

**STRATEGIC QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH –
DEFINE AND ARTICULATE OUR SKILLS OR WE WILL BE REPLACED
BY OTHERS**

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**MRSA Paper
Presented to SA Branch MRSA
February 8, 1999**



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SUMMARY

This paper addresses the urgent need for our profession to agree on and articulate the taxonomy of skills and signals of competency for those conducting qualitative market research focus groups.

It argues that this is required due to five factors: groups are used for strategic advice; they are high cost; people other than market researchers are offering them; the explanation of the skills seem to range from myth/magic through to experience and hard work; and for training and accreditation there has to be an agreed taxonomy.

The paper links this need to a recent request in an ESOMAR European conference.

The paper describes recent research into the views of 19 SQMRs (strategic qualitative market researchers) in Australia on this theme and related literature.

It proposes a model of the taxonomy of skills, a summary of a model of competency, a model of how SQMRs describe their analytical thinking in and outside of focus groups and an attempt to demythologise the skill and identify the cause of competency. It concludes by posing 15 questions for our profession.

The author is a marketing strategist and marketing researcher who has advised on strategy up to Cabinet level and Board level internationally, managed large and medium sized organisations and been both buyer and supplier thus bringing different perspectives to it.

INTRODUCTION

Business executives constantly make decisions which have far reaching effects upon companies, markets, products, share price, retention of core assets and profits. These decisions rely on information drawn from a wide range of fields. Financial information is the predominant source of influence upon many decisions. Marketing information is also a key component and the work carried out by market researchers forms a contribution to this. Our quantitative data is used not only by marketing teams, but in more general decision making on markets, product development and communications to name just three areas. Qualitative information can also provide extensive insight and guidance to companies to help them understand the markets they operate in and the consumer or businesses they sell to.

This paper concentrates only on this latter source of information, qualitative market research, and within this concentrates upon only one type of qualitative research, namely the use of market research focus groups. This does not seek to minimise the importance of quantitative methods or of other forms of qualitative research, but the example of focus groups is used as a case study to illustrate some key themes. The author regularly uses both qualitative and quantitative methods outside of the context of this paper and advises multinationals and significant national industries on strategy at a senior level.

The paper commences by discussing a range of key threats which exist for those using qualitative market research focus groups. It argues that as an industry we need a more definitive and firm articulation of what constitutes competent marketing focus group research. We also need a greater level of agreement on what training and level of skill should be present in a focus group researcher in their first 2 years experience and also in a highly competent focus group researcher of anywhere between 3 years and longer. These skill competencies need to be articulated by our industry very clearly.

The paper argues that as an industry, if we are to maintain and increase the input that our professionals have to strategic business decisions at the highest levels of business, then we need to ensure business executives better understand the level of expertise available within our profession. Without this understanding we could quite easily and rapidly be replaced by others from outside of the profession.

Secondly, the paper comments on two conclusions from a comprehensive literature review which attempted to find a well documented and structured articulation of the skills used and the career progression of those who conduct market research focus groups. The literature did not really provide the expected documentation.

Third, the paper describes an Australian research project which was conducted in 1997/98 and sought to gain a better understanding of the skill taxonomy and career progression of a sample of 19 very experienced market researchers who were influencing company (and sometimes government or other instrumentalities) strategies, and who substantially (but not exclusively) used market research focus groups as a core methodology in their understanding of markets or consumers. The majority of these had also trained many others in the use of focus group techniques. Cowley had penned the term Strategic Qualitative Market Researchers some years ago (Cowley 1996) as a description of competent market researchers who provided high level input to companies at a strategic level through the use of qualitative market research (not excluding the fact they may also use quantitative methods). Some parts of this research are included in the models described next.

Fourthly, the paper suggests some tentative models which have been constructed by the author out of a combination of inputs (following the interpretive paradigm of research), which may be helpful to our industry as it seeks to assist the business community in its understanding of the skills and techniques available and also in our planning of professional development.

Finally, the paper ends with a series of questions which may be worthy of further consideration by our profession.

The paper acknowledges the considerable support and input of 19 prominent members of our profession who contributed their time and skill in describing their experience over the years of both conducting and analysing market research focus groups and providing subsequent insight and strategy to companies; and their description of their recruitment, coaching and training of other market researchers.

ARTICULATE - OR LET OTHERS ASSUME OUR SKILLS

The argument I put forward is quite simple. If business better understands what is skilful competent market research using focus groups, then it assists both business and our profession. It assists business by helping to prevent poor or inexperienced advice being given to business buyers with all of the ramifications that then occur; it helps the profession by providing a growing awareness in business of the substantial insights gained from competent focus group research. At a time when many people change roles quite quickly within companies and buyers of research may vary between highly experienced market research managers at one end, to someone with no experience of buying research but lots of business problems at the other end, this can only benefit both groups.

But this requires that our profession can articulate very clearly what is the skill taxonomy; what is the career progression; how do the analytical skills (which we seem to be remunerated for) operate, and what “signals” competency and what causes competency?

Imagine 3 engineers responsible for the structural component of a nuclear power station identifying the undergraduate qualifications for the main project manager. One says engineering, another says music and the third says art. Whilst this may affect the power station, it is likely to also confuse the buyer. But we do exactly this as this paper will reveal. Imagine a Queen’s Council saying that anyone can perform the role of a Queen’s Council. It is likely that those who have passed through the rites of passage, courses of law and professional development would be horrified. Those being defended may also be wary if the person did not have legal qualifications. Yet we ask business to take on trust that the skills used in focus groups are developed properly in those who offer to solve business problems. Now this is not to say that we need extreme academic qualifications. It may be, like some professions of this decade, that the course of development transposes those rigid frames of knowledge, the documented disciplines; and new knowledge may be more unstructured and innovative. Such are some of our computer software designers; or our Internet creators. But as a profession we must be able to articulate which it is. It cannot just be a different concept between different operators. For business to take seriously the insights drawn by market researchers from the use of focus groups and not lose confidence, we must be able to articulate clearly and coherently as a profession the skills used and the signals of competency.

There are at least five reasons why it is so important that we can articulate these skills:

- (i) the use of focus groups can be highly strategic
- (ii) they are high cost
- (iii) increasing competition - perhaps anyone can conduct them?
- (iv) myth, magic, age, experience or bloody hard work?
- (v) training and accreditation has to be based on an agreed taxonomy of skills

(i) The use of focus groups can be highly strategic

Focus group methodology can be used for relatively straightforward understanding of consumer issues right through to detailed insights and strategy. In the research six examples of different applications were quoted by different respondents. These were:

- advertising or concept testing requiring an understanding of the advertising world and the application of communication theory
- research primarily aimed at understanding behaviours requiring a much stronger social psychological background together with organisational understanding
- market and strategic understanding, often requiring a very strong background in marketing and business, together with an experience of what can and can't be done in business
- new product development and line extension requiring quite a range of background skills drawn from the above
- social policy research which requires quite specifically an understanding of the way that social organisations and government work and of the social and community areas of work, and the impact of policy
- internal staff research requiring an understanding of social psychology, organisations, human resources and some understanding of communication theory

and there must be others.

The uses can be very operational, eg testing an advertisement or describing the service behaviours expected by consumers, or at the other end, highly strategic influencing quite major events or issues.

In Australia, for instance, politicians have used market research, not only quantitatively to predict the outcome of an election, but also qualitatively to shape their policies and even to shape their images. By using market research, one politician was able to determine early on that he should only be filmed from one side of his face and should be aged considerably in order to raise voter support. This type of filming gave him a much more authoritative look than filming from the other direction. Focus groups revealed this. Very few political figures now appear to be beyond the use of market research as an information and decision making process. Recently (The Guardian, January 1998) it was reported "The Queen has approved the appointment of the first Royal focus group, following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, to act as an instant sounding board to help her and top courtiers cope with any future family crisis." The article went on to explain that the British Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair, had found it particularly useful to use market research focus groups in his successful election campaign.

The Guardian continued that “Two polling companies, Mori and Opinion Leader Research, were asked to make private presentations to the Palace on how they could provide the Royal Family with focus groups similar to those which have proved invaluable to the Blair Government” (The Guardian, January 1998).

Ronald Reagan used focus groups to identify the American public’s reaction to his proposed visit to President Gorbachev. Parties in the recent docks dispute claimed focus group insight affected strategy; they are used by CEOs to test their corporate communications; they are used by film makers to determine the end of major films and by art entrepreneurs to determine the perfect paintings that will sell. Business will make decisions to implement new products, processes or initiatives using focus groups. They gain understanding of consumers through them. They find new opportunities using them.

One would expect that if a method is being used to provide information for such key strategic decisions, the skill base of those using the method can be clearly articulated. That seems a reasonable minimum requirement.

In fact in a recent ESOMAR conference this was clearly identified by one speaker who described the need for more rigour in qualitative market research.

Reuter explains what he calls “the unwritten contract of qualitative research” made with clients as follows. I quote this as it summarises excellently the lack of articulation of standards:

He says:-

- “It depends on the case **what services** clients expect from us. They rely upon us to tell them what is necessary to solve their true problem.
- However, there is **no compromise** as to the things clients **trust us to guarantee**. These are the musts of any qualitative research.” (Reuter 1995)

He shows this in a figure:

FIGURE 1: THE UNWRITTEN CONTRACT, REUTER 1995

The Unwritten Contract of Qualitative Research	
SERVICES EXPECTED BY OUR CLIENTS	THINGS OUR CLIENTS TRUST US TO GUARANTEE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EXPLORATION eg unknown territories, new phenomena, possible opportunities • UNDERSTANDING eg why something is so and works the way it does, the driving forces behind consumer behaviour and market dynamics • DIAGNOSTICS eg the working of communication, what it does or does not do, analysis of mechanisms and rules • SOUND HYPOTHESES CONCERNING VIRTUAL REALITIES eg what certain measures might affect, forecasts on the probability of success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THEORIES Sound theories on the fields we are dealing with, eg consumer theory, theory of communication, innovation, etc • KNOWLEDGE Knowledge of the “back-up sciences” that may be useful to define the approach, eg psychology, sociology, semiotics, anthropology... • KNOW HOW Knowledge of the “back-up sciences” that may be useful to define the approach, eg psychology, sociology, semiotics, anthropology • CREATIVE INTERPRETATION Gaining understanding and giving keys for understanding to our clients

He goes on to say “Here the situation is rather bad. I dare say that no **experienced client** relies on these guarantees when buying services labelled as ‘qualitative research’. They know that no one can offer all these guarantees, they **are angry** about researchers who sneak in by using this label, announcing trivial facts (‘consumers said...’) and offering unfounded speculations instead of intelligent interpretations. Sometimes they **are amused** at knowing that one of their colleagues proclaimed another absolute truth as to this very subject just the day before.”

This is not to say that there are no descriptions of the skill taxonomy and competency. As we will see later, the literature is full of descriptions, but in the main, lacking in the breadth and coherency of what these descriptions cover.

(ii) They are high cost

The focus group is quite a high cost activity. If a business is spending on focus groups, then we would expect that there is a clear definition of what is being provided for the money. Most will understand it includes the development of a moderator's guide, recruiting (to MRQA standards?) respondents; providing a room, viewing (if not in a naturalistic setting), food, conducting the groups, providing or not providing instant feedback (!) and providing a report and recommendations. But what constitutes a competent focus group researcher who is worth that cost? Can we as a profession clearly spell it out to assist our clients? If the high cost is related not only to logistics but to the ability of the researcher to conduct the group, and more importantly to analyse the data and draw conclusions, then do we provide a method to discriminate between good and bad technique?

Inexperienced buyers will comment on focus group researchers quite often in terms of their group work skills, commenting by comparison with normal discussion groups; for instance the attention may be on "Why didn't she ask that exact question? Why didn't he get that person to join in more? Even at this simplest level we have not clearly differentiated the methodology. But more importantly have we an agreed rationale for the analytical techniques that the competent SQMR uses? When we go to the literature as discussed later, we find quite a range that considers logistic techniques, ie arranging groups, recruiting etc; a second major range of literature describing group related techniques, eg listening, asking the right questions etc; and apart from only a very small number of texts internationally, very little on the overall taxonomy of skills of the SQMR, the way they carry out analytical reasoning (apart from the literature on the use of transcript analysis) and the signals of competency. The first dedicated work on analysis of focus groups which I could trace appeared in 1998. (Kreuger, 1998)

(iii) Increasing competition - perhaps anyone can conduct them

An increasing number of people are offering and conducting focus groups. On one hand the management consultant or accountancy company ("dressed up as" management consultant) will offer focus groups as a start up part of a project looking at customers of a company. At the other extreme, a student came to me and said they wanted to offer to run some for us because they had been shown how to run focus groups in three sessions at their university business course and felt that this was a more lucrative, easier and enjoyable part time occupation than telephone interviewing! A group of teachers and a group of trainer facilitators competed with three or four market research companies to run focus groups and the market research companies lost it. The facilitators claimed they were highly experienced in running discussion groups. The feedback was that the groups had come to an excellent consensus on what product should be offered and this was the one chosen to develop. When asked about underlying needs and motivations, the client admitted that little had been commented on about these in the report, just the consensus achieved after discussion. The discussion was the focus. The "analytical tool", the researcher, was relatively unimportant.

But perhaps they're right. Maybe anyone can run focus groups. In reality it seems we say anyone can come into market research companies and be trained to run them, because there is no required entry qualifications or agreed frame of knowledge, and no competency criteria. In fact, some companies will let new researchers run groups extremely quickly after recruitment, perhaps showing we really do believe that it isn't a skill, it's just an activity that is sold. We have seen some excellent Australian papers produced discussing issues such as affinity groups versus random groups (Mckay 1994); viewing rooms versus normative settings (Elliott 1998); transcript analysis versus the researcher as analyst (Elliott 1998); questioning techniques (Chant undated); but do we have a widely agreed position and articulation as a profession on these issues?

(iv) Myth, magic, age, experience or bloody hard work?

And when we do perceive competency, can we describe what creates it? Is the analytical ability some type of mysterious talent which the SQMR is revered for? A strongly worded article by Sharp (1997) asks for a demystifying of focus groups. He first describes what he calls the "psychology/witchcraft" perspective. He claims it emerged from "white coat, pseudo-scientific psycho-babble and hippie, palmistry, fortune telling". "This psycho-babble/witchcraft places great emphasis on the specialist interpretive skills of the moderator. Focus group moderators are seen to wield special abilities to uncover secret hidden motives of the group participants." He goes on to say that the skills are kept to a few people and the conclusions are difficult to verify. "To become a moderator therefore requires special skills (not everyone can become a witch/warlock!) and training, which is usually seen as a psychology degree and/or considerable on-the-job training under the guidance of a guru/sorcerer. Clients are supposed to pay (usually a lot) for the special insight of the moderator. The trick in getting good research is, therefore, to find a really good witch"(p2).

Sharp attempts to demystify the focus group by suggesting it is a normal part of the battery of research tools available. He sees the skills that are necessary as group management skills. "A required level of knowledge about consumer behaviour, markets in general, as well as knowledge about the specific market and product/service." He argues that the ideal (marketing) focus group moderator is someone with a marketing degree, a solid research training (preferably a post-graduate research degree in marketing or consumer behaviour) experience in marketing practice, familiarity with the product under investigation, and experience in group moderation and public speaking. He does suggest these skills "are admittedly rare, but they make sense" (p4). (Sharp 1997)

Is it then a *gift* or a *mystery* or a *talent*? If it is then we need better recruiting techniques to discover such talent because many colleagues I have worked with say the success rate of producing competent SQMRs is not high. Perhaps we are the talented, internationally renowned ballet dancers of the research industry, or possibly as Sharp states just witches!

Or is it *age*? Time allows the SQMR to build a competency through a maturation process. Like an old wine, matured to perfection. Bides grim for the time it takes to get there and one would expect lots of “old fruits” around the profession and yet experience shows also lots of younger skill. Makes retention of utmost importance!

Or is it *experience*? The gradual evolution of a range of skills and experience which then creates competency. Makes systematic coaching and exposure of utmost importance. Or is it just *hard self disciplined* work refining a skill base to an extraordinary level? If so we have to try to see if we can make some parts of the development easier for people. But we must be able to explain the necessary taxonomy of skills and the cause of competency.

(v) **Training and accreditation has to be based on an agreed taxonomy of skills**

Finally, how can we create accreditation or professional recognition within the profession unless we can describe the taxonomy of the skills and the way to develop them to a level of competency. A taxonomy of skills is used in this paper to describe a categorisation of skill sets necessary for performing a role competently. If we do not have an agreed description then we leave ourselves open to a training solution created by, for instance, academic institutions mainly from components of other courses. Or at the other end just a collection of short courses. If we set the standard too operational, the profession and the skill becomes a TAFE level technical trade qualification. It is difficult to argue that the analytical skills are worth what we charge for them. If we set the level too high, then we may have to link it to an academic postgraduate degree and exclude many people. We also run the risk of it becoming too channelled into a specific discipline with the athlerosclerosis of the mind and the tunnelling of vision and perception that can cause; or a withdrawal of the skill base to a theoretical context rather than the dynamic context where it is developed currently in practice.

I have argued in this section that we need to be able to articulate very clearly as a profession the taxonomy of skills necessary to conduct and analyse market research focus groups; the analytical processes used by the SQMR to provide valid and competent insights to business; the signals of competency so that people can determine competent operators and the causation of competency so we can either mythologise or demythologise the profession. If we don't articulate - it could be a passing phenomenon.

DOES THE LITERATURE DESCRIBE THE SKILLS COHERENTLY?

The research study which forms the basis of this paper conducted an extensive literature review of any literature which could assist an understanding of SQMRs (more regularly referred to in the literature as moderators), the skills used to conduct focus groups and specifically the processes used to conduct competent analysis.

This paper cannot spend too much time discussing the literature as there are a lot of disparate pieces of literature concerning focus groups and SQMRs (moderators). However the following key observations can be made:

- (i) There is considerable literature on general qualitative methods in the social sciences.
- (ii) The literature describing market research focus groups as a subset of qualitative research is more limited. It comprises mainly descriptive writing rather than conclusions based on research.
- (iii) The main emphasis of such writing is on description of focus groups, their advantages and limitations, group and questioning techniques and group recruiting.
- (iv) There is little on the **analytical skills** used in focus group research by market researchers. Even where the subject of a piece of literature is focus groups, little time is spent on analysis (with a few exceptions).
- (v) There is very little describing a coherent taxonomy of skills, signals of competency in those skills or causes of competency

When literature does refer to SQMRs it is with little regard for the analytical methods they use. On one hand there is little regard for any objectivity “Often conclusions reached from watching a focus group session vary depending on who watches it! The result seems to depend on the viewpoint of the researcher” (McCarthy E.J. 1994). In contrast, others such as Kinnear recognise a high level of skill: “Highly skilled moderators can ensure that proper respondent rapport is established, that the discussion is directed along relevant dimensions, and that the degree of probing and depth of insight are sufficient to accomplish the research objectives.

“In addition, the moderator is central to the analysis and interpretation of the data”. He goes on to state that “Great skill, experience, knowledge of the discussion topic and intuitive insight about the nature of group dynamics are required to accomplish this task” (Kinnear T.C. 1983). If the skill is so complicated then one would expect clear descriptions of what the skill is. They do not appear to exist.

The literature review was extensive and will be available at a later date in a separate publication.

THE RESEARCH CASE STUDY

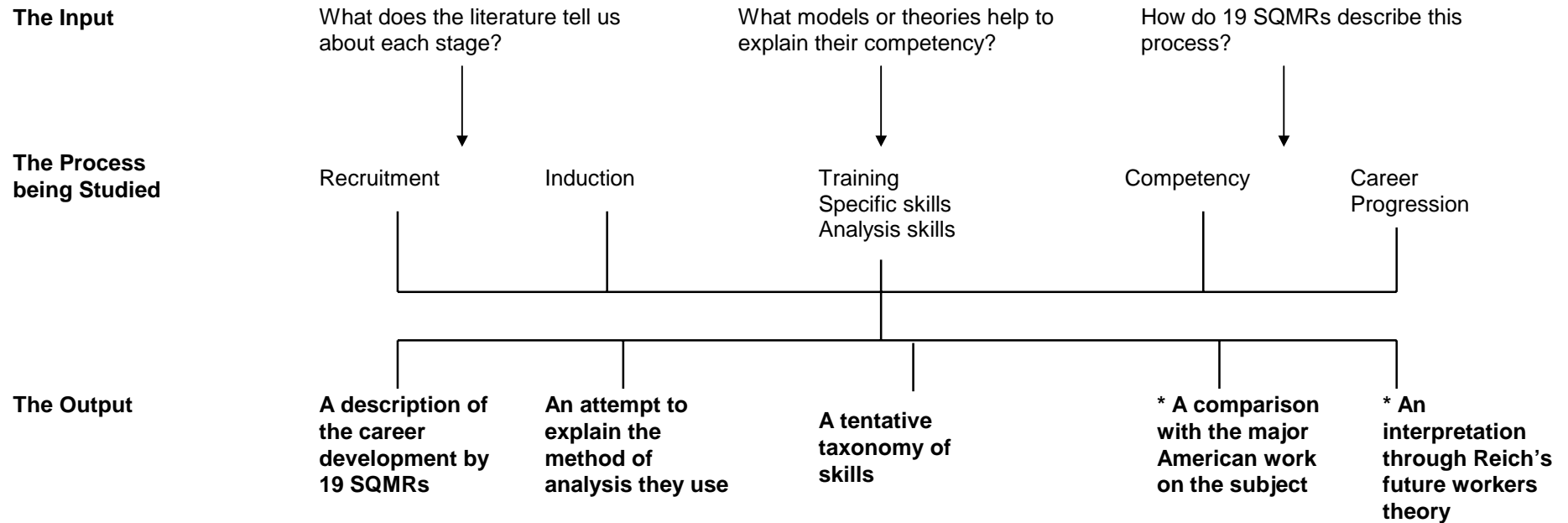
SQMRs use a wide variety of qualitative, quantitative and analytical methods.

A prominent methodology used by SQMRs is the market research focus group, a form of qualitative research. This was used as the example, through which to gain an understanding of skill development. It was chosen because it represents quite easily the use of observational, analytical and interpretative skills for which the SQMRs are highly paid. It is also used mainly but not exclusively within the market research industry although it has started to be used in other areas of social science research in the last decade.

The diagram on the following page illustrates the overall approach.

FIGURE 2: RESEARCH INTO THE SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES USED BY SQMRs IN AUSTRALIA, COWLEY 1998

The Field: 19 SQMRs in Australia
 The Research Paradigm: Interpretive case study
 The scope: Primarily concentrating on Market Research Focus Groups Skills



* Not included in this paper.

The research methodology is founded largely on the interpretive paradigm of knowledge.

Basically, interpretive research draws upon the thinking in sociology, usually described as social action theory, which actually comprises three related perspectives on social relations and behaviour. The three Social Action theories are *Symbolic Interactionism* (dealing with actions and interactions as the outcome of the meanings people attach to things and their behaviour), *Phenomenology* (the descriptive study of intentional perceptions and the experiences of the senses), and *Ethnomethodology* (the ways and means or social competence people use in everyday situations to create meaning out of confusion).

The approach that was chosen

I chose a case study interpretive approach because I believe that this was the most appropriate methodology for the subject in question. From the literature review, I concluded that a lot was known about the description of focus groups and how to prepare for them, a little more was known about some of the techniques of running groups, but hardly anything appeared in the literature on the career path of SQMRs or on the analytical skills with which they approached their work. The methodology therefore had to go back to some basic understanding of SQMRs and be capable of identifying from them the broadest range of issues that they thought were important to be considered in trying to describe career progression and skills. Naturalistic observation (Glazer B.J. & Strauss A. 1967) is the predominant philosophy in which this methodology exists. The approach has a range of procedures in order to attempt to ensure validity and reliability. The case study approach is applied here to a variety of individuals who, while not statistically representing the total population, are taken to be an illustration of those within the profession. Nisbet & Watt (1978) describe it as “Case study is an umbrella term for a family of research methods having in common the decision to focus on inquiry around an instance”. The method attempts to give a fair and accurate description of a specific case in such a way as to allow the reader to penetrate superficial record, and also to check the author’s interpretations by examining an appropriate selection of the objective evidence from which the case study has been built.

Validity and assumptions

Naturalistic observation and case study have four aspects of validity which are important and which are part of this methodological approach. Firstly, there is a belief that if somebody sees the world in a particular way, that is how the world is for now. This research takes, as the basis for validity, that what the respondents described is how they saw the world and how they saw career development and training. I do not believe that in any of the interviews they felt that they couldn’t be open and honest as I assured them that the information being collected was confidential and it would have been difficult to use it in a commercially competitive environment which would normally be their fear.

The methodology seemed to produce quite an openness in the respondents and this was demonstrated later in the number who very quickly were prepared to be interviewed for the second time.

Validity and naturalistic observation is also described as fluidity of knowing and being. This is often referred to as situation social action and is about interpretive research. The researcher is an integral part of the research process with knowledge developing due to the research process being in place. In this research it was very evident that respondents felt that some of the issues being discussed had not been researched before and they commented on this. They found it difficult initially to answer some of the questions, particularly in relation to how they think and how they measure competency in SQMRs. I think the research process itself pushed along the thinking to some degree. This was a benefit of the use of this method.

The third aspect of validity in naturalistic observation is that the researcher is the “active element in the social drama” and the design of the research changes and adapts as the project continues. There are running adjustments to the project. In this instance the researcher fulfils this issue related to validity. The design changed, particularly after the first interviews where initially I felt I had enough information and then on analysing it I felt that there were some crucial issues which needed further exploration. Three or four attempts were made to try to find a methodology which would successfully explore these issues without bothering extremely busy people, and, which would enable me to talk to them in more detail.

The fourth aspect of validity is that the researcher acknowledges their own involvement as a continued process of learning. My interest in this area was to learn about it as well as complete the research. As such, I hope that the research will be able to be used to prompt further thinking in the industry and academic studies. It has certainly moved my own thinking quite a lot further in terms of the skill base and training of SQMRs.

Some benefits do emerge from this methodology. It had the ability to describe in-depth each of the major components of recruitment, training and skills of SQMRs. On reflection of other methodologies available, a longitudinal study may have been able to do this over a period of time, and would have been quite successful in identifying the barriers and factors that tripped people up along the way, and those factors that helped them. A qualitative/quantitative methodology probably would not have revealed the degree of depth which this case study approach has revealed, but would have quantified issues. The social psychological measurement approach would have started from so many presumptions of skill that it would not have revealed many of the things this study has revealed.

Another benefit of the case study is that it has been successful in building a composite picture. I have suggested some models related to training, analytical ability and the development of higher level skills which I refer to as the X Factor. These form quite a composite picture of some of the key elements of SQMR as a profession, and as such should be easily understood within the profession. I suspect it would have been more difficult to achieve this through other methodologies.

A further benefit is that it “non numerically” allows for it to be easily interpreted in lay language for recruitment environments. I suspect that the communication of the findings will be relatively easy in those environments.

Finally, the case study has allowed for a good base of understanding of the role of the SQMR and in contrast to much previous writing which has concentrated upon pure opinions and descriptions from individuals’ perceptions of the skills to run focus groups, this study has analysed data taken from 19 leading practitioners. It has built a picture based on their interpretation and views.

Sample

In the end I contacted 21 respondents. I had originally planned to contact a much smaller number of senior members of the profession, those I felt fell into a sample of SQMRs. As the research progressed it became evident that I should contact a slightly larger number and in turn I then decided to follow through quite a lot of leads which I gained from the SQMRs themselves. Nineteen respondents were willing to participate. In the second round it was even easier as I wanted to explore some points with those who had appeared to be most articulate or able to describe the processes, particularly in relation to analysis. In the second round of interviews I had intended to interview six people but eventually interviewed seven. The two respondents who were not able to be interviewed were due to the following issues. The first person, for the whole of the period while I was carrying out the first set of interviews, was on holiday, working on extensive projects or out of the country. This person is a respected leader in the field, similar to a number of the other respondents, and it was disappointing that I was not able to make contact. The second person who was not interviewed, was not prepared to be interviewed.

FIGURE 3: THE SPREAD OF RESPONDENTS

	Recommended by client	Recommended by peers	State	Size of org.	8-10 years experience	10-15+ years experience - a well known "name"
1	1	By 2, 4	NSW	Large	✓	
2		By 1, 5	NSW	Large		✓
3			SA	Small	✓	
4		By 2	NSW	Medium		✓
5		By 4	Vic	Small		✓
6	2	By 8	Vic	Medium		✓
7			Vic	Large		✓
8		By 6	Vic	Medium		✓
9		By 6	Vic	Large - Small		✓
10	3 4	By 5	NSW	Medium		✓
11	5 6	By 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 14 16, 17, 18	NSW	Medium		✓
12	4	By 4	NSW	Medium		✓
13		By 6	Vic	Medium		✓
14	7 8	By 2, 6, 4	Vic	Medium		✓
15	6	By 5	NSW	Medium		✓
16		By 11, 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 17, 18	NSW	Small		✓
17	5 2 6	By 1	SA	Medium	✓	
18	2 6 5	By 1	SA	Medium		✓
19	9 4	By 5	NSW	Medium		✓

- 11 males and 8 females responded. Gender is not itemised to protect confidentiality
- organisation size:
 - small = 1-4 consultants
 - medium = 5-10 consultants
 - large = over 11 consultants

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aims of the research and the core questions discussed were as follows:

- i. Where do SQMRs come from?
- ii. How are they trained?
- iii. How long does it take to train an SQMR?
- iv. What drives and motivates the SQMR?
- v. What are the rewards they seek?
- vi. What is the taxonomy of skills?
- vii. When do you have confidence in their skills; the question of competency?
- viii. Are the advanced analytical skills used by SQMRs a result of mystery, talent or gift, a result of age, a result of experience or produced by long hard work?

This paper only addresses the last 3 issues.

THE RESEARCH RESULTS

What is the Taxonomy of skills?

By combining and analysing the literature, the data drawn from the interviews with 19 SQMRs and the researcher's own experience, a comprehensive analysis was completed on the description of skills used by SQMRs in conducting and analysing qualitative focus groups.

Figure 6 following is suggested as a tentative taxonomy of skills of the 3-8 years experienced qualitative focus group researcher. Somewhere during this, their skills are refined and some become very strategic in input to companies.

FIGURE 4: COWLEY TAXONOMY OF SKILLS FOR SQMRs						
Entry attributes	Sharp intellect	Affinity to people/ values openness	Problem solving Solution/creation	Entrepreneurial lateral thinking	Ability to be open - proactive curiosity	
Background frames of reference	Motivational psychology Behavioural psychology Psychology of perception Psychology of attitudes Psychology of communication (including advertising, marketing processes)	Marketing Consumer behaviour Advertising Public relations Understanding of organisations	Sociology Anthropology Education History Politics	Organisational theory Management theory Product management Business experience	Access to new work: Journals Books Seminars (always learning)	Research theory Design Quantitative Qualitative Analysis Fundamental research skills
Core operational skills in groups	Interpersonal skills (eg listening etc)	Interviewing skills	Group work skills	Special focus group work skills	Analysis skills	
Core operational skills out of groups	Writing moderator's guides Recruiting Sampling	Analysis skills	Report writing	Presentation skills		
Associated skills	People management	Client management and negotiation	Project management	Sales skills		
Progress in profession skills	Experience and mentoring					
The factors which signal competency	The "X" Factor					
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Six core factors appear to constitute the taxonomy. The majority of the core operational skills in groups (3rd row) are the “easy ones” talked about. This is where people and the literature focuses (apart from the last one “analysis skills”). Interestingly the core operational skills out of groups (4th row) gets less mention, but is considered.

The entry attributes (1st row) can be clearly articulated yet most SQMRs say they experience a relatively high failure rate with some new recruits making it and some not. The background frames of reference (2nd row) are widely different in what is required between different respondents. The associated skills (5th row) were touched on in the interviews but not articulated as strongly as other areas and yet probably have a major impact on the researcher’s perceived competency.

All respondents commented on mentoring, but with a recognition of the difficulty of this under the time constraint of the profession.

The X Factor (last row) is a set of skills which initially most people had difficulty in articulating yet clearly were able to say that some researchers had and some didn’t.

They could clearly say that there were three major stages of development. From induction to two years was normally a “learn the techniques” stage with watching, practice and mentoring. By 2 years if people hadn’t made it they wouldn’t. From three years to about eight years there was long hard development of skills, and towards the end of this an insatiable desire to have highly stimulating projects to work on, or a “burn out”. But the very strategic researchers were recognised as developing some other skills which I called the “X Factor” as I attempted to determine what they are.

What is competency? What is the X Factor?

This progression towards competency in years 3-8 was finally described by respondents as core recognisable competency in discrete, identifiable skills.

There were seven areas of these skills, namely:

- The relationship with clients
- Confidence in their role and themselves
- Competency within the group itself*
- Competency in the style of questions*
- Competency in the interpretation
- Competency in analysis
- Hard self disciplined work

Interestingly, the literature in the main concentrates on the two skills asterisked. The detailed components of these have been identified and will be reported separately, but will be described in the presentation of this paper.

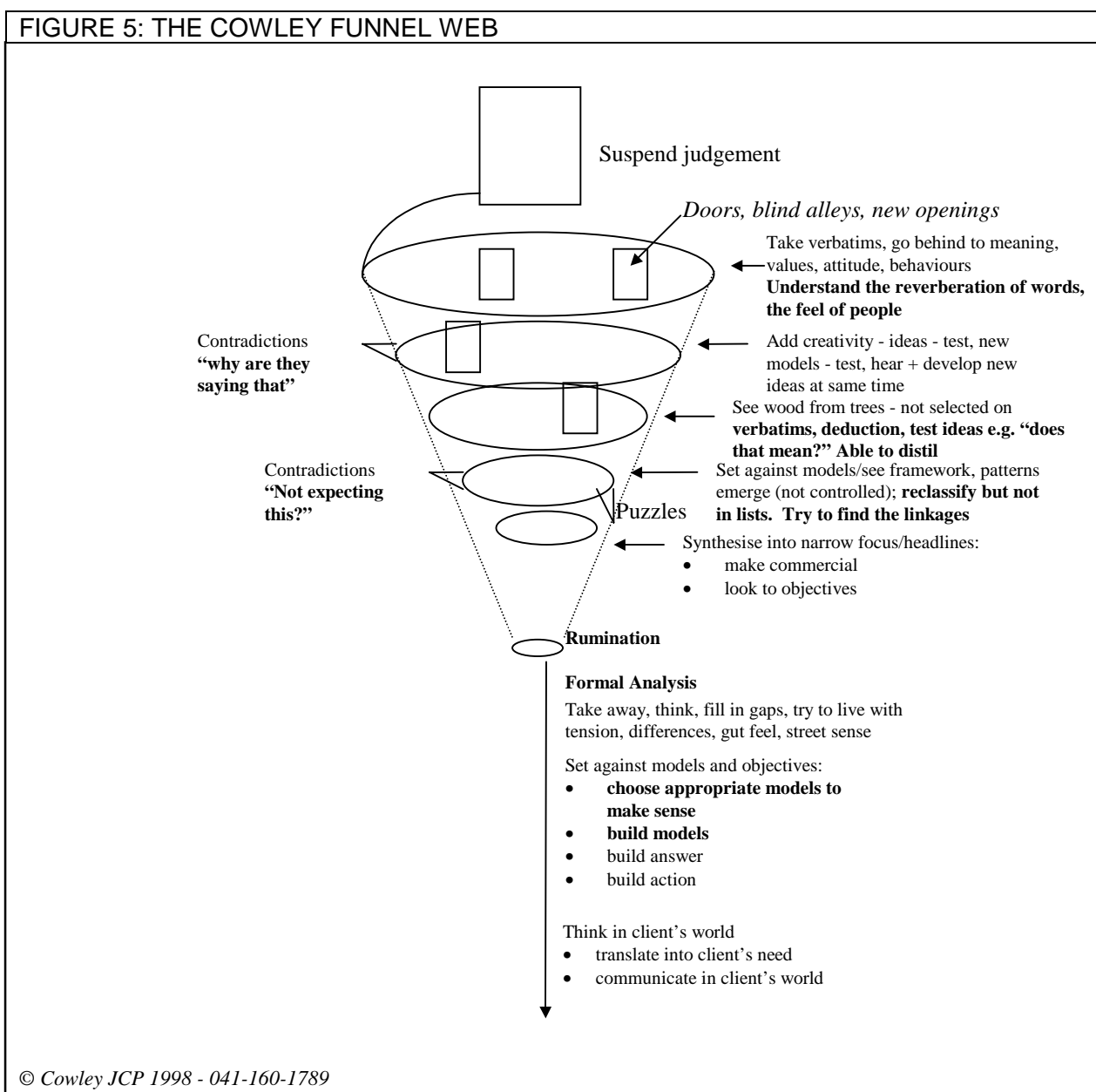
What are the advanced analytical and interpretive skills?

Of critical importance in this competency is the analytical and interpretive skill of the SQMR.

This is what is paid for; this is the hidden guarantee identified by Reuter. This could be the myth or wizardry mentioned by Sharp, or it could be just a lot of hard work and skill development.

By combining the respondents' views; re-interviewing seven respondents in depth on this specific issue and combining with it a broader knowledge of theories on conceptualisation, advanced thinking and education, I arrived at the following model which was then tested with SQMRs.

FIGURE 5: THE COWLEY FUNNEL WEB



This analytical style will be explained with presentation of the paper.

The researcher has for many years tried to understand the mind of SQMRs in order to try to develop better training for future SQMRs. We had developed a model in 1993 (Cowley 1993) to try to explain this. This research proved the earlier model very inadequate.

A further part of the research has integrated this style of analysis in the context of writings about future workers and analytical style.

Are the advanced analytical skills used by SQMRs a result of mystery, talent or gift, a result of age, a result of experience or produced by long hard work?

It would be easy to claim magic for such a filter that allows data to be buffeted by the mind and come out the other end as elaborate strategy. Even more so when the professionals are well regarded by the industry for their competency, and many have a reasonable level of charisma.

But the respondents didn't claim magic. They were interestingly very similar in their claims. An analysis was conducted of the key skills together with possible causative factors. These are shown in figure 8.

My conclusion was as follows. It is not magic nor a gift. It is not age, but a little bit of time may help in gaining a huge repertoire of experience. It seems to be just incredibly disciplined hard work over time and an extensive skill base developed to levels of competency.

The final finding of the research was a personal one. I had never met most of the other SQMRs. They were just names I'd been told we compete with. It was striking that they all had high confidence, perhaps high egos; but all could reduce this ego to nothing in their rapport with people; and none had the arrogance which unfortunately is seen in other types of consultants. Their willingness to help, but more importantly the depth of their human knowledge and intellectual sharpness made me feel very privileged to belong to the market research profession.

FIGURE 6: MYSTERY, AGE OR SKILL - COWLEY DEMYTHOLOGISED VIEW OF SQMRs

	Does it come with age?	Does age help?	Can anyone with necessary predispositions learn it?	Is it 'mystery' (a special skill)?	Is it the framework (eg type of degree discipline)?	Is it time and hard work and refinement of skill and just doing lots of it?
Understanding and negotiation with clients	Can get easier due to experience	Can signal 'experience' and build confidence	Yes	No, but 'image' can affect clients	Breadth of understanding can help	Yes
Educating clients	Time and experience help	Possibly	Yes	No	Probably helps	Yes
Selling to clients	Time and experience help	Possibly	Yes	No	Probably helps	Yes
Negotiation	Time and experience help	Possibly	Yes	No	Probably helps	Yes
Project management	Time and experience help	No	Yes	No	N/A	Yes
Fundamental research skills	Time and experience help	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Interviewing skills	Build repertoire of skills	N/A	Yes	No	Can help in knowing what to probe	Yes
Listening/interpretation	Time not age	Not necessarily	Apparently not	No	Not sure	Probably but not all seem to succeed
Group work skills	Not necessarily, some very good early on	Can in relating to some ages but can also hinder	Yes	No	Requires disciplined training	The more you do the better range of techniques you build
Personal skills/personality	Not necessarily	May keep in range of skills	Possibly not to this extent	No	No	No

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FIGURE 6: continued

	Does it come with age?	Does age help?	Can anyone with necessary predispositions learn it?	Is it 'mystery' (a special skill)?	Is it the framework (eg type of degree discipline)?	Is it time and hard work and refinement of skill and just doing lots of it?
Frameworks-depth and breadth of knowledge	Probably	Probably	Yes, probably	No	Yes	Yes
Analytical ability	Can be there early but time and experience helps	Possibly gets better with age	Apparently not	No	Probably better with depth of frameworks	Yes, yes, yes
Open mind	Not necessarily	Not necessarily	Not necessarily	No	Not necessarily	Don't know
Report writing	Not necessarily	Possible due to 3 Rs	Possibly	No	No	Yes
Presentation skills	Can be there any age	Possibly in credibility	Probably	No	No	Yes
Confidence in role and self	Can be there within 2-3 years	Yes	Apparently not	No	Don't know	Possibly but maybe more
The Funnel	Need time to develop	Not age related	Apparently not	No	Yes	Yes
Hard disciplined work	Any age	Any age	Not sure	No	N/A	Yes

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CONCLUSIONS

The research has identified a taxonomy of skills for strategic qualitative market researchers. It has built a model of the “signals” of competency, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and skills which should be present in a competent SQMR. It has described in detail the analytical skills used by SQMRs before, during and after market research focus groups (as described by SQMRs) and concluded that hard work and experience are the likely causes of such competency.

While details may be debated, the research does provide a framework with which SQMRs can clearly articulate their skills and which could be used within discussions on training, curriculum and certification. If a framework is agreed within our profession, it will be easier to differentiate strategic qualitative market research through focus groups from those others who just decide “they can run” focus groups. It will also benefit buyers by clearly spelling out our profession’s understanding of competency.

FURTHER QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ADDRESS

The taxonomy of skills

1. Is the Cowley Taxonomy of Skills for SQMRs in Australia (figure 4) a reasonable description of the skill base required?
 - we should be able to describe to buyers the skills they buy when buying competent researchers
 - any training should be based on a skill taxonomy
2. For consumer attitude and behaviour research is some formal training in psychology of motivation, perception, attitude, behaviour an essential framework?
 - is a “picked up along the way” pop psychology enough?
 - is a psychology component of a degree essential?
3. For business and marketing advice is a background in business and marketing and a practical knowledge of business world an essential framework?
 - is a theoretical view of business enough of a base from which to give business advice, or is business advice about having “been there, done that”?
4. Do new recruits to qualitative market research need to be graduates as a minimum qualification? If so in what?
 - can a non-graduate hold their own with buyers who are predominantly graduates or MBAs?
5. Should all qualitative researchers have a basic degree which includes a substantial research degree and methodology and analysis component?
 - can good research be conducted without substantial theoretical basis?
6. Should the skilled qualitative market researcher base level be defined by a technical level training (eg TAFE; diploma etc.) or by a graduate level, or by a master degree in research?
 - is it a profession which is fluid, flexible and crosses boundaries? Or is it one which does provide for clients professionals with high levels of training?
7. Can suitable recruiting criteria or tests be devised to determine skills on the “entry points”?
8. Can more of these components be taught through formal settings, thus allowing our companies to concentrate on mentoring?

Competency

9. Can competency as a SQMR be identified and described as “They can do this.....” (x 100 statements!) or is it a vague “They’re good at focus groups”.
10. Is the term “moderator” a serious mistake? Should it be something like “trainee qualitative market researcher”; “trained market researcher”; “strategic market researcher”?

Analysis

11. Is the model “The Cowley Funnel Web” a reasonable description of how we see the analytical skills we use?
12. Can this be tested? Can it not only be our description but a verified description?
13. Can more structured methods of coaching in this type of analysis be developed?

Mystery, age or skill

14. Is the model “Cowley Demythologised View of SQMRs” an acceptable demythologising? Is it just bloody hard disciplined work? Can we dispel of myth and mystery and replace it with structured skill development leading to competency?

Articulation

15. Can we assist research buyers by coherently explaining the fundamentals of the skill base, competency and analytical procedures of the SQMR. We can coherently explain when and how a regression analysis should be used; what the +/- accuracy of a sample should be; can we say what the minimum theoretical basis of a market research focus group and its operators are?

Management consultant :

“I didn’t hear you ask the specific questions
- I want to hear you actually ask each one of
them - how else will you know the answer?
I’ll write the questions down for you”

Researcher:

“Why don’t you buy a speaker phone and
just ask them from behind the glass - it would
be a lot cheaper than using a researcher!”

Some way to go in articulating our skills!

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