

# Australasian Journal of Market & Social Research

June 2009 • Volume 17 Number 1 • ISSN 1832 7362



## CONTENTS

- |  |                |
|--|----------------|
| <b>Qualitative Marketing Research: Theory and Practice</b><br>John R. Rossiter   | <b>Page 7</b>  |
| <b>The Effect of Questionnaire Colour, a Chocolate Incentive and a Replacement Return Envelope on Mail Survey Response Rates</b><br>Mike Brennan and Xiaozhen Xu | <b>Page 29</b> |
| <b>The Design of Survey Questions: Lessons from Two Attempts to Reduce Survey Error Rates</b><br>Philip Gendall, Janet Hoek and Rachel Douglas                   | <b>Page 37</b> |
| <b>Ethnographic Approaches to Gathering Marketing Intelligence</b><br>Clive Boddy  | <b>Page 49</b> |



---

# AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF MARKET & SOCIAL RESEARCH

## Editor

Professor Lester W. Johnson  
Melbourne Business School

## Editorial Advisory Board

Susan Ellis  
Melbourne Business School

Pascale Quester  
University of Adelaide

Marie-Louise Fry  
University of Queensland

Liane Ringham  
Inside Story

Mark Jessop  
Disability Services Commission

John Rossiter  
University of Wollongong

V Kumar  
University of Connecticut

Geoffrey Soutar  
University of Western Australia

Peter Oppenheim  
Deakin University

Jill Sweeney  
University of Western Australia

AJMSR is published by the Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Copyright 2009. ISSN 1832 7362

Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Level 1  
3 Queen Street  
Glebe NSW 2037  
Australia

Phone: +61 (0) 2 9566 3100  
Fax: +61 (0) 2 9571 5944  
Email: [publications@amsrs.com.au](mailto:publications@amsrs.com.au)  
Web: [www.amsrs.com.au](http://www.amsrs.com.au)

---

## Australasian Journal of Market & Social Research

The Australasian Journal of Market & Social Research (AJMSR) is the official journal of the Australian Market & Social Research Society (AMSRS). It is published twice a year in June and December.

All full members of the AMSRS receive a complimentary subscription to AJMSR as part of their membership.

### It is also possible to subscribe to AJMSR:

#### *Australian Orders*

\$48.40 (inc GST) per single issue

\$82.50 (inc GST) per one year subscription

#### *International Orders*

\$53.00 (AUD) per single issue

\$94.50 (AUD) per one year subscription

### Submissions

Original papers are invited. There is an editorial policy to ensure that a mix of theoretical and practical papers is presented. Papers should be of some relevance to at least a segment of the population of practicing market or social researchers. Purely academic marketing papers are probably more suitable elsewhere. All papers are refereed by independent assessors.

Contributors of paper will receive an electronic copy of the issue in which their article appears.

Manuscripts should be typed and double spaced. Diagrams and figures should be provided electronically, and of a professional quality. In writing papers, authors should consider the style of articles in previous issues. Authors are requested to provide article references in Harvard referencing style.

On acceptance of an article, authors will be asked to supply their article electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word format. However, conversions can be made from other packages.

AJMSR is an open publication. All expressions of opinion are published on the basis that they are not to be regarded as expressing the official opinion of the Australian Market & Social Research Society. The AMSRS accepts no responsibility for the accuracy of any opinions or information contained in this publication and readers should rely on their own enquiries in making decisions.

All papers for submission should be forwarded to:

Professor Lester W. Johnson

Editor, AJMSR

Melbourne Business School

The University of Melbourne

200 Leicester Street

Carlton VIC 3053 Australia

Email: L.Johnson@mbs.edu

### Subscriptions

All enquiries regarding subscriptions, and other related matters should be directed to:

Australasian Journal of Market & Social Research

Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Level 1, 3 Queen Street

Glebe NSW 2037 Australia

Phone: +61 (0) 2 9566 3100

Fax: +61 (0) 2 9571 5944

Email: [amsrs@amsrs.com.au](mailto:amsrs@amsrs.com.au)

Copies of the articles in AJMSR may be made for personal or classroom use, without charge and with the publisher's consent. Copying for any other purpose must first be approved by the publisher.

AMSRS recognises the contribution of Professor Lester Johnson (Editor) and the Melbourne Business School.

---

## AJMSR – Editorial

This volume of AJMSR contains 4 papers that discuss different approaches to gathering marketing research information. John Rossiter's extensive paper is a review of current theory and practice in qualitative marketing research.

Clive Boddy provides a review of one specific method, namely ethnographic approaches to gathering information, and concludes with suggestions of benefits and limitations.

Two papers from authors at Massey University in New Zealand focus on survey research. The one by Brennan and Xu examines the effects of various incentives on response rates. The Gendall, Hoek and Douglas paper looks at the question of reducing survey error rates through the design of survey questions.

Please feel free to submit a paper to the journal for consideration.

Lester W Johnson

Editor and AMSRS Fellow

*Australasian Journal of Market and Social Research*

# Interested in becoming an AMSRS member?

The Australian Market & Social Research Society Ltd (AMSRS) is a not-for-profit professional membership organisation established to serve those practising or interested in market, economic and social research.

We have a national membership of over 2,000 researchers, marketing executives, market research managers and buyers, field managers, recruiters, interviewers, academics and students.

Being a member benefits those people:

- involved in or interested in market, economic, advertising or social research
- employed in the marketing or research sections of an organisation
- conducting qualitative and quantitative research
- who supervise field operations, interview or recruit participants for research projects
- who teach or study in marketing or social and market research

Membership entitlements include:

- discounted member rates to AMSRS and affiliate events
- a copy of the Annual Directory & Yearbook, and 11 copies of Research News
- regular updates on state and national industry information, developments and events
- a membership card and membership certificate
- Full members are entitled to use the postnominals MMSRS (Member of the Market & Social Research Society), vote in divisional and national elections of the AMSRS and receive the Society's Journal AJMSR.

Note: Student members receive limited membership benefits so please see our website for full details.

All members are bound to observe the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour, which covers both ethics and standard conditions of conducting and reporting scientific research.

**JoinToday**

## Contact us at:

Membership,  
Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Level 1, 3 Queen Street  
Glebe NSW 2037

Phone: +61 (0) 2 9566 3100

**Or check out Membership on our website at [www.amsrs.com.au](http://www.amsrs.com.au)**



---

# Qualitative Marketing Research: Theory and Practice

**Professor John R. Rossiter**  
**Marketing Research Innovation Centre**  
**Faculty of Commerce**  
**University of Wollongong**  
**Wollongong 2522 Australia**  
**Tel: + 61 2 4221 5660**  
**Fax: + 61 2 4221 4560**  
**Email: john\_rossiter@uow.edu.au**

**Acknowledgments:** The author wishes to thank participants in two faculty and doctoral student seminars at the Stockholm School of Economics, as well as Grahame Dowling and Timothy Bock of the University of New South Wales, Australia, for their helpful comments on an earlier version.

## Abstract

An assessment of qualitative market research is provided in which it is proposed that the analytic form of qualitative research is the most scientifically valid and practically useful. Analytic qualitative research is “aided introspection,” which is a unique analyst’s product of data 1 (consumers’ phenomenological reports) and data 2 (the analyst’s inferences), resulting in a mini-theory of action in the behavioral domain of interest. The validity of the mini-theory, and thus of the analytic qualitative research, is purely predictive validity via a field experiment (such as a new product test or the running of a new advertising campaign). Compared with quantitative market research, analytic qualitative research has to accomplish much more and therefore is much more difficult. The analyst has to (1) discover the relevant variables in the mini-theory, (2) decide what the causal relationships are between the variables, and (3) infer consumers’ scores on these variables – thereby engaging in measurement. In quantitative research (surveys or experiments) the first two steps are predecided and the researcher only has to carry out the last step of measurement. The assessment concludes by discussing the limited teachability of analytic qualitative research and positions it as primarily a practitioner science.

Qualitative research is a major methodology in marketing. Indeed, it has emerged as a major methodology in the social sciences in general, with the Association for Qualitative Research (1999) listing over 200 books and monographs on the subject, a number that has evidently grown rapidly in the last decade. There is also a handbook of qualitative research which is now in its third edition (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research is widely employed as a stand-alone methodology by market research practitioners, of course, and increasingly by marketing academics under the label of “interpretist” inquiry. Apart from an early and preliminary article by Calder (1977), qualitative marketing research has largely escaped evaluation in terms of the classic criteria of

validity and reliability that we hold so dear to the “other” major methodology in our field, quantitative research. This paper attempts a new evaluation.

The paper is outlined as follows. The paper commences by identifying what qualitative research is and what it is not. A simple model of all research is then proposed in which C (consumer data) + A (analyst’s interpretations) = R (results) and a comparison is made of the major forms of qualitative research in terms of the interview methodologies used to obtain C, or data 1, and the analytic procedures employed to derive A, or data 2. The conclusion from this comparison is that analytic qualitative research, which consists of group or individual depth interview

---

methodology followed by analyst's content analysis, is the most scientifically valid in terms of contributing new knowledge to marketing. Next, using an expansion of the  $C + A = R$  model, it is argued that analytic qualitative research is much more important and useful than quantitative research but also much more difficult and therefore liable to go wrong. Practical recommendations are given for preventing its going wrong. The concluding practical implication is that few academic researchers should attempt analytic qualitative research and that it should remain largely a practitioner science.

The purpose of the present paper is to try to make sense of qualitative research theoretically and practically and, in the process, to maintain the scientific respect that analytic qualitative research in marketing deserves.

### **Qualitative Research Defined**

"Qualitative research" as a descriptive term is used in several different ways in marketing. Traditional academic market research textbooks describe qualitative research as referring to "exploratory" investigations characterised by semi-structured questions asked of a small, often conveniently-selected sample of respondents, the results of which are indicative but not conclusive without a subsequent quantitative study. This meaning of qualitative research as "exploratory" is appropriate if the research is intended only to be an input for subsequent quantitative research, such as to generate items for a questionnaire survey or stimuli for an experiment. If used in a purely exploratory capacity, qualitative research is not sufficient on its own to contribute to knowledge. In terms of the model that is used to structure this paper,  $C$  (consumer data) +  $A$  (analyst's interpretations) =  $R$  (results), the exploratory version of qualitative research is very much  $C$ -based and can provide only preliminary results, not final results. This exploratory form of qualitative research should really be called pre-quantitative research.

More recently, "qualitative research" has assumed a more philosophical, even political, meaning among academics. Qualitative research is now often equated with interpretive research (see Tadajewski, 2008). Interpretive research is a form of research that is based on qualitative interviewing methods, including self-interviewing or introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), but which has as its purpose the understanding of behavior as an end in itself, rather than the "positivist" research purpose of understanding and then prediction of behavior (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The political aspect is that prediction is seen as being too close to the capability to manipulate behavior, which marketers of course attempt to do (though one could argue that understanding is equally an inducement to manipulation). Typical examples of interpretist research in consumer behavior are the reports by Gould (1991), McCracken (1989), Holbrook (1997), O'Donohoe (1996), and the publication by Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, and Taylor (2002). As will be argued in this paper, all qualitative research involves interpretation, indeed "heavy interpretation." Moreover, introspection is certainly acceptable in qualitative research in that the qualitative research analyst, when forming inferences, is engaging in introspection. The problem is that the purported episodes of "understanding" reported by most exponents of the interpretist school fall far short of constituting explanatory, testable theories. The value to marketing of the interpretist version of qualitative research therefore has to be questioned. As Mick (1997, p. 259) has commented with regard to "semiotics" as practiced by interpretive researchers: "Reaching the end of their articles the reader is often hard pressed to know exactly what new knowledge has been contributed through the exercise of semiotics' esoteric terminology or techniques." Wells' (1993, p. 498) terse question about much academic research – "So what?" – needs to be answered by the interpretist school. The present examination of qualitative research allows

---

interpretivism as a partial means (input) but certainly not as a sufficient end (output) for qualitative research.

One other use of the term “qualitative” should be mentioned and dismissed. Econometricians, market researchers, and other social scientists (Kirk and Miller, 1986) sometimes refer to variables that are nominal, or data that can only be coded as zero-one rather than on a continuum, as qualitative; for example, sex, race, or country of origin (for a recent example of such usage, see Rust and Cooil, 1994). This is not qualitative research, however, and this meaning of “qualitative” will not be pursued here.

The most important conceptual definition of “qualitative research” captures its widest use by marketing practitioners (Moran, 1986). Qualitative research is a procedure, consisting of data collection methodology and mode of analysis, for deriving insights into marketing phenomena, in which the results are in the form of a proposed causal explanation of behavior, a mini-theory of action, with the theory’s action recommendations to be tested in the marketplace. This can be called analytic qualitative research (see also Calder 1977, whose descriptive label for this form of qualitative research is “clinical”). In terms of the  $C + A = R$  model, analytic qualitative research is very much A-based, with the results depending ultimately for reliability and validity on the ability of the qualitative research analyst.

### **Qualitative Research as Science**

Science (Latin *scientia*, to know) is tested knowledge. Knowledge can be defined as a new insight or understanding (a new theory, derived from introspection or observation, and this would include new methodology as new theory) confirmed by a test (a test of logic and then of empirical experimentation). Qualitative research makes a contribution to marketers’ knowledge only if its insights are subjected to an empirical test in a mar-

keting plan (most feasibly, via a quasi-experimental field study). New theories derived by introspection or observation and then reported in the literature without an empirical test receive only a logic test (by the readers of the literature). An influential example is Fournier’s (1998) mini-theory of types of relationships between consumers and brands. This is not to say that all qualitatively-derived theories are good ones and that all empirical tests of them are confirmatory (if they were, marketing plans would always work). However, for the practitioner seeking a mini-theory as the basis of a marketing strategy, there is no alternative procedure that is as effective as qualitative research and is as economical of money and time (see Wells, 1986, 1993).

Qualitative research is used for developing most marketing plans and it is often the only research input. But for the academic theory-builder, too, qualitative research is also effective and economical, a point too little realised by academics who have been led to believe that all science must be derived from quantitative research (for the extreme of this viewpoint, see Ehrenberg, 1995).

For the practitioner, the qualitatively-derived theory has to pass only a single empirical test – that of the current marketing or advertising plan. Hence, the theory is referred to as a “mini-theory,” as it need be applicable only once (see Rossiter, 1994). The professional purpose of qualitative research is not to produce theory or even results that could be generalised beyond the specific marketing situation at hand. The manager wants a unique mini-theory that competitors cannot easily generalise to their brands (Rossiter, 1994). This places it in marked contrast with the purpose of academic research, which is to produce either broad-contingency theories as strategic principles (see Armstrong and Schultz, 1993, and especially Rossiter, 2001, 2002a, 2003) or to identify empirical generalisations (again see Ehrenberg, 1995). The professional

---

qualitative researcher seeks a theory that will work now, for the issue or product in this marketing campaign, never mind other products and never mind posterity.

Because “analytic insights” specifically and “mini-theories” more generally are major components of analytic qualitative research, it is useful to point to some examples of these. The specific insights or more comprehensive mini-theories could not have been obtained from quantitative research, that is, by measuring what consumers say or do, counting it, and interpreting the result literally.

Various examples of qualitative research insights are:

- Toilet Duck’s package innovation (U.K.) where the research input was focus groups.
- Benetton’s “shock tactics” advertising campaign (which ran in Europe for many years but was banned in the U.S. as too controversial) where the research input was the creative director’s introspective selections from his personal collection of professional photographs.
- U.S. Post Office’s “We deliver for you” advertising campaign, which profiles letter carriers personally, based on the inference from participant observation by social anthropologists that many people symbolise the mail deliverer as a means of contact with broader society and even as an antidote to loneliness (Levin, 1992).
- California Milk Board’s (and later the national DMI’s) “Got milk?” advertising campaign, based on the insight from focus groups that people really only ever think about milk when they need it and it isn’t there, and then the identification, from a post-group experiment with the consumers in which they were asked not to drink milk for a week and then report back, of which

foods they most missed milk with, such as cereals, cookies and coffee, foods which were then featured in the ads (Morrison et al., 2002).

- McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” advertising campaign criticised by the experts and by consumers in a quantitative ad test but shrewdly and successfully introduced to overcome consumer resistance to McDonald’s “nutritious menu” items (Rossiter and Bellman, 2005).
- Numerous instances of re-weighting of attributes rated low in survey research but inferred from focus groups or individual depth interviews to be highly important, such as peer acceptability in beer brand choice (Rossiter and Percy, 1997), or taste in toothpaste as a surrogate indicator that the toothpaste is cleaning and freshening the mouth (Langer, 1984).

Other compelling examples of analytic qualitative insights are given in Durgee (1985, 1988), Calder (1994), Rossiter and Bellman (2005), and Zaltman and Zaltman (2008).

There are, of course, thousands of one-off mini-theories in professional qualitative research reports that could be cited, if we had access to them. The author’s own contributions include proprietary reports such as a beer brand choice model developed for Anheuser-Busch; an advertising launch plan for Stouffer’s Lean Cuisine in the U.S.A. and later used almost identically in Australia (branded Findus); a consumer-market brand choice model developed for Rockwell’s power tools; and a persuasion model commissioned by the (U.S.) National Potato Promotion Board (cited in Rossiter and Percy, 1987, 1997). These mini-theories were product- and time-specific, and tested in real-world campaigns with successful outcomes. They are examples of the science of qualitative research.

Turning to broader theories, in which a large number of insights are combined and interrelated, it is evident that most of the influential theoretical models in marketing, such as Howard's (1977) EPS/LPS/RRB product lifecycle-based series of models, or Bass's (1969) diffusion model, and in advertising, the FCB grid (Vaughan, 1980) and the Rossiter-Percy grid (Rossiter and Percy, 1987, 1997; Rossiter, Percy, and Donovan, 1991), were essentially qualitatively derived. No quantitative survey or experiment "produced" these models. Rather, they were the result of analysts' inferences from various sources, including other studies, everyday anthropological observation, and introspection. They represent a continuation of the early tradition of introspection in psychology, perhaps best exemplified by James' (1884) theory of emotion.

### Methodologies Of Qualitative Research

Four principal types of data collection methodologies are employed in qualitative research to collect consumer data (data 1). The four are well recognised in the social sciences as qualitative techniques (Walker, 1985a). In market research, and especially in advertising research, group depth interviews and individual depth interviews are by far the most prevalent methodologies, although the others are used occasionally. The four data collection methodologies are:

- Group depth interviews (commonly called focus groups)
- Individual depth interviews (including company-interview case studies)
- Participant observation (including "anthropological" or "ethnographic" studies such as the Consumer Behavior Odyssey; see Belk, 1991)
- Projective techniques

A comparison of the four types of qualitative research in terms of their data collection methodologies is shown in Table 1.

Four attributes of the methodologies are identified: the number of consumers per interview, total consumer sample size, the consumer's (respondent's) role during the interview, and the analyst's role as question-asker during the interview. These attributes are used to compare and evaluate the methodologies.

Group depth interviews, also known as GDIs or "focus groups," are the most widely practiced type of qualitative research. Calder (1994) has estimated that about 700 focus groups are conducted each day in the U.S.A. alone. Focus groups probably account for about 50 percent of market research projects, although their low cost means that they constitute, as very conservatively estimated for the U.S. market by Baldinger (1992), only about

**Table 1 : Comparison Of The Interview Methodologies Of Qualitative Research**

Type of qualitative research interview	Consumers per interview	Total consumers	Consumer's role	Analyst's role as question-asker
Group depth interviews	2 to 12	any number	active	active
Individual depth Interviews	1	any number	active	active
Participant observation	any number	any number	passive	active
Projective techniques	1	any number	active	active

---

20 percent of market research expenditure (the percentage is much higher in smaller countries and less developed countries). Group depth interviews typically employ two to 12 consumers per interview. The smallest number, two consumers, to form a group is employed quite often with husband-wife or spouse-partner interviews. Another commonly used number of interviewees is four, in what is known as “mini-groups,” which are used when the researcher wants to obtain more information per individual than with a larger group, although often the total time for mini-group interviews is reduced from the usual 2-hour group interview to about 1 hour. Focus groups usually employ about 8 to 10 consumers per interview, occasionally going as high as 12 if the question-asker (group moderator) feels capable of handling a larger group; larger groups are sometimes requested by clients who confuse the number of consumers per group with the quantitative projectability (reliability) of the results. Any number of interviews, totaling any number of consumers, can be conducted, although there is a theoretical upper limit as explained below. The interview “unit” in group depth interviews is the group, so the number of groups to be conducted, rather than the total number of consumers interviewed, is the relevant methodological decision variable (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

The following comments about the number of GDIs that should be conducted apply also to the number of individual interviews in the individual depth interview (IDI) method, other aspects of which are discussed shortly. In theory, the number of groups or interviews to conduct is governed by the judgment of the analyst, who assesses the point of which the “marginal insights” from successive interviews are leveling off (Walker, 1985b). This is aptly called “theoretical saturation” by the grounded-theory school of interpretive research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the question-asker’s role, the point of theoretical saturation is fairly evidently

reached during later interviews when the question-asker can almost “predict” what the interviewee’s answer to the question will be (Lunt and Livingstone, 1994). If the question-asker is also the analyst, which is ideal theoretically although professionals differ on this procedure in practice (McQuarrie, 1989), then “hearing the same information” will be reasonably equivalent to the likelihood that the marginal insights, which are analytic inferences, have approached their asymptote. In practice, it is only the rare client who is willing to let the number of groups or number of interviewees be “open-ended,” with the total to be decided by the analyst. Usually, a fixed number of groups of interviews is decided with the client in advance. A rule of thumb that works well in practice (Rossiter and Percy, 1997) is to conduct three groups, or about 12 individual interviews, per segment, if the target market is known a priori to be segmented, or just this number in total in an unsegmented market. Should a new, heretofore unrealised segment or segments emerge during the course of the initial interviews, then another set of three groups – or 12 more individual interviews – should be added. The reason for three groups is that, because of group dynamics, it is quite likely that the first two groups will drift in contradictory directions and thus a third group is needed as a “tiebreaker” to resolve conflicting data for the analyst to make inferences from. In terms of the final two attributes in the table, the consumer’s role is “active” in group depth interviews, as is the role of the interviewer.

Individual depth interviews, or IDIs, quite obviously consist of a single question-asker and a single question-answerer on each question-asking occasion. The main methodological difference between group depth interviews and individual depth interviews is that, in the group setting, the question-answerers interact with each other, rather than with just the question-asker, in providing answers to questions. That is, the participants’

---

answers are presumably not the same as if they had been interviewed individually. In IDIs, the answers are not peer-dependent and usually are assumed to be more forthcomingly personal than in the group setting. The questions in IDIs are exactly the same as in GDIs.

Individual depth interviews are employed, rather than group interviews, in several well-known circumstances (McQuarrie and McIntyre, 1990; Rossiter and Percy, 1997). One is where the analyst's prior knowledge of the category indicates that the purchase (or other) decision of interest is made largely by the individual consumer acting alone. This includes personal-product decisions, such as in the personal health and hygiene area, where consumers would not be comfortable talking about their personal needs in a group setting. An extreme application is the use of hypnosis of individuals to try to elicit "deep" product experiences (Cuneo, 1999). A second well-known use of individual interviews is when the qualitative researcher has to interview professional people such as medical specialists or very senior executives – the sorts of individuals who would not readily come to a group discussion. For this purpose, "executive interviewers" are often employed as the question-askers and are the research firm's most skilled individuals in obtaining these hard-to-get interviews. A third use is when a "developmental history" is sought to find out how consumers arrived at their current state of knowledge and attitudes in the category (e.g., Fournier, 1998). Because of the longitudinal questioning, developmental history-gathering is much better suited to IDIs than to group interviews. A final use of individual depth interviews is in pre-quantitative qualitative research which, as discussed previously, is not really qualitative research as its purpose is only to formulate items for a quantitative survey. Griffin and Hauser (1993) have shown that it is much more cost efficient to use individual, rather than group, interviews to generate survey items.

Participant observation is a type of qualitative research, long established in social anthropology and more recently adopted in market research (see Belk, 1991, and Levin, 1992), in which the question-asker immerses himself or herself in the question-answerer's natural social and cultural environment. The idea, of course, is for the question-asker, as both asker and analyst, to walk a fine line between participation (outwardly) and detachment (inwardly) so as not to be an overly reactive part of the measurement process. Participation is necessary to obtain measurement in the first place, given that unobtrusive observation (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest, 1966) would provide an inadequate understanding. But detachment is necessary, also, to "factor out" the analyst's participation.

In participant observation, any number of consumers can be "interviewed" on any single occasion, and in total, but with a theoretical (and a practical) upper limit as explained above for GDIs and IDIs. Consumers per interview may range from one respondent per interview, such as in "shill" shopping, whereby the question-asker poses as a shopper in order to observe and in a sense "interview" the salesperson, to many respondents per (unobtrusive) interview, used in the anthropological type of setting, as in the Consumer Behavior Odyssey (Belk, 1991). The total number of interviews is arbitrarily decided. The consumer's role in participant observation is different from the other types of qualitative research interviews in that the consumer should not be aware that an interview is taking place. In the shill-shopper situation, for example, the respondent (a salesperson rather than a consumer) is unaware that he or she is being interviewed. In the more anthropological situation, it is assumed that the question-asker has previously established rapport and become part of the social group to the point where its members don't feel they are being interviewed or observed, although this perception may not be entirely removable. The consum-

---

er's role in participant observation in Table 1 is therefore classified as "passive" rather than the consumer as an active answerer of questions as in the other qualitative interview methodologies. However, the question-asker's role is "active," because rarely is participant observation simply "observation." Questions have to be asked to clarify what is going on, and also to test analytic inferences as the research proceeds; all this is done in a fairly unobtrusive manner but can hardly be described as passive.

Projective techniques are included as a type of qualitative research because they use evolving questions, open-ended answering, and heavy interpretation, and the results formulated as a mini-theory. In the Rorschach Inkblots test, for instance, the interviewer first asks the respondent, "What do you see?", and then follows up with neutral probe questions such as "What else?" In the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the interviewer asks the respondent to "Tell a story" about each TAT picture and probes each initial answer with "Tell me more." However, in Speaker Balloons, a commonly used projective technique in market research, the respondent merely receives an initiating question from the analyst or interviewer, along the lines of "What might this person be saying?" but even this could be regarded as an evolving question because the respondent is likely to mentally ask further questions such as "Why is the interviewer asking me this? What does the interviewer really want to know?" Another commonly used projective technique in market research is Sentence Completion, such as "People drink Coca-Cola because \_\_\_\_\_." With Sentence Completion, the first part of the sentence forms the question and so this particular projective technique less clearly meets the criterion of evolving questions, and indeed the question can be administered via a self-completion survey, but it does produce open-ended answers that require interpretation. All projective tech-

niques require the analyst's interpretation of the extent to which the consumer's answer reflects a personal explanation, and thus is "projective."

Projective techniques employ one consumer per interview and any total number of interviews. In projective techniques, the consumer's role is active, as the consumer responds projectively to the ambiguous initiating stimulus. The question-asker's role is also active because he or she not only provides the initiating stimulus but formulates the evolving questions when projective techniques are used in individual depth interviews.

What emerges from qualitative research interviews, from each of the four interview methodologies, are first-order data. This is Schutz's (1967) term to describe the immediate "surface" information obtained from the interview, that is, the open-ended answers, or what can more simply be called data 1. Higher-order data are the analyst's interpretations of the first-order data, which can be called data 2. The nature of higher-order data will be discussed in the next section.

First-order data (data 1) produced by qualitative interview methodologies are extremely messy. The open-ended answers are mainly "what is" descriptions and "why" reasons (the latter as detected by the consumers themselves). The label "messy" is justified for two reasons. In the first place, the open-ended answers may, of course, be organised by question areas, but there is not much more structure to the data than this. Eventually, the data have to be organised into a model that will little resemble the question order. The second reason for messiness is that in all but some forms of content analysis, the first-order data are multi-modality data. Group depth interviews, the most prevalent methodology, provide first-order data in all of five modalities: verbal (what is said), paraverbal (how it is said), facial-visual (nonverbal expression), somatic ("body language"), and intersubjective

---

(group dynamics). The extra modalities' contents, not just verbal content, are part of the data 1 that the analyst receives.

The question-asker is not just a question asker but is also unavoidably an analyst. The question-asker is simultaneously adopting the role of answer-interpreter. In order to know which further questions to ask and what to probe, the question-asker must simultaneously be assessing the incoming first-order data. This is true even for the most "neutral" probes, such as "Tell me more about that"; numerous studies by Wilson and his colleagues (for a review, see Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, and Lisle, 1989) have demonstrated that asking people to reflect on or explain their attitudes, such as their liking for a particular product, gives lower prediction of their behavior than had they not been probed. In other words, the question-asker has to know "when to stop," or what to later "discount." This is another reason why, for highly valid results in qualitative research, the analyst should also be the original question-asker. The questions and answers are open, reactive, often interactive, and typically are provided in multiple modalities. Even if the sample of respondents could be duplicated, their answers couldn't. And this is prior to the first-order data being interpreted!

The next phase of qualitative research is the analytic procedure, in which first-order data are interpreted in higher-order terms and become data 2. Reliability does apply to these data but in a very different sense, as explained under the A factor later.

### **Modes Of Analysis In Qualitative Research**

The second component of qualitative research consists of the mode of analysis used to derive data 2 (the theoretical framework, concepts, relations, and inferences). No matter which type of qualitative interviewing methodology is employed, there is always a choice of analytic modes. The alternative analytic procedures in qualitative research

are compared in Table 2. Four analytic modes are identified:

- Analyst's content analysis
- Coders' content analysis
- Computerised content analysis
- User observation

These are compared in terms of five attributes, namely, the number of analysts, the background knowledge involved in the analysis, the estimated upper limits of interpretive skills in each type of analysis, the estimated range of results possible with each type, and the estimated predictive validity of each.

Qualitative research analysis is increasingly equated in academic writings as "grounded theory," a description proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their widely-cited book. This is usually taken to mean that qualitative research is a "theory of social action" (such as the action in a particular area of consumer behavior) based on, or "grounded in," the experiences of the consumers. The description is incomplete and misleading. The theory – the result – that emerges is much more "grounded" in the experiences of the analyst. It is wrong to believe, as many commentators apparently do, such as Calder (1977; 1994) and McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990), that qualitative research results can consist of completely atheoretical "consumer phenomenology." There is always an analyst whenever phenomenological reports (which are data 1) are received and interpreted by someone else. This point is far too little appreciated, especially by academic consumer researchers who refer to the objective-sounding term "grounded theory" without realising that the analyst is a very large part of that theory and that the "grounding" is therefore not what they think it is. The importance of this point will become clearer in the following discussion of the four qualitative research analytic modes and also in the final section of the

**Table 2 : Modes Of Analysis Employed To Derive Inferences (Data 2) From Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research analytic procedure	Total analysts	Background knowledge needed	Upper limit of interpretive skills	Range of results possible	Typical predictive validity
Analyst's content analysis	1	Marketing theory plus psychology	very high	extreme	moderate to very high
Coders' content analysis	2 – 10	subject matter only	very low	small	low
Computerised content analysis	1	none except lexical	virtually zero	none	very low
User observation	total users	commonsense marketing expertise	moderate	quite large	moderate

paper which examines qualitative research in the light of classical quantitative measurement theory.

Analyst's content analysis. In analytic qualitative research, the interviews are analysed by an independent, professionally trained researcher who interprets the first-order data (data 1) in terms of higher-order concepts consisting of an overall theoretical framework, major variables, and inferred causal relationships between the variables (data 2). Occasionally, in very difficult marketing situations, some clients employ two or three professional analysts independently, who often also conduct their own qualitative research interviews separately. In the overwhelming majority of studies, however, there is only one analyst. For marketing applications of analytic qualitative research, the analyst ideally should have a strong background in psychology, so as to be able to interpret the first-order data and convert them to higher-order concepts. Also, the analyst should have a strong background in marketing theory. The state of qualitative research in practice is that most analysts have a good background in psychology or are intuitively "natural" psychologists but too few are up to date in terms of marketing theory (Gordon, 1997). The analyst who can combine psychological knowledge with

an extensive and current knowledge of marketing theory is much more likely to achieve high predictive validity.

With analytic qualitative research, the most important form of qualitative research, the client is essentially "buying the analyst," not simply buying the interview data. The best analysts, as evidenced by their historical high success rate, charge very high fees, and these fees are justified for all but the most mundane marketing problems. It follows that the upper limit of interpretive skills of analysts is "very high." However, it also follows that analysts differ widely in abilities and thus the range of results possible from qualitative research is "extreme." The author has demonstrated the variability of analysts' results numerous times by assigning students in advertising research classes into teams to jointly conduct a focus group; then, using duplicates of the audio tape or video tape of the group discussion (the first-order data), the team-members as individuals have to interpret the results and write reports. The range of results – findings and recommendations – is always extreme, with grades ranging from A+ to F, yet the results are based on identical data 1. This many-times replicated result led to the proposition, discussed later, that analytic qualitative research

---

results are characterisable as about 50% consumer data and 50% analyst's interpretation. The author has also read many professional qualitative research reports on behalf of clients and arrived at a similar conclusion: that the range of insightfulness and usability of the results shows extreme variation from poor to very high.

However, because the client is obtaining an independent viewpoint, even a poor qualitative research report will generally be quite helpful – mainly because the manager, that is, the user, steps in as the analyst in translating the findings to action. For this reason, the predictive validity of analytic qualitative research is assessed as ranging from “moderate to very high,” rather than very low to very high. Nearly always, clients will state that “some value” has been obtained from the qualitative research even when an experienced qualitative researcher reading the report would class it as poor. And the client may be right, if the client (or, at the last minute, the advertising agency's creative person) is a good analyst.

Coders' content analysis. Sometimes, multiple coders are employed as low-level analysts of qualitatively-derived interview data. The use of multiple coders is typical in academic studies where the content-analytic convention of “inter-coder reliability” is well established. To establish inter-coder reliability estimates, between two and 10 coders in total may be employed (Perrault and Leigh, 1989; Rust and Cooil, 1994) but usually there are just two or three. The background knowledge brought to the analytic situation is “subject matter only,” in that coders are temporarily trained “on the data itself” and no prior psychological or marketing knowledge is assumed or typically present. The upper limit of interpretive skills when using multiple-coder content analysis is therefore “very low.” The range of results possible is “small” – which is a paradoxical but logically necessary outcome of achieving high inter-coder reliability. If the coders' findings are taken at face value with little

further analysis, as they most often are in academic qualitative studies, the typical predictive validity is “low.”

Computerised content analysis. An increasingly favored mode of content analysis, especially in academic qualitative studies, is computerised content analysis. The researcher or research team has to set up the content codes initially, as in coders' content analysis, but thereafter the computer merely does a blind and mechanical numerical count according to the pre-established codes. The computer needs no background knowledge other than lexical (word form or parts of speech) discrimination and there are no marketing or psychological skills in the computer's interpretation. An example is the computerised content analysis of corporate advertising slogans by Dowling and Kabanoff (1996). The analyst has to select the content categories to be coded by the computer in the first place and computerised content analysis requires heavy subjective interpretation, contrary to the belief that it is the most objective of all types of content analysis. For instance, the largest category in Dowling and Kabanoff's study, into which 50 percent of the slogans were placed, was “Equivocal,” that is, uninterpretable by the computer (1996, p. 71)! Because of its use of the computer, computerised content analysis gives the semblance of being more “scientific” than other forms of content analysis but it is likely the least scientific and the least valid.

Computerised content analysis is little more than a quantitative summary of first-order data, a simple frequency count of data 1. The upper limit of interpretive skills is “virtually zero” though not entirely zero because there has been some analyst's input initially. It should go without saying that the typical predictive validity of computerised content analysis used in qualitative research is “very low.”

User content analysis. By “user” is meant the marketing manager or government

---

policy maker or, in applications of qualitative research in advertising, the creative team or copywriter at the advertising agency. User observation is the method of analysis employed by definition with the so-called phenomenological type of qualitative research (Calder, 1977) in which the interview data from consumers are taken at face value. The data 1 are the interviews themselves (such as focus groups) and are observed directly by the user in person, on video tape, on audio tape, or indirectly from a summary report that is quite literal (with minimal and preferably no higher-order interpretation). With phenomenological qualitative research, the user must act as the analyst and the data 2, the inferences, are never made explicit but remain implicit in the plan that is implemented.

User observation is not, however, confined to the phenomenological type of qualitative research. User observation almost always enters as an additional mode of analysis prior to application of qualitative research findings when the analytic type of qualitative research is conducted in which higher-order findings from an independent analyst – the qualitative researcher – are available to the user. It is therefore very important to examine what the user brings to the analytic process.

For user observation, there may be several users physically observing an interview at one time, as when a number of managers, and sometimes creative people from the advertising agency, observe focus groups or individual depth interviews directly, typically from behind a one-way mirror or on video tape. The total number of analysts is equal to the total number of users. The background knowledge brought to the analytic situation by the user is described as “commonsense marketing experience.” This fits in most cases, in that very few managers have extensive training in marketing theory. It is also rare for users as analysts to have extensive psychological training; hence, the upper limit of interpretive skills for user observation would be “moderate.” Because different

managers will bring to the analysis different levels of marketing experience and also different levels of “natural” interpretive ability, the range of results possible via user observation as an analytic procedure is assessed as “quite large.”

When user observation is the sole analytic procedure, as with phenomenological qualitative research, the typical predictive validity of the findings is assessed as “moderate.” The degree of predictive validity with the user-as-analyst is constrained by a presumed limited ability to develop higher-order conceptual insights (if the typical user had this ability, there would be no need to employ an independent professional analyst). On the other hand, the user’s ability to apply the findings, drawing on marketing experience and marketing skills, should be quite high. Users might therefore be typified as being able to apply lower-level, first-order data very well. If the marketing situation or “problem” that led to the research in the first place does not require a “deep” solution, then user observation alone, with the user’s subsequent analysis being translated into marketing action, will be sufficient for high predictive validity. Most situations in which qualitative research is called for, however, have a far more complex causal structure which users are usually not able to detect in full and thus the overall assessment of the predictive ability of user observation as “moderate” seems justified.

A special form of user observation not shown in the table but well worth discussing occurs when people read mini-theoretical accounts, or “interpretations,” based on qualitative research that are published in the literature. The reader is cast as a user and thus an analyst. Due to the unfortunate schism between the academic and practitioner literatures in marketing (e.g., Wells, 1993), there are usually two situations here. One is where managers read practitioners’, or sometimes academics’ simplified-for-practitioners, theoretical proposals in the practitioner literature (in the British Admap publication, for instance, or in the U.S. Journal of

---

Advertising Research, both of which have large practitioner readerships, with articles submitted by practitioners and academics). The manager-as-reader situation is exactly akin to user observation in the table and the table's classification of interpretive skills and predictive validity applies.

The other situation is where academics read (usually other academics') qualitative mini-theories. Well-known (to academics) examples of such mini-theories would be Gould's precedent-breaking article in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (1991) based entirely on his own introspection and Fournier's more recent article in the same journal (1998) on brand relationships based on individual depth interviews. Who knows what analytic skills various readers bring to judging the worth of these mini-theories? It would seem that these accounts pass only the test of their internal logic (or else, presumably, they wouldn't be published in respected journals) and perhaps some sort of test of "empathy" with the reader's own experiences as an observer and therefore analyst of consumer behavior. But these qualitative mini-theories are not yet science until they have passed an empirical test, something which only practitioners are usually in a position to provide via a marketing or advertising campaign. By this argument, it may be concluded that Ph.D. theses consisting of untested qualitative mini-theories are precarious as far as the normal criterion of "contribution to knowledge" is concerned.

The variables that can affect the vital contribution of the analyst in qualitative research may be identified as follows:

- The analyst's comprehension ability, including the probably intuitive ability to "read people" (which Gardner, 1983, calls "interpersonal intelligence").
- The analyst's knowledge of psychological concepts and processes.
- The analyst's knowledge of marketing concepts and theories.
- The analyst's personal values.

And what can only be described as a "stochastic" element, in that different items of first-order data will be focused upon depending on the analyst's attention span, state of mind and perhaps physical fatigue, and other environmental quirks in the situational context occurring while the first-order data are being analysed.

This list of variables should make it clear that the analytic process itself is highly variable across analysts except, of course, when low-validity forms of analysis are employed such as coders' content analysis or computerised content analysis. This means that the results will be highly variable, depending on the analyst. This essential realisation is reinforced in the final section, where analytic qualitative research is compared with quantitative research in terms of the conventional criteria that are used to evaluate the worth of research.

### **Analytic Qualitative Research Compared With Quantitative Research**

"Quantitative" research refers to structured question surveys or administered experiments providing numerical answers which, after statistical analysis, are interpreted as the results. Quantitative research is compared here with the most important form of qualitative research – analytic qualitative research. The two types of marketing research are compared in terms of the model introduced at the beginning of the paper: C (consumer data) + A (analyst's interpretations) = R (results). Table 3 offers a comparison of the "sources of variance" leading to the results in the two types of research. The reasoning underlying the estimated weights is discussed under the C, A, and R factor headings, next.

### **The C Factor**

In analytic qualitative research, the analyst's purpose is to build a mini-theory of the behavioral domain of interest (Walker, 1985a; Moran, 1986). In marketing, this theory might range from quite elaborate models of buyer or consumer behavior

**Table 3 : Comparison Of Qualitative And Quantitative Research In Terms Of Sources Of Variance (%) Which Lead To The Results (Author's Estimates)**

	<b>Consumers (C factor)</b>		<b>Analyst (A factor)</b>		<b>Results (R factor)</b>
Qualitative research	50 %	+	50 %	=	100 %
Quantitative research	90 %	+	10 %	=	100 %

(Howard, 1977) to a much narrower set of recommendations for positioning and advertising a particular branded item. In constructing this theory, the "sample" that the analyst is drawing from in the first-order interview data is really a sample from the population of ideas rather than the population of consumers. As Walker (1985a, pp. 5-6) puts it: "The units of analysis generally consist of ideas, experiences and viewpoints and the reported and logical relationships between them." This is stated directly by Lunt and Livingstone (1996, p. 92) in the case of focus groups: "The unit of analysis in focus groups is the thematic content of discourse used in the groups, not properties of the individuals composing the groups." Additionally, the analyst is sampling from his or her own ideas and experiences, via introspection. This second phenomenon is examined in the "A factor" later. Meanwhile, the contribution of the C factor in analytic qualitative research is estimated to be (no more than) 50 percent.

Realisation that the relevant "C factor" in analytic qualitative research is the population of ideas rather than the population of consumers explains why analytic qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, should not be concerned with random sampling. In fact, to maximise the range and variety of ideas, purposive sampling should be employed. The researcher should deliberately recruit not only some average consumers but also extremes such as very heavy users of the category, averse non-users, users of "niche" brands, and so forth. This means that even so-called "professional respondents," or "groupies" as they are disparagingly

called, are suitable as subjects in qualitative research; they are proven talkers and, having experienced many qualitative interviews (for which they must meet the respective product category screening criteria, of course), they are likely to be able to contribute more ideas than the typical "naïve" respondent. More ideas means more unique and thus valuable ideas (Langer, 1984; Rossiter and Lilien, 1994).

The consumer (C) data collected in an analytic qualitative study are ideas and, because of the people-sampling method and the varying ability of the analyst to elicit ideas from consumers, the data are almost impossible to replicate. The main reasons for this very low "reliability" of data 1 are:

1. The consumer or respondent sample employed in the research. (The analyst designs the sample selection but the market research company recruits the sample, usually by nonrandom means.)
2. The question-asker's personal characteristics and also the perceived social relationship between the question-asker and the consumer, as perceived by the consumer, and to some extent as perceived by the question-asker. (Only in content analysis are personal characteristics not relevant.)
3. The actual questions asked (and not asked).
4. The degree and quality of probing of consumers' answers. (The probing in content analysis is seen in the addition of unanticipated content categories.)

---

It can be seen from the last two factors on the list that the analyst, not just the consumer, contributes to the quality of data 1. The consumers' contribution (C) to the results in the overall research equation  $C + A = R$  is therefore justifiably estimated at no more than 50 percent. In fact, a great many marketing plans are formulated by a single manager's qualitative introspection, without any consumer input at all, as are a great many advertising campaigns formulated by the introspecting copywriter in an advertising agency (Kover, 1995). From a cynical perspective, consumers – the C factor in analytic qualitative research – may be seen as just an input instrument for the analyst's inferences.

In quantitative research, by comparison, the consumers' contribution to the results as providers of data 1 is more like 90 percent. The analyst converts these data 1 to a very simple form of data 2 (inferences) via statistical analysis. As argued below, the analyst's contribution to the results of quantitative research is only about 10 percent.

### **The A Factor**

The fundamental and most important difference between analytic qualitative research and quantitative research is the analyst's contribution (the A factor), which is major in analytic qualitative research and relatively minor in quantitative research. In analytic qualitative research, the analyst's role is analogous to that of a clinician (Calder, 1977), who observes and then infers to reach a diagnosis and recommendation. The biggest myth about qualitative research, including the analytic type, perpetuated in textbooks, academic journal articles, and increasingly by doctoral committees which now accept qualitative theses, is that "anyone can do it." Practitioners know better (Gordon, 1997). Just as clinicians exhibit differing abilities to correctly diagnose patients' problems, the analysts in qualitative research have differing abilities and therefore differing predictive validities (see also Westen and Weinberger, 2004). This

was demonstrated in the student studies referred to earlier, where each student, acting as a separate A, analysed the same C-data, with widely differing results (R). It is certainly evident in the field of professional qualitative market research where some analysts are highly-paid and highly sought after, based on their predictive track record, whereas other low-success analysts leave the profession after few attempts.

It follows that the validity of analytic qualitative research results cannot be improved by averaging the interpretations of high-validity analysts with those of low-validity analysts. This is also the problem with trying to invoke "trustworthiness" as a sort of construct validity claim by dragging in other analysts to review the data and "confirm" the inferences (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen, 1993). Imagine, in a not too far-fetched analogy, trying to estimate a person's height by averaging the results from three judges, one of whom uses a tape measure, another just looks at the person and guesses, and the third plugs in the average height of people in the population. Only one judge would be right. Averaging (or seeking "consensus") is a false analogy with internal-consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) in quantitative research. In the qualitative case, the different analysts would be regarded as multiple items on a test, and the fallacy would be to look for a high "alpha." This fallacy is demonstrated in the qualitative analytic procedure of coders' content analysis and in the extreme with computerised content analysis (see Table 2 earlier). Inter-analyst "reliability" is a nonsensical concept in analytic qualitative research and does not provide the equivalent of the quantitative researcher's comforting coefficient alpha to indicate the internal-consistency reliability of measurement results. Analytic qualitative research is highly unreliable in the inter-coder or inter-analyst sense but can be highly valid: it is just that analysts' predictive validities differ.

The second point is that internal-consistency reliability is important in qualitative research but in a reconceptualised way. The correct equivalent to internal-consistency reliability in qualitative research is the leveling off of a marginal insight referred to earlier – that is, the reliability of the idea. From this perspective, the “items” in the “test” are A’s successive feelings of confidence about each inference he or she makes (data 2). The analyst must interview enough consumers – thereby sampling enough of the “confidence episodes” pertaining to the idea – until the analyst experiences a “cumulative confidence of inference” that the idea is approaching “100% correct,” in which case it goes into the report (or 100% wrong, in which case the hypothesised idea is dropped from the report). This is equivalent to a coefficient alpha approaching 1.0. Of course, there will be multiple insights or ideas, and hence multiple “confidence alphas,” but usually these will begin to simultaneously reach their maxima as more consumers are interviewed and the overall explanatory theory begins to be fitted together in the analyst’s mind.

Analytical qualitative research, as stated before, is largely unreplicable. However, the analyst’s performance over successive projects provides a form of test-retest reliability. Test-retest reliability in the sense of a cumulative “track record” over successive jobs is what distinguishes successful analysts from the unsuccessful.

In quantitative research, by contrast, there is no direct analogy to the analyst’s test-retest reliability because the analyses (and the results) are supposed to be completely replicable, that is, achievable by anyone. In practice, this is hardly ever the case because exact replications of data 1, before the statistical analysis, are hardly ever achieved.

### The R Factor

Little has been written in the literature of qualitative research about the research outcome: the results of R factor. Wells (1986) is one of the few to address this topic. He makes the important observation from long experience that “words” reports, as are typical in qualitative research, are

**Table 4 : Quantitative Interpretation Of Qualitative Reporting:  
Base = 160 Executive Users Of Qualitative Research  
(Scipione 1995)**

Degree descriptors	Mean (%)	s.e. (%)	Change descriptors	Mean (%)	s.e. (%)
Virtually all	85	(1.1)	A significant change	47	(2.4)
Most	69	(1.7)	A substantial change	34	(1.8)
A large majority	61	(1.7)	Much more than	32	(1.7)
More than half	59	(0.8)	Somewhat more than	31	(2.0)
A majority	56	(1.4)	Somewhat less than	29	(2.0)
A large majority	41	(1.7)	Much less than	26	(1.0)
Less than half	40	(1.0)	A slight change	20	(2.2)
A minority	24	(1.7)	Hardly anyone	12	(1.6)

---

much more likely to be taken as a basis for managerial action than are “numbers” reports, as in quantitative research. The words and numbers division is deceptive, as Overholser (1986) and Scipione (1995), among others, have demonstrated (see Table 4). But the conceptualisation of results involves much more than this distinction.

As alluded to several times throughout this paper, the results of analytic qualitative research should be presented in the form of mini-theory of marketing action. This means that a theoretical framework for the results is required. Such theoretical frameworks are usually nonexistent in qualitative research reports. Not surprisingly, buyers of qualitative research studies complain that there is a lot of “free-form,” unsatisfactory reporting (Moran, 1986). Lack of a theoretical framework for the results is also a serious problem for academic “interpretive” qualitative research reports. One such framework, applicable especially to developing action recommendations for advertising campaigns, is available in Rossiter and Percy (1987, 1997). Without getting too specific here, the framework, to be “filled in” by the qualitative research analyst, consists of a behavioral sequence model, a listing of communication objectives, a positioning statement, and recommended persuasive tactics. Another framework, applicable to qualitative research for new product positioning, could be easily adapted from Urban and Hauser (1993). Much more hard thinking is needed to develop appropriate R-frameworks for presenting qualitative research results.

Finally, there is another difference between quantitative research and analytic qualitative research that resides in the R factor. Quantitative research can be fairly distinctly divided into theory-testing research and applied research (Fern and Monroe, 1996). For example, theory-testing research is usually conducted with an experimental design in a laboratory setting, and statistical significance takes precedence over effect sizes. Applied

research, on the other hand, is usually undertaken by using a non-experimental survey or quasi-experimental field study (Campbell and Stanley, 1973), and effect sizes are paramount regardless of statistical significance (Fern and Monroe, 1996). Analytic qualitative research, on the other hand, combines theory-testing and applied research. The qualitative research analyst is developing and, in the interviews, tentatively testing, a mini-theory. The mini-theory requires the analyst to discover the relevant variables, decide how they are causally related, infer consumers’ scores on these variables (thereby engaging in measurement), and then test the theory “on the run” before writing it up in the report. Statistical significance does not apply but predictive effect sizes definitely do, though only in a loose, ordinal, small-medium-big quantitative metric rather than as precise numbers.

Along with its methodological and analytic difficulties, the lack of an “effects” test makes analytic qualitative research unsuitable for most Ph.D. dissertations. With a qualitative dissertation, the examiners (or other readers) can say: “Well, that’s your view but who’s to say you’re right?” The Ph.D. student’s theory may well be right (valid), but no-one can know without a field test of it. Untested qualitative research cannot contribute to knowledge in the field, the usual defining requirement of Ph.D. research and of most academic publications.

In practice, qualitative research results (action recommendations) are usually tested for predictive validity in some form of field experiment. In marketing, this is most often an advertising pre-test, a product or service test-market, or simply launching a product or running an advertising campaign and then “tracking” its results over time. Rarely is an ideal, fully-controlled experimental design, such as the Solomon 4-group design (Campbell and Stanley, 1973; Rossiter and Percy, 1997, chapter 19), affordable. Advertising pre-tests such

as ARSTM and ADVANTAGE \* ACTTM typically employ the one-group pretest-posttest design (observation-treatment-observation) in which the possible effect of pre-testing on the post-test outcome is uncontrolled, although this effect appears not to be a problem in practice due to well-disguised pre-test measures. Some advertising pre-tests, such as ADTESTTM and RPM TestTM, employ the true-experiment posttest-only control-group design, which is well-controlled but requires more than double the sample size of the protest-posttest design to obtain statistically reliable results. Product or service test markets usually employ the quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design, non-equivalent because test and non-test, or control, groups are geographically rather than randomly assigned (although BehaviorScanTM does randomly assign households to TV advertising treatments in its test markets by using split-cable technology); nevertheless, statistical correction through measurement and then covariance analysis of potentially mis-matching rival causes of the differences in outcome between experimental and control groups provides good assurance.

In-market tracking studies employ the quasi-experimental design of either a single-group time-series (panel sample) or equivalent-group time series (so-called “continuous” tracking, such as Millward Brown’s or MarketMind’s tracking research). The main threat to quasi-experiments comes from potential rival causal factors operating in the marketplace but these are usually well-measured and assessed by these tracking research suppliers so that managers can be highly confident in the truth of the findings (Rossiter and Percy, 1997, chapter 20). However, this is not to condone what is too often a non-experiment, the “one-shot case study” (Campbell and Stanley, 1973) in which the manager merely observes sales results of the new marketing campaign and deems it a success or failure, with no measurement and control of potential alternative causal factors. If prior

sales are observed as a pre-measure, this becomes a one-group pretest-posttest design, which is safe enough for advertising pre-tests, or “theater tests,” but not for in-market tests without measurement and control of all likely other real-world causes of sales change.

In sum, validated advertising pre-tests (see Rossiter and Percy, 1997, chapter 19), responsible test-market experiments or quasi-experiments, or multiple-measurement in-market tracking is necessary to establish the predictive validity of a mini-theory proposed by analytic qualitative research.

## Summary

This assessment of qualitative research can be summarised in terms of four major points:

1. Qualitative research is not simply the use of qualitative interview methodologies. The analyst is a crucial and inseparable part of qualitative measurement, and the results are the analyst’s causal mini-theory of the behavior that is the topic of investigation. This is properly called analytic qualitative research. The interpretive ability of the analyst contributes about 50 percent to the predictive validity of the results, which is enough range from analyst to analyst to produce qualitative research that is of very low to very high predictive validity. Interpretive ability requires interpersonal intelligence for collecting data and making inferences about causality, and knowledge of marketing theory for making recommendations for a marketing plan.
2. Evaluation of qualitative research methodologies in terms of standard quantitative research criteria – such as random sampling of consumers, consumer-sample size, and any sort of statistical analysis of the results other than ordinal recommendations of “degree” – are completely inappropriate. Internal-consistency reliability in analytic qualitative research refers to the

analyst's "confidence alphas" in making inferences from successive sampling of respondents' data; enough interviews have to be conducted to yield high confidence in all the main inferences constituting the mini-theory. Test-retest reliability in analytic qualitative research refers to the analyst's record of predictive validity over jobs, the most important consideration in buying qualitative research commercially.

3. There is only one relevant validity criterion for qualitative research: the predictive validity of the results. A corollary of this is that the inferences formulated by the analyst cannot be regarded as contributions to knowledge until those inferences demonstrate predictive validity when tested in the field. This means that "interpretive" qualitative research, on its own, is not marketing knowledge. In analytic qualitative research by professionals, predictive validity only has to be demonstrated once, for the current brand and the current marketing or advertising campaign. In analytic qualitative research by academics, broader predictive validity does, of course, have to be demonstrated. This is done not by trying to "quantify" the findings but via direct practical applications of the qualitative mini-theory.

4. Analytic qualitative research, it could be argued, will always be a professional domain. This is because qualitative researchers must prove themselves professionally as analysts and also because qualitative research mini-theories require a field test (a campaign) to establish their validity. Marketing academics and Ph.D. students, if they are particularly skilled as analysts, can conduct analytic qualitative research to propose a theory. They can then put the theory up for peer review, which may result in a theoretical article clearly labeled as such. This is not to be belittled, as marketing and advertising are fields which cannot develop without promising theories, though less so mini-theories. But very few academics or doctoral students have the necessary ability to do analytic qualitative research and, given usual resources, academics cannot test the theory by applying it in a marketing or advertising campaign. Realistically, only professionals can do this. Professional qualitative researchers are therefore in a unique position to contribute scientific knowledge, not just temporary and specific knowledge for a particular campaign, but also more enduring and general knowledge in the case of those theories that are worth repeated trials in the marketplace.

## References

- Armstrong, J.S. & Schultz, R.L. 1993, 'Principles involving marketing policies: an empirical assessment', *Marketing Letters*, vol. 4, no.3, pp. 253-265.
- Association for Qualitative Research 1999, '*Listing of books and monographs on qualitative research*', Provided at the 1999 annual conference, Melbourne, Australia, July 8-10.
- Baldinger, A.L. 1992, 'What CEOs are saying about brand equity: a call to action for researchers', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 32, no.4, pp.RC-6 to RC-12.
- Bass, F.M. 1969, 'A new product growth model for consumer durables', *Management Science*, vol. 15, no.1, pp. 215-227.
- Belk, R.W. (ed.) 1991, *Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT
- Calder, B.J. 1977, 'Focus groups and the nature of qualitative research', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol.14, no. 3, pp. 353-364.
- Calder, B.J. 1994, 'Qualitative marketing research', in R.P. Bagozzi (ed.), *Marketing Research*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, pp. 50-72.
- Campbell, D.T. & Stanley, J.C. 1973, *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research*, Rand McNally, Chicago

- Cuneo, A.Z. 1999, 'New ads draw on hypnosis for brand positioning', *Advertising Age*, July 19, p. 9.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. 2005, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- Dowling, G.R. & Kabanoff, B. 1996, 'Computer-aided content analysis: what do 240 advertising slogans have in common?' *Marketing Letters*, vol. 7, no.1, pp. 63-75.
- Durgee, J.F. 1985, 'Depth-interview techniques for creative advertising', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 29-37.
- Ehrenberg, A.S.C. 1995, 'Empirical generalisations, theory, and method', *Marketing Science*, vol. 14 (3, part 2), G20 - G28.
- Erlanson, D.A., Harris, E.L., Skipper, B.L. & Allen, S.A. 1993, *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA
- Fern E. and Monroe, K. 1996, 'Effect-size estimates: issues and problems in interpretation', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 23, no.2, pp. 89-105.
- Fournier, S. 1998, 'Consumer and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 24. no. 4, pp. 343-373.
- Gardner, H. 1983, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, New York:
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. 1967, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Aldine, Chicago, IL
- Gordon, W. 1997, *Is the right research being ill-used?* Admap, February, 20-23.
- Gould, S.J. 1991, 'The self-manipulation of my pervasive, vital energy through product use: an introspective-praxis approach', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.18 no.2, pp. 194-207.
- Griffin, A.J. & Hauser, J.R. 1993, 'The voice of the customer', *Marketing Science*, vol. 12, no.1, pp. 1-27.
- Holbrook, M.B. 1997, 'Walking on the edge: a stereographic photo essay on the verge of consumer research', in S.Brown & D. Turley (eds.), *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*, Routledge, London, pp. 46-78.
- Howard, J.A. 1977, *Consumer Behavior: Application of Theory*, McGraw-Hill, New York
- Hudson, LA. & Ozanne, J.L. 1988, 'Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.14, no.4, pp. 508-521.
- James, William 1884, 'What is an Emotion?', *Mind*, vol. 9, pp.188-205.
- Kirk, J. & Miller, M.L. 1986, *Reliability and Validity in Quantitative Research*, Sage, Beverley Hills, CA:
- Kover, A.J. 1995, 'Copywriters' implicit theories of communication: an exploration', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 21, no.4, pp. 596-611.
- Langer, J. 1984, 'Managing market research: the contribution of qualitative techniques', *Marketing Review*, vol. 40, no.2, pp. 25-31.
- Levin, G. 1992, 'Anthropologists in adland: researchers now studying cultural meanings of brands', *Advertising Age*, February 24, pp. 3, 49.
- Lunt, P. & Livingstone, S. 1996, 'Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research', *Journal of Communications*, vol. 46, no.2, pp. 79-98.
- McCracken, G. 1989, 'Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.16, no.3, pp. 310-321.
- McQuarrie, E.F. 1989, Book review, in *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 26, no.1, pp. 121-125.
- McQuarrie, E.F. & McIntyre, S.H. 1990, 'What the group interview can contribute to research on consumer phenomenology', *Research in Consumer Behavior*, vol. 4, pp. 165-194.
- Mick, D.G. 1997, 'Semiotics in marketing and consumer research: balderdash, verity, please', in S. Brown and D. Turley (eds.), *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*, Routledge, London, pp. 249-262.
- Moran, W.T. 1986, 'The science of qualitative research', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol.26, no.3, RC-16 to RC-19.
- Morrison, M.T., Haley, E., Sheehan, K.B., & Taylor, R.E. 2002, *Using Qualitative Research in Advertising*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- O'Donohoe, S. 1996, 'Advertising research: sins of omission and inaugurated eschatology' in S. Brown, J. Bell & D. Carson (eds.), *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology and the Illusion of the End*, Routledge, London, pp. 206-222.

- Overholser, C. 1986, 'Quality, quantity and thinking real hard', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 26, no.3, RC-7 to RC-12.
- Perreault, W.D., Jr. & Leigh, L.E. (1989). 'Reliability of nominal data based on qualitative judgment', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 26, no.2, pp.135-148.
- Rossiter, J.R. 1994, 'Commentary on A.S.C. Ehrenberg's "Theory of well-based results: which comes first?"' in G. Laurent, G.L Lilien, & B. Pras (eds.), *Research Traditions in Marketing*, Kluwer, Boston, MA, pp. 116-122.
- Rossiter, J.R. 2001, 'What is marketing knowledge? Stage I: Forms of marketing knowledge', *Marketing Theory*, vol.1, no.1, pp.9-26.
- Rossiter, J.R. 2002a, 'The five forms of transmissible, usable marketing knowledge', *Marketing Theory*, vol. 2, no.4, pp. 369-380.
- Rossiter, J.R. 2002b, 'The C-OAR-SE procedure for scale development in marketing' *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, vol. 19, no.4, pp. 305-335.
- Rossiter, J.R. 2003, 'Commentary: Qualifying the importance of findings', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 56, no.1, pp. 85-88.
- Rossiter, J.R. & Bellman, S. 2005), *Marketing Communications: Theory and Applications*, Pearson Prentice Hall, Frenchs Forest, Australia
- Rossiter, J.R. & Lilien, G.L. 1994, 'New "brainstorming" principles', *Australian Journal of Management*, vol. 19, no.1, pp. 61-72.
- Rossiter, J.R. & Percy, L. 1987, *Advertising and Promotional Management*, McGraw-Hill, New York
- Rossiter, J.R. & Percy, L. 1997, *Advertising Communications and Promotion Management*, McGraw-Hill, New York
- Rossiter, J.R., Percy, L. & Donovan, R.J. 1991, 'A better advertising planning grid', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 31, no.5, pp. 11-21.
- Rust, R.T. & Cooil, B. 1994, 'Reliability measures for qualitative data: theory and implications', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 31, no.1, pp.1-14.
- Scipione, P.A. 1995, 'The value of words: numerical perceptions associated with descriptive words and phrases in market research reports', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol.35, no.3, pp.36-43.
- Schutz, A. 1967, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Northwestern University Press, Evanstone, IL
- Tadajewski, M. 2008, 'Incommensurable paradigms, cognitive bias and the politics of marketing theory' *Marketing Theory*, vol. 8, no.3, pp. 273-297.
- Urban, G.L. & Hauser, J.R. 1993, *Design and Marketing of New Products*, 2nd edn, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ
- Vaughan, R. 1980, 'How advertising works: a planning model', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 20, no.5, pp. 27-33.
- Walker, R. 1985a, 'An introduction to applied qualitative research', in R. Walker (ed.), *Applied Qualitative Research*, Gower, Aldershot, UK, pp. 3-26.
- Walker, R. 1985b, 'Evaluating applied qualitative research', in R. Walker, *Op. cit.*, pp. 177-196.
- Wallendorf, M. & Brucks, M. 1993, 'Introspection in consumer research: implementation and implications', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 20, no.3, pp. 339-359.
- Webb, E.J., Campbell, D.T., Schwartz, R.D. & Sechrest, L. 1966, *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences*, Rand McNally, Chicago
- Wells, W.D. 1986, 'Truth and consequences', *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol.26 no.3, RC-13 to RC-16.
- Wells, W. 1993, 'Discovery-oriented consumer research', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.19, no.4, pp. 489-504.
- Westen, D. & Weinberger, J. 2004, 'When clinical description becomes statistical prediction', *American Psychologist*, vol.59, no.7, pp. 595-613.
- Wilson, T.D., Dunn, D.S., Kraft, D. & Lisle, D.J. 1989, Introspection, attitude change, and attitude-behavior consistency: The disruptive effects of explaining why we feel the way we do', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 22, pp. 287-343.
- Zaltman, G. & Zaltman, L. 2008, *Marketing Metaphoria*, Harvard Business Press, Boston

# Interested in becoming an AMSRS member?

The Australian Market & Social Research Society Ltd (AMSRS) is a not-for-profit professional membership organisation established to serve those practising or interested in market, economic and social research.

We have a national membership of over 2,000 researchers, marketing executives, market research managers and buyers, field managers, recruiters, interviewers, academics and students.

Being a member benefits those people:

- involved in or interested in market, economic, advertising or social research
- employed in the marketing or research sections of an organisation
- conducting qualitative and quantitative research
- who supervise field operations, interview or recruit participants for research projects
- who teach or study in marketing or social and market research

Membership entitlements include:

- discounted member rates to AMSRS and affiliate events
- a copy of the Annual Directory & Yearbook, and 11 copies of Research News
- regular updates on state and national industry information, developments and events
- a membership card and membership certificate
- Full members are entitled to use the postnominals MMSRS (Member of the Market & Social Research Society), vote in divisional and national elections of the AMSRS and receive the Society's Journal AJMSR.

Note: Student members receive limited membership benefits so please see our website for full details.

All members are bound to observe the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour, which covers both ethics and standard conditions of conducting and reporting scientific research.

**Join Today**

## Contact us at:

Membership,  
Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Level 1, 3 Queen Street  
Glebe NSW 2037

Phone: +61 (0) 2 9566 3100

**Or check out Membership on our website at [www.amsrs.com.au](http://www.amsrs.com.au)**



---

# The Effect of Questionnaire Colour, a Chocolate Incentive and a Replacement Return Envelope on Mail Survey Response Rates

Mike Brennan and Xiaozhen Xu

Massey University

## Abstract

A mail survey of the general public was used to examine the effect on response rates of a chocolate incentive, questionnaire colour, and a replacement reply-paid return envelope. The chocolate significantly increased the response rate when used in the first mail-out, but significantly decreased the response rate when used in a follow-up mail-out. Neither the colour of the questionnaire (white or purple) nor a replacement reply-paid envelope significantly affected response rates.

## Introduction

It has long been recognised that mail survey response rates can be improved by using a “pre-paid” incentive. While many different types of incentives have been tested (Kanuk and Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975; Dillman 1978, 1991, 2000; Duncan 1979; Yu and Cooper 1983; Harvey 1987; Fox, Crask and Kim 1988; Brennan 1992; Church 1993), it is evident that the most effective incentive is cash (Armstrong 1975; Kanuk and Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975; Goodstad, Chung, Kronitz and Cook 1977; Herberlein and Baumbartner 1978; Hansen 1980; Furse, Stewart and Rados 1981; Yu and Cooper 1983; Fox, Crask and Kim 1988; Gajraj, Faria and Dickinson 1990; James and Bolstein 1990; Church 1993; Jobber, Saunders and Mitchell 2004). However, using a cash incentive is no longer permissible in countries such as New Zealand, so the challenge is to find an acceptable alternative.

To be useful, an incentive must not only be effective, but also low cost, and suitable for posting in a letter. One such incentive that appears to meet these criteria is chocolate. Gendall, Leong and Healey (2005) found that gold-foil covered chocolate coins produced modest increases in response rate (2.7% to 5.1%), and con-

cluded that the coins were a cost effective option. Brennan and Charbonneau (2006) found that flat, foil-wrapped milk chocolate squares significantly boosted initial response rates in a mail survey when sent with the first mail-out (by 7.3%), although the overall response rate was similar to the control after three mail-outs (63.0% c.f. 62.3%). Even so, a faster response to the first mail-out increased the cost-effectiveness, as fewer people needed to be re-contacted. Curiously, the incentive failed to improve the response rate when sent with the first reminder letter.

A second factor that may influence response rates is the colour of the survey questionnaire, although the evidence is not strong. Of a mere 15 published studies, only 5 report statistically significant colour effects. Matteson (1974) found a significantly higher response from pink than white for one of two conditions; Blythe and Essex (1981) found yellow more effective than white in one of two conditions; Fullerton and Dodge (1988) found pink more effective than yellow, but not more effective than blue or white; LaGarce and Washburn (1995) and LaGarce and Kuhn (1995) found blue/yellow to be more effective than black/white (although they examined coloured print

rather than coloured paper); and Brennan and Charbonneau (2005) found purple to produce a significantly higher response rate than red, green, blue. Unfortunately, Brennan and Charbonneau (2005) did not test the effects of using white paper, so it is not clear whether purple is more or less effective than white. Of these studies, only that of Brennan and Charbonneau (2005) involved a survey of the general public.

A third factor that may influence response rates relates to the procedures a researcher uses to assist participation, such as supplying an addressed reply-paid envelope, and sending replacement questionnaires and reply-paid envelopes in follow-up mail-outs. There is evidence that sending out replacement questionnaires in follow-up mail-outs increases response rates more than simply sending a reminder letter (Futrell and Lamb 1974; Brennan 2004; Charbonneau and Brennan 2006) or a reminder postcard (Von Reisen 1979), but printing additional questionnaires can add significantly to survey costs. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence (personal experience) that people frequently return the original questionnaire when sent a replacement, suggesting that the replacement is often redundant. However, even if respondents retain the original questionnaire, their efforts to participate are impeded if they have lost the reply-paid return envelope. Since it seems intuitive that people are more likely to misplace an envelope than a questionnaire, it would seem sensible to determine whether simply sending a replacement reply-paid envelope with a reminder letter increases response rates.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of using a coloured questionnaire, a chocolate incentive, and a replacement return envelope to improve mail survey response rates.

### **Method**

A sample of 960 names was randomly selected from the 2003 New Zealand Electoral Roll to provide equal sized sam-

ples of each gender in each of 12 age-group categories. All respondents were from a single Provincial City, to control for mail delivery procedures. An equal number from each age/gender category was randomly assigned to five treatment groups for an experiment involving choice behaviour. Then an equal number from each choice treatment group within each age/gender category was randomly assigned to each of four treatment groups for this survey methodology study.

A mail survey was conducted in November (summer) of 2006. A reply-paid envelope and a questionnaire were sent in the first mail-out. A reminder letter was sent to non-responders 10 days later. Overall, after one follow-up letter, there were 286 valid responses, 63 GNA/ineligibles and 19 refusals, representing a response rate (valid/(N-GNA)) of 31.9%.

The survey tested the effects on response rates of three procedures: using either a purple or white coloured questionnaire, enclosing a chocolate as an incentive, and sending a replacement reply-paid envelope with the reminder letter. Only two mail-outs were used, and the second mail-out was a reminder letter without a replacement questionnaire.

The initial mail-out tested the effects of questionnaire colour and using a chocolate as an incentive. Only the front and back cover pages of the 16 page questionnaire (A3 folded into an A4 booklet) were coloured; the inside pages were white. The follow-up mail-out tested the effects of chocolate as an incentive when sent with a reminder letter (where this incentive had not been used in the first mail-out), and the effect of supplying a replacement reply-paid envelope (where chocolate had been used as an incentive in the first mail-out).

The chocolate incentive was a small, flat (44mm x 45mm x 6mm) foil-wrapped milk chocolate (Whittaker's), which was attached to the cover letter with double

sided adhesive tape. The letter explained what the survey was about, requested participation, and where a chocolate was used, ended with the statement: "Please accept the attached chocolate as a small token of appreciation."

For each of the four treatment groups from the first mail-out, non-responders were randomly split into two groups balanced by gender and age-group. One of the two non-response groups that had been sent a chocolate in the first mail-out was sent replacement reply-paid envelope with the reminder letter, while the other was not. One of the two non-response groups that had not been sent

a chocolate in the first mail-out was sent a chocolate with the reminder letter, while the other was not. The research design is shown in Table 1.

## Results

**Initial mail-out.** The response rates for the treatments used in the initial mail-out are reported in Table 2.

The use of the chocolate incentive produced a significantly higher response to the initial mail-out than the control (no incentive) overall ( $\chi^2 = 10.3$  d.f. = 1,  $p=.001$ ), and for the white questionnaires but not the purple (white:  $\chi^2 = 7.263$  d.f. = 1,  $p=.007$ ; purple:  $\chi^2 = 3.210$  d.f. = 1,  $p=.073$ ).

**Table 1. Research Design.**

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4	
Mail-out 1	P+C (230)		W+C (231)		P-C (233)		W-C (223)	
Mail-out 2	+R (81)	-R (85)	+R (79)	-R (81)	+C (91)	-C (91)	+C (88)	-C (91)

**Note.** P = Purple questionnaire cover; W = White questionnaire cover  
 +C = Chocolate incentive; -C = no chocolate incentive  
 +R = replacement reply-paid envelope; -R = no replacement reply-paid envelope  
 Number in parentheses ( ) = sample size adjusted for GNA/ineligible

**Table 2. Response rates for initial mail-out**

Treatment	n	%
<b>Interactions</b>		
Purple + Chocolate	230	22.6
Purple – Chocolate	231	16.0
White + Chocolate	233	27.0
White – Chocolate	223	16.6
<b>Main Effects</b>		
Chocolate	463	24.8
No Chocolate	454	16.3
White	456	21.9
Purple	461	19.3

Note. Response rate = Valid / Total sample – (ineligible + GNA)

The colour of the questionnaire had no significant effect on the response rate ( $\chi^2 = .965$  d.f. = 1,  $p=.329$ ) to the first mail-out, and there is no interaction between questionnaire colour and the use of a chocolate incentive; the difference in response rates between the purple and white questionnaires was non-significant both when a chocolate incentive was used ( $\chi^2 = 1.217$  d.f. = 1,  $p=.270$ ) and when a chocolate incentive was not used ( $\chi^2 = .027$ , d.f. = 1,  $p=.868$ ).

Follow-up mail-out. Table 3 displays the effects on response rates of using a chocolate incentive with non-respondents who had not been sent a chocolate previously, and of sending a replacement envelope to non-respondents who had been sent a chocolate incentive previously.

The surprising finding is that the use of the chocolate incentive with the follow-up letter produced a significantly lower response rate than not sending an incentive ( $\chi^2 = 4.136$  d.f. = 1  $p=.042$ ).

The replacement envelope produced a very small but non-significant increase in response rate ( $\chi^2 = .834$  d.f. = 1  $p=.361$ ). Of note is that only a single response was returned in the replacement envelope rather than the original supplied in the initial mail-out.

The difference in response between purple and white questionnaires (combined across chocolate and replacement envelope treatments) was also not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = .139$  d.f. = 1  $p=.709$ ).

## Discussion

The results confirm earlier reports that sending a chocolate as an incentive in the first mail-out is an effective way of boosting mail survey response rates. Brennan and Charbonneau (2006) reported an increase in response rate in the first mail-out of 7.3 % for the chocolate incentive over the control, whereas the increase in this study was 8.5%. That said, the actual first wave response rates for the control groups in the two studies differ considerably; 34% for Brennan and Charbonneau (2006) compared with 16.3 % in the present study. This makes the effect of the chocolate in the present study even more noteworthy, as it suggests that chocolate is an effective incentive even for surveys that fail to attract high response rates.

That said, it would also seem that one needs to be careful about using chocolate as an incentive. While chocolate was very effective when sent with the first mail-out, using a chocolate as an incentive in a follow-up mail-out (letter only) not only failed to increase the response rate to that mail-out, but significantly decreased it (- 7.5%).

**Table 3. Response rates for follow-up letter**

Treatment	n	%
Chocolate	179	10.6
No chocolate	182	18.1
Replacement envelope	160	15.5
No replacement envelope	166	12.0
Purple*	348	13.7
White*	339	14.7

Note. Response rate = Valid / Total sample – (ineligible + GNA)

\* The colour of the questionnaire sent in the first mail-out

---

While sending a chocolate with the first follow-up was found to be ineffective in the Brennan and Charbonneau (2006) study, it still generated a response rate similar to that of the control. Thus the significant decrease the response rate in the present study was unexpected. There is also no obvious reason for it, and careful checking excluded coding error as a cause.

While it is purely conjecture, one possibility is that respondents may have perceived the chocolate sent in the follow-up mail-out as a bribe or an attempt at coercion rather than as a token of appreciation, given that a proportion of the people receiving the incentive had already declined the first invitation to participate. The demands the survey may well have contributed to this situation, as the tasks were clearly “academic” and were quite likely of little relevance to most respondents. That is, respondents were asked to take part in choice tasks and answer questions relating to their decision processes, rather than provide information about their attitudes or behaviour towards some topic of general importance or interest.

While purple may perform better than other colours (see Brennan and Charbonneau 2005), the present results suggest that using purple paper for a questionnaire is no more effective than using white paper, and so do not support the idea that a colourful questionnaire will stand out and be more easily noticed and retrieved by respondents when prompted by a reminder letter, and thus improve response rates. Furthermore, the results do not support the idea that this effect is more likely to occur where response rates are low, as suggested by Matteson (1974).

It is also apparent that sending a replacement reply-paid envelope is unnecessary. Although the group sent a replacement envelope produced a response rate that was 3.5% higher than the group not sent a replacement envelope, this increase was not statistically significant, so may have been due to chance.

## Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the colour of a questionnaire does not make a significant difference to mail survey response rates, and sending a replacement envelope with a reminder letter is unnecessary. However, sending a chocolate as an incentive is an effective way of significantly increasing response rates, so long as it is sent in the first mail-out and not sent with a reminder.

## References

- Armstrong, J. Scott. 1975, 'Monetary incentives in mail surveys', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 39, pp. 112-16.
- Blythe, I. and Essex, P. 1981, 'Variations on a postal theme', *Paper to the Annual Conference of the Market Research Society*, March, pp. 35-51 cited in Jobber & Sanderson, 1983.
- Brennan, M. 1992, 'Techniques for improving mail survey response rates', *Marketing Bulletin*, vol.3, pp. 24-37, retrieved from <<http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz>>
- Brennan, M. 2004, 'A test of two procedures for increasing responses to mail surveys', *Marketing Bulletin*, vol. 15 (Research Note 3), pp. 1-9, retrieved from <<http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz>>
- Brennan, M. & Charbonneau, J. 2005, 'The colour purple: The effect of questionnaire colour on mail survey response rates', *Marketing Bulletin*, vol. 16 (Research Note 5), retrieved from <http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz>
- Brennan, M. & Charbonneau, J. 2006, 'The effect of incentives on mail survey response rates' Paper presented at the *61st Annual AAPOR Conference*, May 18-21, Montreal.
- Charbonneau, J. & Brennan, M. 2006, 'Increasing mail survey response rates: The effect of non-monetary incentives, reminder letters and replacement questionnaires' Paper presented at *ANZMAC 2006*, December 4-6, Brisbane 2006.
- Church, Allan H. 1993, 'Estimating the effect of incentives on mail survey response rates: A meta-analysis' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 57, pp. 62-79.
- Dillman, Don A. 1978, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method*. John Wiley & Sons, New York
- Dillman, Don A. 1991, 'The design and administration of mail surveys', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 17, pp. 225-49.
- Dillman, Don A. 2000, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. John Wiley & Sons, New York
- Duncan, W. Jack. 1979, 'Mail questionnaires in survey research: A review of response inducement techniques', *Journal of Management*, vol. 5, Winter, pp. 39-55.
- Fox, R.J., Crask, M.R. & Kim, K. 1988, 'Mail survey response rate: A meta-analysis of selected techniques for improving response', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 52, pp. 467-91.
- Fullerton, S. & Dodge, H.R. 1988, 'The impact of colour on response rates for mail questionnaires', *Academy of Marketing Science Proceedings*, vol. 11, pp. 413-415. Gree234794
- Furse, D. H., Stewart, D. W. & Rados, D. L. 1981, 'Effects of foot-in-the-door, cash incentives and follow-ups on survey response', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 18, pp. 473-78.
- Futrell, C. M. & Charles W. Lamb 1974, 'Effect on mail survey return rates of including questionnaires with follow-up letters', *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 52, pp. 11-15.
- Gajraj, A.M., Faria, A.J. & Dickinson, J.R. 1990, 'A comparison of the effect of promised and provided lotteries, monetary and gift incentives on mail survey response rates, speed and cost', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 32 no. 1, pp. 141-162.
- Gendall, P., Leong, M. & Healey, B. 2005, 'The effect of pre-paid non-monetary incentives in mail surveys', In proceedings of *ANZMAC 2005 Conference*, December 5-7, Freemantle, Australia, retrieved from CDROM ISBN 0-646-45546-X.
- Goodstadt, M. S., Chung, L., Kronitz, R. & Cook, G. 1977, 'Mail survey response rates: Their manipulation and impact', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 14, pp 391-95.
- Hansen, R. A. 1980, 'A self-perception interpretation of the effect of monetary and nonmonetary incentives on mail survey respondent behaviour', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. XVII, pp. 77-83.
- Harvey, L. 1987, 'Factors affecting response rates to mailed questionnaires: A comprehensive literature review', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 341-53.

---

Heberlein, T. A. & Baumgartner, R. 1978, 'Factors affecting response rates to mailed questionnaires: A quantitative analysis of the published literature', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 43, pp. 447-62.

James, J.M. & Bolstein, R. 1990, 'The effect of monetary incentives and follow-up mailings on response rate and response quality in mail surveys', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 54, pp. 346-361.

Jobber, D., Saunders, J. & Mitchell, V-W. 2004, 'Pre-paid monetary incentive effects on mail survey response', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 57, pp. 347-50.

Kanuk, L. & Berenson, C. 1975, 'Mail surveys and response rates: A literature review', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 12, pp. 440-453.

LaGarce, R., & Washburn, J. 1995, 'An investigation into the effects of questionnaire format and color variations on mail survey response rates', *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*, vol. 25, no.1, pp. 57-70.

LaGarce, R. & Kuhn, L.D. 1995, 'The effect of visual stimuli on mail survey response rates', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 24, pp. 11-18.

Linsky, A. S. 1975, 'Stimulating responses to mailed questionnaires: A review', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 39, pp. 82-101.

Matteson, M.T. 1974, 'Type of transmittal letter and questionnaire colour as two variables influencing response rates in a mail survey', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 59, no.4, pp. 535-536.

Von Reisen, R. D. 1979, 'Postcard reminders versus questionnaires and mail survey response rates from a professional population', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 7, pp 1-7.

Yu, J. & Cooper, H. 1983, 'A quantitative review of research design effects on response rates to questionnaires', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 20, pp 36-44.

# Interested in becoming an AMSRS member?

The Australian Market & Social Research Society Ltd (AMSRS) is a not-for-profit professional membership organisation established to serve those practising or interested in market, economic and social research.

We have a national membership of over 2,000 researchers, marketing executives, market research managers and buyers, field managers, recruiters, interviewers, academics and students.

Being a member benefits those people:

- involved in or interested in market, economic, advertising or social research
- employed in the marketing or research sections of an organisation
- conducting qualitative and quantitative research
- who supervise field operations, interview or recruit participants for research projects
- who teach or study in marketing or social and market research

Membership entitlements include:

- discounted member rates to AMSRS and affiliate events
- a copy of the Annual Directory & Yearbook, and 11 copies of Research News
- regular updates on state and national industry information, developments and events
- a membership card and membership certificate
- Full members are entitled to use the postnominals MMSRS (Member of the Market & Social Research Society), vote in divisional and national elections of the AMSRS and receive the Society's Journal AJMSR.

Note: Student members receive limited membership benefits so please see our website for full details.

All members are bound to observe the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour, which covers both ethics and standard conditions of conducting and reporting scientific research.

**Join Today**

## Contact us at:

Membership,  
Australian Market & Social Research Society  
Level 1, 3 Queen Street  
Glebe NSW 2037



Phone: +61 (0) 2 9566 3100

**Or check out Membership on our website at [www.amsrs.com.au](http://www.amsrs.com.au)**

---

# The Design Of Survey Questions: Lessons From Two Attempts To Reduce Survey Error Rates

**Philip Gendall, Janet Hoek and Rachel Douglas Massey  
University, Palmerston North, New Zealand**

**Department of Communication, Journalism & Marketing  
Massey University  
Private Bag 11-222 Palmerton North New Zealand**

**Email: p.gendall@massey.ac.nz**

## **Abstract**

Despite the best efforts of questionnaire designers, survey questions do not always work as intended; however, the risk of this occurring can be reduced by cognitive pre-testing. Although it may be time consuming and expensive, pre-testing can be cost effective for demographic questions asked in many surveys. This paper reports two attempts to redesign survey questions about education and employment to reduce response errors. These attempts were successful for the education questions but not for the employment question. The results emphasise two fundamental principles of questionnaire design; namely, that respondents define what researchers can do and that researchers should not impose their view of the world on respondents.

## **Introduction**

This study investigated two sets of questions used in many social surveys: education and employment status. While it is important that all survey questions are well written, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to rigorously test all the questions in a particular questionnaire. However, demographic information is collected in most surveys; consequently, improvements in these questions can provide enduring benefits. This is particularly so for long-term survey programmes, such as International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), which uses the same set of demographic questions every year.

In an ISSP survey administered by mail to a randomly selected sample of New Zealanders, the proportion of detectable errors among the demographic questions ranged from zero to 25%; the questions with the most detectable errors

were those asking about education and employment<sup>1</sup>. The types of errors made varied from respondents ticking more than one box when a single answer was required, to missing skips, writing letters or characters in boxes instead of the appropriate symbol or number, to answers that were inconsistent between questions.

The education questions for the survey are shown in Figure 1.

---

<sup>1</sup> The topic of the survey was national identity and the sample was selected from the New Zealand electoral roll. The achieved sample size was 1052, which represented an effective response rate of 60%.

## Figure 1. Education Questions for ISSP Survey

**17. How many years of formal, full-time education have you had?**

Number of years

Kura kaupapa/primary (including intermediate)

Secondary school

After secondary school

**18. Which of these categories best describes the amount of formal education you have had?**

*PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

No formal schooling

Kura kaupapa/primary school (including intermediate)

Secondary school for up to 3 years

Secondary school for 4 years or more

Some university, wananga, polytechnic or other tertiary

Completed trade or professional qualification

Completed university or polytechnic degree

The errors detected are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Errors Observed for ISSP Education Questions**

N = 1052	Observed Errors	
	n	%
<b>Question 17</b>		
Incomplete information	134	12.7
Entered fractions or other symbols instead of numbers	29	2.8
<b>Question 18</b>		
Ticked more than one box	263	25.0
Answers to questions 17 & 18 inconsistent	10	1.0
Missing cases (no answer entered)	8	0.8

For question 17, an incomplete answer was defined as one where respondents had entered a figure for their secondary or tertiary education, but had not entered a figure for either their primary or secondary education (or both). The answers required were whole numbers, so respondents entering a value such '41/2 ' were recorded as having made an error, as were respondents who had ticked boxes where a number was an appropriate answer.

Question 18 required respondents to tick just one box, thus respondents who had ticked more than one were recorded as having made an error, as were respondents who had ticked a level of education higher than that suggested by their response to question 17.

For both questions, respondents could have made more than one of these errors;

they are not mutually exclusive. For the first question, a significant proportion of respondents (nearly 13%) did not answer at least part of the question. Sometimes this omission could be remedied after the event (for example, we know that generally if a person completed primary school, they spent eight years there), but ideally this should not be necessary, and in many cases such omissions cannot be corrected.

For the second question, a large proportion (one quarter) of respondents selected more than one option as their highest level of education. This suggests that the question did not indicate clearly to respondents that they should select just one box, or that many respondents found an individual response category inappropriate.

The employment question for the ISSP survey is shown in Figure 2.

## Figure 2. Employment Question for ISSP Survey

### 19. Which of the following best describes your current employment status?

Employed - full-time (35+ hours weekly)	<input type="checkbox"/>	} PLEASE GO TO Q22
Employed - part-time (15-35 hours weekly)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Employed - less than 15 hours weekly/temporarily out of work	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Helping family member	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Unemployed or beneficiary	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Student	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Retired	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Housewife/husband - home duties	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Permanently disabled	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Other (Please specify) .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	

The errors detected are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Errors Observed for ISSP Employment Question**

N = 1734	Observed Errors	
	n	%
More than one box ticked	67	3.9 <sup>1</sup>
Missed - skip over the following questions if not in paid employment	68	3.9 <sup>1</sup>
Other errors (eg respondent ticks employed, and then writes retired)	29	2.8 <sup>2</sup>
Missing cases (no answer entered)	31	2.8 <sup>1</sup>

Notes: 1. These figures are calculated as a percentage of the respondent's own answers, as well as their partner's, where they indicated they had a partner (i.e., 1052 + 682).  
 2. This was only recorded for the respondent's own details, not for their partner's details.

As for the education questions, respondents could have made more than one error in answering the employment question as the error categories were not mutually exclusive.

Respondents' problems with the employment question were less pronounced than for the education question, but the fact that nearly 4% of respondents ticked more than one box and nearly 4% missed the ensuing skip after this question, are indicative of questionnaire errors.

The skip in question 19 was intended to prevent respondents who were not in paid employment from answering further employment questions, but 4% of those who should have skipped question 20 went on to answer either question 20 or question 21. Some of these respondents rewrote their category from the earlier question (e.g., 'retired'), but others went on to write some type of job, either past or present. If people were currently studying and working, they may have ticked student but gone on to describe the work they did, while people who were retired often wanted to indicate the work that they had done (e.g., 'ex naval officer').

### Principles of Survey Question Design

Dillman (2007) describes the goal of self-administered survey question design as developing a query that every potential respondent will interpret in the same way, be able to respond to accurately, and be willing to answer. Dillman and many other survey researchers offer specific advice about how to achieve this goal (see, for example, Belson 1981, Converse & Presser 1986; Fowler 1995; Gendall 1998; Peterson 2000; Bradburn, Sudman & Wansink 2004).

This advice suggests that questions should be clear, unambiguous and non-leading, should avoid language that might be unfamiliar to respondents, and be formatted in a way that helps respondents to answer them. More generally, this advice reflects the general principles of questionnaire design outlined by Labaw (1980); namely, that the respondent defines what researchers can do and that researchers should let respondents tell them what they mean and not impose their own values, perceptions or language on respondents.

Fowler (1995) notes that there are potential problems with designing 'good' survey

---

questions to measure both education and occupation. The difficulty in measuring education is that it can follow different paths for different qualifications. For example, two people may have the same number of years of education but one may have achieved a university degree while the other may have achieved a non-academic qualification. Researchers need to decide whether both these types of study should be included and, if so, what, if any, weighting should be given to each. The problem is compounded in a survey programme like the ISSP because education systems differ among countries but the measures of education level and attainment need to be directly comparable across ISSP member countries.

In the study reported here, the question asking respondents to report their years of formal education suffered from respondents not providing complete information.

This could have been the fault of:

- poor layout causing respondents to answer only part of the question
- respondents not understanding what figures they should enter, or what type of answer was expected, so entering none

For the question asking for highest education level, a large number of respondents selected more than one answer. From the principles offered in the literature, potential problems with this question could be that:

- more than one question was actually being asked (highest qualification, and number of years of education)
- the instructions to tick just one answer were not clear enough (not in the right place for respondents to clearly see)
- the instruction was not clearly communicated

Measuring employment status unambiguously is potentially even more difficult than measuring education. As Fowler (1995) notes, overlapping response categories for employment questions are

common. For example, most students have some sort of job, many people with full-time jobs are also studying, and the status of 'retired' covers a number of situations. In fact, the whole notion of employment is becoming increasingly ambiguous as more people have several jobs and the once clear distinctions between employed, unemployed, homemaker, and retired become blurred.

For the employment question in the current study, a number of respondents gave more than one answer where only one was required. Some possible reasons for this are:

- the instruction to tick just one box was not clear enough
- the response options given were not mutually exclusive and respondents found that they fitted into more than one category
- the instruction was not clearly communicated

Some respondents missed the skip that was part of the employment question, going on to answer a section of the questionnaire they were not intended to answer. This suggests two things about the question:

- that the skip was not clear enough to respondents
- that respondents were not able to answer the question in a way they felt was complete from the options given, so they answered later questions to clarify their answers

## Methodology

The research comprised two stages. The first involved redesigning the education and employment questions using the principles of questionnaire design and cognitive interviews with potential respondents. The second was a field test of the redesigned questions in a mail survey.

The sample for the qualitative phase was a convenience sample of 15 respondents to an omnibus survey who had agreed to take part in further research. Initially, respondents were asked to fill out a ques-

tionnaire on the role of government containing the original education and employment questions. Respondents who had made an error in answering any part of the employment or education questions were asked why they had answered the questions in that way, and all respondents were asked to comment on what would have made the questions clearer or easier to answer. Alternative, redesigned questions were subsequently tested to assess the effect of changes made to the questions.

### Education questions

The main problem with the 'years of education' question was that many respondents found it very difficult to

provide an exact answer, particularly if they had studied part-time, or if their education had occurred many years ago. The solution was to design a categorical question with categories corresponding to the normal stages of transition in the New Zealand education system.

The main problem with the second education question was that it confounds two questions: highest qualification and years of education. This question was redesigned so that it asked only the respondent's highest qualification.

The two redesigned education questions are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Redesigned Education Questions**

**17. Which of these categories best describes the amount of formal education you have had?**

*PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

- No formal schooling
- Primary/intermediate up to standard six or form two
- Secondary school for up to 3 years
- Secondary school for 4 years or more
- University/polytechnic for up to 3 years
- University/polytechnic for 4 or more years

**18. Which one of these categories best describes your highest formal qualification?**

*PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY*

- No formal qualification
- School qualifications only (proficiency, School C, UE, Bursary etc)
- Trade or Professional certificate
- Diploma below Bachelor level
- Bachelor's Degree
- Post-graduate or higher qualification

## Employment question

The problem with the employment question is that it confounds how people receive their economic support and what they do with their day. Even if respondents were willing and able to confine their answer to their current employment status, for many, more than one response category may be appropriate (for example, retired but working less than 15 hours a week). Furthermore, it was clear from both the cognitive interviews and the ISSP survey that many respondents wanted to describe their lives, not just their employment status, so regardless of the intent of the question a retired pensioner, working 10 hours a week and studying a paper at university, would be likely to tick three boxes rather than one.

To address these problems the question was split into three questions that attempted to separately establish whether respondents were employed, and if so their employment status and, if not, how they spent their day. This involved a series of skip instructions to route respondents to the appropriate combination of questions.

The three redesigned employment questions are shown in Figure 4.

The performance of the redesigned questions in reducing respondent errors was tested in a mail survey using the same shortened version of the ISSP Role of Government questionnaire tested

**Figure 4. Redesigned Employment Questions**

**19a. Are you currently self employed or in paid employment?**

Yes

No

PLEASE GO TO Q22

PLEASE GO TO Q19C

**19b. Which of the following best describes your current employment status?**

Work full-time (35+ hours weekly)

Work part-time (15-35 hours weekly)

Work less than 15 hours weekly

PLEASE GO TO Q20

**19c. Which one of the following categories best describes you?**

Helping family member

Voluntary worker

Student

Unemployed/job seeker

Retired

Housewife/husband - home maker

Permanently disable/unable to work

Other (Please specify) .....

PLEASE GO TO Q22

in the cognitive interviews. There were two versions of the questionnaire, one containing the original education and employment questions, the other the redesigned questions.

A systematic sample of 772 potential respondents was selected from the New Zealand electoral roll and respondents were randomly allocated one version of the questionnaire. After two reminders, just over 200 valid responses had been received for each version of the questionnaire, representing response rates of 62% and 66%, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

The test questions were examined for the following errors:

- more than one box ticked
- missed skips
- inconsistent answers
- letters or characters instead of ticks
- missing responses

Not all of these were relevant to all of the questions, and some questions had more than one potential error.

### Results

Errors made in the education questions are shown in Table 3. The proportion of respondents making errors was reduced

**Table 3. Summary of Errors for Education Questions Tested**

	Original Questions (n=213)		Redesigned questions (n=226)	
	n	%	n	%
<b>Question 17</b>				
Missed boxes	42	19.7	0	0
Entered fractions or other symbols instead of numbers	29	9.9	1	0.4
Answer unrealistic	2	0.9	n/a	n/a
More than one box ticked	n/a	n/a	4	1.8
Missing cases (no answer entered)	7	3.3	1	0.4
<b>Question 18</b>				
Ticked more than one box	45	21.7	7	3.1
Answers to Q17 & Q18 inconsistent	11	5.2	0	0
Entered fractions or other symbols instead of numbers	5	2.3	0	0
Missing cases (no answer entered)	3	1.4	2	0.9
Total number of respondents making errors	99	46.5	13	5.8

<sup>2</sup> For version 1, which contained the original questions, 213 valid questionnaires were returned out of the 386 mailed. Thirty five questionnaires were returned 'gone no address' and seven respondents were ineligible, giving an effective response rate of  $213/[386-(35+7)] \times 100 = 61.9\%$ . Version 2 had 226 valid responses, 28 questionnaires returned 'gone no address' and 13 ineligible respondents. This represents an effective response rate of  $222/[386-(28+13)] \times 100 = 65.5\%$ .

from 47% for the original questions to 6% for the redesigned questions. Furthermore, this improvement was apparent in all of the errors observed. The only substantive error for the redesigned questions was 3% of respondents ticking more than one box for the highest formal qualification question. However, while this indicates that the question did not work completely as intended, this is an error that can be rectified in data cleaning by choosing the highest category. Overall, redesigning the education questions could thus be judged to have been successful.

Table 4 summarises the errors made by respondents when answering the employment questions. Because the employment questions for the respondent and his or her partner were identical, the errors for both sets of questions were combined and the proportion of respondents making errors was calculated as a percentage of the number of potential answers; that is, the number of respondents who answered for themselves plus the number of respondents who indicated they were married or lived with a partner. For the questionnaire with the original questions this number was 360 (213 respondents plus 147 partners) and for the other version it was 400 (226 respondents plus 174 partners).

For the employment questions, the proportion of respondents making errors increased from 22% for the original question to 33% for the redesigned questions. This increase was entirely due to errors of omission (missing a question that should have been answered) as a result of the skip pattern introduced into the redesigned question set. Redesigning the employment question had little or no effect on the two main errors observed for the original question; namely, respondents ignoring the skip over subsequent questions if they were not in paid employment or ticking more than one box.

Apart from the missing cases, the observed errors are all 'retrievable' in the sense that they can be rectified during data cleaning, but this process is time consuming if the numbers involved are large (12% in this case). Clearly this redesigning of the employment question was unsuccessful when measured against the objective of encouraging respondents to give unambiguous answers to the questions that apply to them and to only these questions.

**Table 4. Summary of Errors for Education Questions Tested**

	Original Questions (n=360)		Redesigned questions (n=400)	
	n	%	n	%
<b>Question 17</b>				
Total number of respondents making errors	23	6.4	20	5.0
Missing cases (no answer entered)	n/a	n/a	48	12.0
Missed skip over following questions if not in paid employment	39	10.8	36	9.0
Entered fractions or other symbols instead of numbers	0	0	1	0.2
Missing cases (no answer entered at all)	9	2.5	3	0.7
Total number of respondents making errors	47	22.1	75	33.2

---

## Discussion

This study illustrates some of the fundamental principles of questionnaire design that are so often ignored by researchers. The original 'years of education' question asked respondents for numbers that many of them could not calculate because they could not retrieve the necessary information. The redesigned version of the question did not require respondents to produce numbers or to decide which parts of their education were relevant to the question. This made the question unambiguous and much easier to answer, improvements that were reflected in the reduced error rate.

One disadvantage of the redesigned question is that inevitably some of the fine definition of 'years of education' may be lost. However, such fine definition is probably illusory, since it requires judgements to be made about the full-time equivalent of part-time education and depends on respondents accurately remembering how much time they have spent in education. As this study has revealed, these are not straightforward tasks for many respondents, thus violating the fundamental principle of questionnaire design that the respondent defines what the researcher can do. By removing the issue of years of education from the second education question and concentrating solely on the highest qualification obtained, ambiguity in the original question was removed and the question was improved.

The employment questions demonstrate another fundamental principle of questionnaire design - researchers must let respondents answer survey questions without being constrained by the researcher's view of the world.

The redesigned employment question reflects a view of the world that separates people into those who are in paid work and those who are not, and then characterises their role within these categories. However, the results of our study suggest this is an

artificial distinction for many people, and, in a self completion survey, there is no way of forcing such respondents to adopt this view. A homemaker who is studying and working part-time is likely to place herself in all three categories because this is the reality of her life.

An alternative explanation for the failure of the redesigned employment questions to reduce response errors is a formatting problem caused by respondents either not using or ignoring the skip instructions, or by the failure to include instructions that made it clear to respondents what was required of them. This is an empirical question that could be answered by further research. However, rather than continue with efforts to develop skip instructions that all respondents will follow, in subsequent ISSP surveys the employment status question used has been the original employment question without any skips but with a format that emphasises the separation of working and non-working status. This current version of the employment status question is shown in Figure 5 (see following page).

Despite the fact that respondents are instructed to 'tick one box only', some respondents still tick two or more boxes, but this proportion is much lower than the 5% to 6% who did the same thing in this study (in 2007 the proportion of respondents who ticked more than one box in the ISSP employment status question was less than 2%).

The physical separation of the 'currently working' and 'not currently working' categories appears to convey to most respondents that these are mutually exclusive in a way that a question conveying the same information could not. The fact that subsequent questions about hours of work and occupation do not apply to respondents not currently working is dealt with by providing a 'not applicable' response option, rather than attempting to skip these respondents past the questions. This eliminates the

---

## Figure 5. Current Version of ISSP Employment Question

---

### 66. Which one of these categories best describes your current employment status?

PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ONLY

#### **CURRENTLY WORKING**

---

- Employed – full time (35+ hours weekly)
- Employed – part time (15-35 hours weekly)
- Employed – less than 15 hours/temporarily out of work
- Helping family member

#### **NOT CURRENTLY WORKING**

---

- Unemployed or beneficiary
- Student
- Retired
- Housewife/husband – home duties
- Permanently disabled
- 

potential for skip errors, has minimal effect on respondent burden and is consistent with Gendall & Davies' (2003) conclusion that researchers should avoid branching wherever possible when designing self-completion questionnaires.

Though all the response categories are intended to be mutually exclusive they are actually entered in the data as separate variables, so the few multiple responses can be dealt with as the researcher sees fit. Thus the current version of the question does not completely solve the problem of some respondents answering the question they want to answer rather than the one intended by the researcher, but it does reduce the problem to a low level.

The response errors detected and discussed in this study are detectable errors; in other words, errors that can be identified or inferred by observation. Without independent measures of respondents' education and employment status we could not determine how successful (or unsuccessful) the questions tested were in actually eliciting the correct answers.

### **Conclusions**

The task of designing a survey questionnaire frequently involves conflict between the researcher's objectives and the willingness or ability of respondents to provide the information the researcher is seeking. Too often this dilemma is resolved in the researcher's favour by a questionnaire that violates the fundamental principles of questionnaire design.

Sometimes, this is not even apparent to the researcher - potential respondents still respond and give plausible answers - and the researcher is unaware that the questions he or she has written have not 'worked' as intended. In other cases, high levels of response error are a sign that some questions have failed the test of being 'good' questions. The questions tested in the current study are examples of this.

For both the education and employment status questions, the results of this study emphasise the importance of a respondent-oriented approach to questionnaire design. The lesson from the

---

education questions is that respondents cannot always provide the information researchers would like, or at least, not in the detail desired. The lesson from the employment status question is that it is better to let respondents describe their own situation and to derive the information needed from this, rather than attempt to constrain them to a response set that suits the researcher.

## References

- Belson, W.A. 1981, *The Design and Understanding of Survey Questions*. Gower, Aldershot, England.
- Bradburn, N.M., Sudman, S. & Wansink, B. 2004, *Asking Questions; The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design for Market Research, Political Polls and Social and Health Questions*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Converse, J.M. & Presser, S. 1986, *Survey Questions: Handcrafting the Standardised Questionnaire*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Dillman, D.A. 2007, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method (Second Edition)*. John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.
- Fowler, F.J. 1995, *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Gendall, P. 1998, *A Framework for Questionnaire Design: Labaw Revisited*. *Marketing Bulletin*, 9, 28-39.
- Gendall, P. & Davies, K. 2003, *Why Skipping May Be Bad For You: A Test of Skip-Pattern Compliance in a Self-Completion Questionnaire*. *Journal of Asia Pacific Marketing*, vol.2, no.1, pp.75 - 87.
- Labaw, P.J. 1980, *Advanced Questionnaire Design*. ABT Books, Cambridge, MA.
- Peterson, R.A. 2000, *Constructing Effective Questionnaires*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

---

# Ethnographic Approaches to Gathering Marketing Intelligence

**Clive Boddy**  
**Visiting Professor of Marketing Research,**  
**University of Lincoln (UK), and Honorary**  
**Visiting Professor in Marketing, Middlesex**  
**University Business School (UK)**

## Abstract

This paper identifies the increasing use of ethnographic approaches to gathering marketing intelligence concerning consumer behaviour in the market research industry. This is driven by the desire of marketers to get even closer to their customers. The paper defines what an ethnographic approach to gathering marketing intelligence concerning consumer behaviour is; identifies common types of observation studies; discusses some of the strengths and weaknesses of an ethnographic approach to marketing research; and some of the benefits of an ethnographic approach. It then describes mystery shopping, accompanied shopping and accompanied internet surfing as examples of ethnographic approaches and concludes that ethnography needs to be mastered by marketing researchers so that they can fulfil the desires that marketers have to get closer to understanding consumer behaviour through this method.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, marketing, consumer behaviour, market research, observation.

## Introduction

Marketers are reported to be increasingly trying to meet their customers so as to gain an understanding of what those customers value, how they speak and what they want in their lives; and those marketers are also reported to be seeking out market research companies who can deliver such ethnographic experiences to them (Trevaskis 2000). The use of ethnography in market research is reported to be increasingly popular and fashionable (Nafus 2006). The reason for this trend in market research is that marketers report that an ethnographic approach to market research can provide insights in a more inspiring, interesting and lively manner than more traditional forms of market research such as focus group discussions (Taylor 2008).

Nevertheless, reports of ethnographic approaches to marketing research such as observation studies are relatively scarce in the marketing research literature, presumably because they have been a relatively little used approach in market research, apart from in mystery shopping studies. They are thus an overlooked data collection and research methodology (Slack

& Rowley 2000) but one which may be increasingly demanded by marketers in the future. Proponents of ethnography claim that observation studies can deliver insights that cannot be obtained through other market research methodologies and that observation is a very useful way of gathering marketing intelligence (Boote & Mathews 1999).

According to a search of the Australian Market and Social Research Society's 2008 Research Supplier Directory, seventeen out of three hundred and twentyfour Australian research suppliers offered 'ethnography', 'ethnographic', 'accompanied shopping' or 'participant observation' in their on-line directory of services (AMSRS 2008). This is about five percent of market research suppliers in Australia claiming that they offer ethnographic type research and this compares to seventeen percent of all research companies listed in the equivalent UK directory (MRS 2008).

## Definition of Ethnography

Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology and the study of small groups in a particular culture to discover the shared meanings and values of the

---

people in the group. In marketing it is said to be valuable in understanding the social meanings attributed to material possessions (Goulding 2005).

According to the US Marketing Research Association's on-line glossary of terms (MRA 2008) the definition of ethnography is:-

“a qualitative method of studying and learning about a person or group of people. Typically ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. To develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, the researcher must both become a participant in the life of the setting while also maintaining the stance of an observer, someone who describes the experience. Rather than look at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects (the big picture), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied. Ethnographic accounts, then, are both descriptive and interpretive”

Ethnography, according to academics is firstly, the fundamental research method of the discipline of cultural anthropology, and secondly, the written text produced to report ethnographic research results (Hall 2008). The beginnings of ethnography are usually traced back according to Desai, (Desai 2008) to studies in the early 20th Century as detailed in the work of the social anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas. Ethnography derives from the work of such anthropologists in studying remote societies through immersing themselves in those societies and observing the behaviour of the people in them at first hand while participating in the society (Boote & Mathews 1999). The term ethnography has been adopted within market research to describe occasions where market researchers spend periods of time observing and interacting with research participants or research subjects in the parts of their everyday lives that are being researched (AQR 2008b). This can

be for example, to gain an understanding of how people of different sexes talk about their experiences, to gain an understanding of the different manner in which men and women relate to shopping and consumption (Croft, Boddy & Pentucci 2007).

### **Observation Studies**

An ethnographic approach to market research is often in the form of various ways of conducting such participant observation studies with consumers and audiences of interest. The data for ethnographies is reported to be usually gained from extensive observation and description of the details of the social life or cultural phenomena observed in a single case study or small number of cases (Hall 2008). The observer often participates in the activities of the observed at the same time as observing them and this is known as participant observation (Serf 2007). Observation is reported to produce valid findings partly because respondents are in their natural environment in a familiar non-threatening situation and just do what they usually do without thinking about it (Serf 2007).

### **Types of Observation: Covert Versus Overt**

In covert observation, where the observer is not known to or identified to the subjects of the research, or is known to them personally but is not known to be observing them, then observer effects are minimised and the truth value of what is observed is increased (Stafford 1993). It is reported to be a useful way of researching tourism and tourists in terms of investigating how they interact with their tourist environment because the investigation can last the whole length of the tour concerned and so can observe an event in a holistic manner (Seaton 2002).

This approach raises particular ethical issues especially where the observed behaviour may not be in tune with societal norms. However, for behaviours like tourism where it is claimed that people watching is a part of everyone's experience as

---

a tourist, covert participant observation is said to pose few ethical dilemmas (Seaton 2002).

### **Types of Observation: Natural Versus Contrived**

Observation can take place in a natural environment such as a study of drinking behaviour taking place in the local pub of the subjects of the research, or in a contrived environment such as a pub which has been specifically set-up with cameras, sensors and microphones in order to record everything that occurs for future observational analysis. Natural environments are reported to be more relaxed for subjects and so are thought to present a truer reflection of actual behaviour (Boote & Mathews 1999). For example in order to find out how people really prepare and consume meals they can be directly observed or even filmed while preparing and eating their food and then they can be questioned about this activity if anything that they did is perplexing or requires clarification (Gummerson 2005). This type of research was reportedly carried out by a western food company in trying to understand the food preparation and eating habits of consumers in markets the food companies planned to enter (Boddy 1994).

### **Types of Observation: Participant Versus Non-Participant**

Non-participant observers do not take part in what is happening in the research other than to watch what subjects are doing. Participant observers watch and partake in what is happening at the same time as observing it.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant Observation is reported to be a useful technique where the researcher wants to gain an insider's perspective of what is happening in a situation or event (Stafford 1993). What happens as a person reacts, in situ, to a consumption experience, such as using a leisure centre, can provide insights as to the

limitations of the experience from the customers point of view (Slack & Rowley 2000). This can include gaining an understanding as to how consumers interact with the facilities themselves and with the personnel helping to provide the services (Slack & Rowley 2000). A participant observer experiences the process of the service provision and thus gains a consumers understanding of the experience and mystery shoppers in market research can thus be described as being engaged in ethnographic research.

### **Observer Effects**

It is recognised by ethnographic researchers that the observer, as the instrument of the research, can be subject to observation error due to systematic and random interference with the process of observation and due to bias in the initial point of view of the researcher (Stafford 1993). The difficulty of separating one's own point of view from what is observed and researched is acknowledged by ethnographic researchers, who say that doing the research becomes a part of the autobiography of the researcher as the researcher becomes personally immersed in, reflective on and involved in what is being researched (Hannabuss 2000). This can impact on the validity and reliability of the research undertaken.

Market researchers have also long recognised that the presence of an observer can effect the behaviour of the observed in ways that are hard to measure or account for, but which tends to be towards whatever the socially accepted norm for that particular society is (Robson & Wardle 1988). These market researchers used the projective technique of bubble drawings to help understand the effects of observers on focus group discussions. When asked directly group members said that the presence of an observer did not bother them or effect them, and the researchers speculated that this may be because to admit otherwise would be to challenge their self-image as honest, straightforward people (Robson & Wardle 1988). However,

---

an analysis of the results from the bubble drawings showed that group members were influenced by the presence of the observer and that they tried to make their responses more logical, more likely to conform to public norms and levels of public acceptability and that they were more anxious in the presence of the observer (Robson & Wardle 1988). This shows some of the effects that an observer can have on research subjects. Clearly then, observer induced bias is an issue in participant observation research in ethnography and is a weakness of the methodology.

Researchers engaged in participant observation report that acceptance and socialisation go hand in hand as the researchers becomes known to the members of the group being researched, become increasingly accepted by them over time and even become socialised into being actual members of the group under study (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Thus observer effects can be felt by the observed as well as the observer and each influences the other.

### **Other Weaknesses of Observation**

Direct observation cannot help the researcher gain a deep understanding of why something happens, or of the cognitive elements of behaviour, only that it has actually happened (Slack & Rowley 2000). However, such a motivational understanding can be gained by asking the subjects to explain their behaviour, why for example they choose one restaurant type over another for celebrations and yet another for business meetings and lunches.

### **Ethnographic analysis**

Data collected from an ethnographic study is searched for categories, patterns, underlying meanings and concepts that explain patterns of behaviour. This is based on insider (the respondent) and outsider (the researcher) interpretations that together give insights that would not be possible from just one point of view alone (Goulding 2005). A constant

iterative approach to analysis is reported by ethnographers as data is amassed, coded, compared and categorised under a conceptual framework that unites everything in a holistic manner (Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

### **Benefits of an ethnographic approach to marketing research**

Direct questioning techniques in market research have long been recognised as being problematic in that questions can unintentionally mislead respondents and bias responses due to leading questions and poor wording in questionnaire design (O'Brien 1987). In other situations respondents may want to present a socially acceptable face and distort their answers accordingly, or may answer according to what they think the researchers wants to hear and ethnography gets around these barriers by pure observation of what is happening rather than by relying on reports of what has happened (Serf 2007).

Observational research, which is the essence of ethnographic research, gets over this problem because it records what actually happened rather than what people say happened and this claim to truth or validity is an essential strength of ethnographic research. A key main strength of ethnography is this claim to validity in that it often relies on direct observation of consumers in situ, when consumers cannot easily hide, rationalise or disguise their actions and behaviour. Unlike other forms of market research which rely on the inherently more unreliable recall of what respondents were thinking and doing as remembered at some point in the future when they are interviewed or take part in group discussions. An area where an ethnographic approach is reported to be useful is the area of 'green' consumerism or ethical marketing (Goulding 2005), where what people claim to be influenced by may not match with their actual purchasing behaviour in terms of buying environmentally friendly or ethically produced products.

---

A leading ethnographic market researcher says that the technique represents an opportunity for marketers to better understand their consumers in the actual state of consumption, thus allowing greater understanding of their frustrations and satisfactions with what is being consumed and with an understanding of what the benefits to consumers are of the consumption experience (Mariampolski 1999). The aspirations and practices of consumers can best be understood by watching them in their real environment, where a holistic view can be gathered, say ethnographers (Mariampolski 1999). An example of this is reported to be that of Kenco, the coffee bean marketer, who used an ethnographic approach to observe customers in coffee shops and found that the holistic experience was as important to customers as the coffee beans themselves and that for example the crockery in which the coffee is served is also important in terms of the holistic experience of visiting a coffee shop (Taylor 2008). The researcher involved reported that watching customers talk 'in situ', was better than wading through stacks of data (Taylor 2008).

Another example of this participant observation approach of watching consumers in their real environment is reported in an interesting longitudinal study of Harvey Davidson motorcycle owners in the USA, where an understanding of how and why Harvey Davidson motorcycles and accessories were purchased was gained from the consumers' point of view (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). The authors reported on a three year study of Harvey Davidson motorcycle owners and came to an in-depth understanding of the various sub-groups of owners and their motivations and aspirations, and how the company, Harvey Davidson, nurtured and marketed to those sub-groups; including rich urban bikers, family bikers, outlaws and even Christian bikers; by providing a steady stream of information to new bikers and by appealing to the core values of love of personal freedom, patriotism and machismo, of the established bikers (Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

Another benefit of an ethnographic approach is that it can be the least intrusive to respondents, who are merely observed. It has, say researchers, the least amount of response bias of any market research methodology (Boote & Mathews 1999). Mini-ethnographic episodes can be built into more traditional research exercises such as focus group discussion, as an example of this, one researcher was involved with research into a new type of chocolate biscuit aimed at children, instead of the moderator asking the children which they liked the best she just left the room and observed the children through the one-way mirror as they gleefully devoured their favourites (Boddy 1994).

When respondents cannot easily analyse or verbalise their own behaviour it can be useful to just observe them; thus the makers of the TV series 'Sesame Street' observed children watching different versions of the show in order to see what sections were the most appealing, interesting and involving to children (Boote & Mathews 1999). Asking such little children, with their limited verbal skills, would have been time consuming and unreliable.

Similarly the effects of music on the speed of shopping in supermarkets may be observed to get a true reading of its effects, whereas direct questioning on this subject may present consumers with scenarios which they were unaware of and cannot reasonably comment on (Boote & Mathews 1999).

In their own research Boote and Mathews observed pedestrian flows in the streets around specific restaurants and observed people eating in those restaurants to gain intelligence as to the best location for restaurants (Boote & Mathews 1999). They came up with a specific set of recommendations for their client, including recommendations that restaurants be located; at the centre of high streets rather than at the ends, on the sunny side of the street (research was in an urban environment in

---

a cloudy country) and adjacent to rather than opposite bank cash machines which tend to disrupt pedestrian traffic flows. Observational research is also said to be a useful tool when sensitivity may mean that more direct research is difficult, subjects such as bullying at work or equity at work are said to be suitable subjects for an ethnographic, observational approach because of the sensitivities involved (Hannabuss 2000).

Serf reports that observation can be a useful technique when complex scenarios make it difficult to recognise who the key players are in a decision, for example in a hospital medical department where junior doctors, senior doctors and junior and senior nurses and various other assistants may all be working towards the same end at the same time (Serf 2007). Senior doctors may assume that stocks of medicine are sourced from a central store according to regulations but observation may find that a limited number of key medicines used in casualty are actually stored near to hand for quick emergency use and that this effectively changes who the decision makers are as to which medicines are used in practice (Serf 2007). Such complex activities would be hard to find out about via traditional research methods because junior staff wouldn't want to report on their own 'non-regulation' behaviour and senior staff would not necessarily know what was really happening anyway.

### **Mystery Shopping**

Mystery Shopping is the collection of information from retail or service outlets or showrooms by researchers acting as ordinary shoppers. Mystery shopping is where customer-focussed, client companies are seeking the point of view of their customers by engaging market research companies to use an ethnographic approach to data collection where specially trained interviewers act as shoppers and report back on their actual 'shopping' experiences.

A "front-line", 'in-situ' experience of the shopping environment is thus gained and the client company can assess whether this experience is one it wishes its customers to have or not. The aims of mystery shopping can include; measurement and monitoring of the customer service skills of employees, monitoring of these same skills among competitors, identification of outstanding employees, and measurement of the effects of specific training on employee service skills. Employees will usually be told that mystery shopping is being used to monitor their service levels but will not know when and where this will take place. Thus the client gets a truer perspective of the service levels that their employees give than may otherwise be possible to research.

### **Accompanied Shopping**

Accompanied shopping is another ethnographic approach where the respondent is engaging in shopping while accompanied by a researcher. This may involve a degree of passive observation by the market researcher as well as direct questioning about what the participant is doing and thinking about while shopping. Accompanied shopping is reported to be very useful in bringing to light aspects of behaviour that the respondent may not be aware of, or may not be able to verbalise easily or well (AQR 2008a). Market researchers report that such ethnographic approaches to research can reveal how brands are used in everyday life by individual consumers and their families and friends and can reveal how brands fit into the culture and world-view of consumers. They report that this can provide useful new understandings and insights (Jankel-Elliot 2008).

### **Conclusions**

An ethnographic approach to market research clearly has some strengths in terms of the truth or validity of the data collected from this approach, which can be free of, or very low in, response bias. It is also a useful approach when investigating subjects who find it hard to verbalise,

---

such as children watching a TV show or men buying deodorant, or when measuring the effects of experimental variables, such the effect of as speed of music in a shopping environment on the speed of shopping behaviour. On the other hand there can be observer effects present which can bias responses or behaviour in ways that are hard or impossible to measure. An ethnographic approach to market research is an approach that market researchers have to master to keep up with client demands to obtain research that gets them as close as possible to the real lived world of their customers.

## References

AMSRS 2008, *Directory of Suppliers*, viewed on 27 February 2008, retrieved from <<http://www.mrsa.com.au/index>>

AQR 2008a, *Glossary of Terms: Accompanied Shopping*, viewed on 25 February 2008, retrieved from <[http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/index.shtml?accompanied shopping](http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/index.shtml?accompanied%20shopping)>

AQR 2008b, *Glossary of Terms: Ethnography*, viewed on 25 February 2008, retrieved from <<http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/index.shtml?ethnography>>

Boddy, C. R. 1994, 'Keynote Speech: The Challenge of Understanding the Dynamics of Consumers in Korea', in *Proceedings of the 1994 Annual Marketing Seminar of the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea Marketing Committee*, American Chamber of Commerce in Korea, Seoul, pp. 5 - 13.

Boote, J. & Mathews, A. 1999, "Saying is one thing; doing is another": the role of observation in marketing research', *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 15 - 21.

Croft, R., Boddy, C. R. & Pentucci, C. 2007, 'Say what you mean, mean what you say: an ethnographic approach to male and female conversation', *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 49, no. 6, pp. 715 - 734.

Desai, P. 2008, *Truth, Lies and Videotape*, viewed on 25 February 2008, retrieved from the Association of Qualitative Researchers <<http://www.aqr.org.uk/index>>

Goulding, C. 2005, 'Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology. A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research', *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, pp. 294 - 308.

Gummerson, E. 2005, 'Qualitative research in marketing. Road map for a wilderness of complexity and unpredictability', *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, pp. 309 - 327.

Hall, B. 2008, *Ethnography*, viewed on 26 February 2008, retrieved from <<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro/CPIA/METHODS/Ethnography.html>>

Hannabuss, S. 2000, 'Being there: ethnographic research and autobiography', *Library Management*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 99 - 106.

- 
- Jankel-Elliot 2008, *The Joys of Ethnography*, viewed on 25 February 2008, retrieved from the Association of Qualitative Researchers <<http://www.aqr.org.uk/index>>
- Mariampolski, H. 1999, 'The power of ethnography', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 75 - 86.
- MRA 2008, *Website of the Marketing Research Association*, viewed on 27 February 2008, retrieved from <[http://www.mra-net.org/resources/glossary\\_terms.cfm](http://www.mra-net.org/resources/glossary_terms.cfm)>
- MRS 2008, *Research Buyers Guide*, viewed on 25 February 2008, retrieved from <<http://www.rbg.org.uk/index>>
- Nafus, D. 2006, *Who Needs Theory Anyway*, viewed 25 February 2008, retrieved from the Association of Qualitative Researchers <<http://www.aqr.org.uk/index>>
- O'Brien, J. 1987, 'Two answers are better than one', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 223 - 240.
- Robson, S. & Wardle, J. 1988, 'Who's watching whom? A study of the effects of observers on group discussions', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 333 - 359.
- Schouten, J. W. & McAlexander, J. H. 1995, 'Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers', *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 43 - 61.
- Seaton, A. V. 2002, 'Observing conducted tours: The ethnographic context in tourist research', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, vol. 8, pp. 309 - 319.
- Serf, B. J. 2007, 'A Day In The Life Of Your Customer', *Medical Marketing and Media*, vol. 42, pp. 61 - 64.
- Slack, F. & Rowley, J. 2000, 'Observation: Perspectives on Research Methodologies for Leisure Managers', *Management Research News*, vol. 23, no. 12, pp. 10 - 16.
- Stafford, M. R. 1993, 'Participant observation and the pursuit of truth: Methodological and ethical considerations', *Journal of the Market Research Society*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 63 - 76.
- Taylor, D. 2008, 'New year, new insight', *The Marketer*, vol. February 2008, p. 13.
- Trevaskis, H. 2000, "You had to be there" why marketers are increasingly experiencing consumers for themselves and the impact of this on the role and remit of consumer professionals', *International Journal of Market Research*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 207 - 217.