4.2. Too much psychology

Another respondent criticizes the consumer research orientation as overly dominated by psychology and idealizes the earlier days as more comfortable with qualitative research, which was hardly the case; but lends support to my perception of the viciousness that still goes on.

A fascinating element of consumer research is that, since consumers are people and being involved in a consumption or exchange situation requires interacting with other people, our discipline should always have identified with all of the social sciences. My perception is that it did—in the early stages of development when scholars were well versed in a variety of disciplines. But, during the years that marketing departments responded to the pressures of business schools needing to develop an image of being "research-oriented," our discipline had to pick one science to pattern itself after, and, for reasons I'm not sure about, that discipline was psychology. We seem to have been struggling ever since to return to a world that is more reflective of the complexities of consumers, consumption and exchange processes, but the struggle has really hurt the discipline as a whole. . . My perception is that the field was very comfortable with qualitative methods early in its development, but along the way, someone decided that for either speed of analysis or rigor we needed to move to surveys, with scales to complete, or experiments with lots of control. Then, people got interested in qualitative methods again, but only as defined by the rigor identified as ethnography. As each wave builds, in order to defend the value of whichever method someone prefers, everyone seems to have criticized the other methods or worse, assert that the other methods are of no value. The academic world has been most vicious about this.

4.3. Going to extremes

This respondent also thinks that current study has been distracted away from the middle road of inquiry by being either too abstract and unrealistic or too concrete and descriptive.

We have, as academics tended to study things that are totally abstracted from reality in order to develop control in the research process (almost all experimental research until the past few years) or we have moved to observing only real world events/contexts (rafting on a river, watching a specific movie or baseball team) which are, by definition, so specific as to provide little room for generalization.

4.4. Interpreting patterns

This next respondent sees development toward studying complexity and recognizes that the main merit of qualitative study is the field approach. There the goal is to explain the nature of situations, learning their characteristics and “deeper” relationships rather than, or in addition to, surveying (measuring and correlating) the frequency of subjects’ verbalizations.

When Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell first came out, there was significant reliance on survey research which analyzed patterns in what people told us about themselves. But now, the focus is on mathematical models, experiments, and ethnographic observations to find patterns that consumers are not able to articulate about themselves. For example, Grant McCracken’s article on “Homeyness” dug into people’s home furnishings to lay out the characteristics that contribute to making an environment homey: layering, embracing, variable, engaging, mnemonic, etc...there is much greater awareness of and healthy questioning of the scientific assumptions made in pursuit of that contribution to knowledge. We now acknowledge that we all start out by making particular assumptions, and then proceed to see what new contribution can be made after that. . .and give more attention to finding tensions that consumers operate within rather than point estimate of their preferences. . .some people call this postmodern, others just call it appreciating complexity.

4.5. Cycles, extending methods, and theories

Another respondent associates freely to the evolution of consumer research, noting its cyclical character and its increasingly wide range of theorizing, use of various methods of research, and diversity of topics. Some study is seen as oriented to capturing consumers’ realities, while others’ look for underlying or more basic processes.

A stream of consciousness response: I discovered that all of the hoo-hah about product symbolism some of us stumbled upon in the 1980s had been written about in the 1950s by yourself and a few others. . .perhaps the true hallmark of consumer behavior research is rediscovering the wheel?? . . .Haire’s shopping list methodology. . . shopping/farmers’ market, etc., and ethnography (Odyssey) to capture phenomenology and real world experiences of consumers. . .methodologies ranging from the information display board to autodiving that capture the predominance of the visual channel. . .constructive memory processes (Bettman) and prospect theory. . . the symbolic renaissance of the 1980s. . .deeper descriptions: cultural meaning transfer (McCracken), aesthetics/experiential consumption (Holbrook), extended self (Belk), rituals and structuralism (Rook and Levy)

. . .attitude models (Fishbein). . .deep study of subcultures, (Peñaloza) Hispanic immigrants, (Schouten) Harley riders. . .etc.

4.6. Fleshing out the details

The final respondent provides a relatively detached summary that implies the big ideas have all been had, but are still guiding specific studies.

The major contribution of the ’60s were the comprehensive models such as Howard and Sheth. They identified the basic influences and processes involved in CB. I don’t think much has been added in terms of scope. Since this time, we have been fleshing out the details. . .Attitude research of the 70s provided an important understanding of belief-based attitudes, a framework still useful today. . .Social influence work of the 70s. . .the human information processing paradigm. . .early research strictly cognitive. . .expanded to include emotional responses, low-involvement decision making and judgment, and even non-conscious processes. . .“revolt” of the late 80s, most notably, the Odyssey project re-introduced the macro perspectives that had been part of the comprehensive models of the 1960s. . .focusing on the meanings of brands and consumption. . .included symbolic, ritual, emotional, social, and sensation aspects of consumption. . .qualitative methods used in sociology and anthropology.

The respondents’ associations show the sense of change and developments over time. They recognize the richness and variety of the field of consumer research, and they show some sharp individual differences in awareness and evaluation of what has been achieved. Their views reflect the coming and going of qualitative research as it has contended for its place in the sun of the research world.

In my view, having been part of this intellectual fray and survived it for over 50 years, I must say it has been enjoyable despite the many anxious moments in trying to cope with dubious clients, skeptical students, rigid reviewers, and supercilious colleagues. I am grateful that our heritage is sometimes funny, even ridiculous, so that we can laugh rather than cry about it. I am grateful to know and to have known so many of the participants—especially the really bright ones—who have collectively created and continue to work on our great common endeavor.

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