**A REASSESSMENT OF THE ROOTS AND THEORETICAL BASIS OF QUALITATIVE MARKET RESEARCH IN THE** **UK**

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Introduction

1999 marks the 40th Anniversary of qualitative market research in the UK and a review of the roots and historical basis of our profession seems an appropriate way of celebrating the anniversary.

Moreover, this Anniversary occurs in a period when qualitative market research has seen many new types of clients, lots of new young practitioners and considerable media and public attention. It therefore seems timely to have a statement of our roots and theory – we have a history and expertise of which we are proud, and we should set it out and celebrate it.

Three primary influences have shaped today's qualitative market research industry in the UK.

* the foundations are in psychology and the initial practitioners were psychotherapists. This paper therefore revisits those foundations and considers their relevance and role in today's industry.
* the qualitative market research industry today has incorporated other influences and disciplines that can play a part in helping explore human behaviour and attitudes. Indeed the whole of the social sciences has evolved and developed over the past 40 years. This paper charts these influences and points out where they fit into the scheme of things.
* the industry today has evolved and adapted to reflect changing demands by clients - in turn a reflection of evolving *marketing*thinking and practices. The client perspective is therefore explored (but only insofar as it has influenced qualitative market research thinking and practices).

These facets of 'evolution' mean that this paper is in part a historical narrative of developing thinking and theory. Moreover, as a reassessment of our industry this paper includes some re-statement and re-framing of several old thoughts in new, hopefully clearer terms. The paper ends with an interpretation of the constituent elements of high quality, professional qualitative market research.1. **The origins of qualitative market research - Motivational Research**

Qualitative market research came to the UK via Dr Ernest Dichter who trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst in Vienna. (The French also lay claim to the invention of qualitative market research, but this is NOT how it came to the UK.) Like many Jewish Austrians accused of Communist sympathies, Dichter left Austria to escape the Nazis, and with fellow psychoanalysts Paul Lazarfeld and Herta Hertzog, he eventually arrived in New York in 1938 (via a short period selling buttons for an uncle in Paris).

Just like so many other US immigrants he was forced to change career and he developed an 'entrepreneurial' streak. He got a job as research assistant at NBC - and studying *quantitative*research findings of claimedconsumer reasons for choosing Chrysler cars led him to conclude that the *real*answer lay at a deeper, more psychological level.

At the same time, *marketing*thinking was just beginning to recognise that consumer preference wasn't simply a matter of rational, logical decision-making. Hence, techniques for exposing hidden motives (personality traits and attitudes as well as needs and drives) had considerable appeal.

Dichter approached his early studies in the 1950s (Chrysler, P & G's Ivory Soap) as the psychoanalyst he had trained to be. Initial studies were based on depth interviews, and influenced by his mentor and fellow Vienna-trained psychologist Paul Lazarfeld, Dichter initially aimed for large samples and questionnaire-based data-collection. The use of *groups*came much later.

His company, The Institute of Motivational Studies, grew in the US through the 1950s and developed an impressive blue-chip client base. In 1959 the Institute's Vice President Bill Schlackman set up an office in London - and motivational research arrived in the UK.

In essence therefore, the birth of our industry came about through a combination of

* the displacement of a Viennese psychoanalyst to the US
* who, in the spirit of US entrepreneurship developed practical applications of his psychology training to marketing (including, eventually, the use of groups and depth interviews as a cost-effective *process*for eliciting the necessary information).
* at a time when the marketing community was ready and eager for such psychologically-based insights.

It is important to realise that Motivational Research as practised in those early days had a specific character - some elements of which still play an important part in today's qualitative research.

At the heart of Motivational Research were Freudian ideas of motivation - including the need to explore both suppressed *and*repressed motives. (Suppressed motives concern issues that the individual is aware of, but does not care to admit, whereas repressed motives concern *unconscious*issues the individual will not admit even to themselves.)

The requirements to explore repressed motives demanded a psychoanalytic approach. However many US clients became disillusioned with Motivational Research, principally *because of* the untenable nature of this psychoanalytical approach. Two factors were relevant here

i) whilst Dichter was a trained and experienced psychoanalyst, as the business grew he took on staff who were not. Their analysis often went far beyond their competence.

ii) the format of 1½-hour groups was insufficient to enable even the most competent psychoanalyst to make an accurate analysis. Moreover, recruitment standards were often poor.

As such, the skill deficiency was exacerbated by inadequate 'data’.

Allied to Dichter's reported predilection for expounding his *own*thoughts, the credibility and reliability of the Institute's recommendations became discredited.

(As an aside, this helps explain the *current*US qualitative research practice where clients tend to observe groups, and make their own interpretation, reducing the researcher's role to that of moderator. These very early experiences make them understandably wary of researchers-as-interpreters.)

The situation in the UK was rather different - all the key practitioners (Bill Schlackman, Peter Cooper, John and Mary Goodyear etc.) had qualifications in psychology, and the scale of the early industry did not lead to the skill deficiency experienced in the US.

Whilst early UK clients included such blue-chip companies as Nestlé, Carlsburg, Beechams, JWT etc., the industry remained quite small until the 1970s, by which time the psychoanalytic approach had largely been superseded by more ‘discursive’ models of qualitative research (of which we will hear more).

# 2. The Legacy of Motivational Research

Two important facets of Motivational Research have not really survived

a) Firstly the exploration of repressed motivations and the concomitant need to apply psychoanalytic interpretations of findings is rarely attempted

b) Secondly, as a function of its Freudian origins Motivational Research concerned itself solely with the psychology of the INDIVIDUAL. Post-Freudian psychology embraces the notion that the individual is a function of the individual personality AND their socio-cultural context. As such, modern psychology – and today’s qualitative research – incorporates thinking from social anthropology and cultural studies.

However, having said that modern qualitative research is NOT psychoanalytic, it is still firmly based on many concepts from the disciplines of psychology. So, whilst today’s qualitative researchers are required to understand the basic principles of human psychology, they don’t need to be psychoanalysts.

Thus, Motivational Research bequeathed today’s qualitative market research an important psychological legacy, which remains an important part of the theoretical framework for much of today’s profession.

This framework covers three fundamental aspects of qualitative market research

1. The whole notion that researching consumer motivation requires techniques to go beyond that which people can, and will, tell you in response to simple, direct questions.
2. A variety of models and concepts for understanding the diversity of influences on human nature and motivation
3. A range of research methodologies and techniques.
4. **The whole notion that researching consumer motivation requires techniques to go beyond that which people can, and will, tell you in response to simple, direct questions.**

Little was written about this issue by the early qualitative researchers, but one phrase endures from those times:

“people don’t always say what they mean, and they don’t always mean what they say”

Whilst this is true and intriguing it provides little framework for unravelling or exploring what *isn’t* said and what *isn’t* meant.

In this respect, we can draw upon three descriptive models – albeit it has to be recognised that whilst these models are entirely congruent with the thinking of the time, they were actually devised rather later.

Perhaps the simplest description of this rationale for qualitative market research is embodied in The Johari Window (more comprehensive and more complex models are given later).

The Johari Window is a conceptual model for describing, evaluating and predicting aspects of interpersonal communication (e.g. a market research interview). Its overarching lesson is simple – people do not always say what they mean, and nor do they necessarily mean what they say.

## Aware

**II – Private Feelings**

Private but suppressed

* don’t like to admit
* hard to verbalise (right brain)

Accessible via enabling techniques and careful safe interview environment

**I – Conscious Factors**

Public and spoken

* socially acceptable
* left brain

Accessible via direct questions (e.g. Quantitative)

## Will Say

## Won’t Say

# IV – Unconscious Factors

Private and repressed

Accessible via projection and psychoanalysis

## III – Intuitive Associations

Potentially public – but unspoken

* no vocabulary
* right brain

Accessible via enabling techniques

##### Not Aware

Source : Johari, quoted by Schlackman, and adapted by Mike Imms

It is useful to start with some observations on the top left quadrant – ‘I – Aware + Will Say’.

This is very much the domain of conventional quantitative research – e.g. ask a direct question and elicit a direct response.

The dilemma is that consumers will *tend* to express views that are

* Socially acceptable (i.e. *may*include things they do not mean but feel is ‘the right thing to say’, and won’t include things they believe are socially unacceptable to say)

e.g. “we only watch nature documentaries on TV”

* ‘left brain’ – i.e. - conscious
* communicable
* verbal
* analytic (rational, logical, deductive)

(i.e. excluding many things they *do* mean)

In short, ask a sensible question and you get a sensible answer – but real life isn’t always sensible.

Whilst the ‘aware + will say’ is of course a wholly legitimate area of enquiry for research, the importance of the Johari window is that it

1. maps out important dimensions BEYOND the ‘aware and will say’
2. clarifies the nature of the task for exploring this broader territory

Interestingly, it illustrates that even if Motivational Research (and its emphasis on the repressed issues of quadrant IV) is not wholly credible, quadrants II and III remain vital territories for exploration, but are beyond the scope of quantitative research. (As we shall see later, this was the rationale behind the ‘new qualitative research’.)

An alternative model describing different levels of consumer motivations also provides an illustration of the need for the deeper enquiry offered by qualitative research. This model, devised by Peter Cooper, describes layers of meaning almost like a geological structure.

# Layer Research Method Output

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PUBLIC | COMMUNICABLE | AWARE | Spontaneous |  | Simple  Questioning | Immediate, spontaneous  response |
| Reasoned, conventional | Asking/reminding | Justifications, explanations |
| Pre-conscious | Pressing | Detailed elaborations/  introspections |
| PRIVATE | Concealed, Personal | Sympathetic, probing | Personal admissions |
| NON - | Intuitive | Play, drama,  Non-verbal | Symbols, imagination  Analogy |
| NON - | Unconscious | Projective approaches | Repressed attitudes, motives |

Additionally, Bill Schlackman describes a model of consciousness as an ‘onion’ – the layers representing deeper levels of consciousness.

**Stereotype**

**Games**

**(defences)**

###### Thoughts/

**feelings**

**Repressed**

###### Subconscious

D

**C**C

B

**E**E

A

**Source** : Schlackman (1989)

# ii) A variety of models and concepts for understanding the diversity of influences on human nature and motivation

An essential part of our inheritance from psychology includes a variety of models and concepts that provide a framework for understanding what makes consumers tick;

Key amongst these are :

# The nature of Cognition and Perception

Cognition concerns the mental process of knowing, perceiving and judging – processes which enable individuals to interpret the world around them. Perception concerns the *content* of that interpretation. Early tools in this area included the Kelly Repertory Grid and Rorsach which are **not** widely used today (plus Thematic Apperception Tests, which *are* still used.)

**Learning Theories**

e.g. Stimulus – Response

# Models of motivation and the nature of needs

e.g. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

# Models of Human Interaction and Communication

e.g. Transactional Analysis

# Theories of Personality

e.g. Jung, and in particular the importance of emotions, feelings, intuition and perceiving in determining human behaviour.

e.g. Freud’s theory of mind, levels of consciousness, and the ‘hermeneutic tools’ to help interpret underlying meanings.

Importantly, these models and concepts have been augmented over the 40 years as other schools of thinking in psychology have emerged – e.g. Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Humanism etc.

# iii) A range of research methodologies and techniques

The discipline of psychology – specifically psychotherapy – was the source of much of the thinking behind what we now take for granted as qualitative market research methodologies and techniques.

* **Non-directive questioning techniques**

Non-directive question techniques were first described by C R Rogers in 1945. He used non-directive interviews first in counselling and psychotherapy and later commented that it was useful in research interviewing as a means of avoiding biased response. This was picked up and developed by Dichter’s former colleague, Herta Hertzog. In essence, the interviewer (moderator) retains the initiative regarding the course of the interview. Respondents are encouraged to feel ‘free to relate their experiences and reveal their attitudes and opinions as they see fit, with as little direction as possible from the interviewer.

(Crucially, this is a DIFFERENT CONCEPT to the interview style of the ‘focused interview’ or ‘focus group’, as we shall see later.)

* **Projective techniques**

In order to understand the role of projection and enabling techniques we need to refer back to the Johari Window :

Aware

I

III

IV

II

Will Say

Won’t Say

Not Aware

The early Motivational Researchers, in pursuit of their interest in the psychoanalytic insight into the *individual* emphasised ‘won’t say + not aware’. Here, some Projective techniques were used – BUT ONLY TO A LIMITED DEGREE.

* Rorsach ‘Ink Blots’
* Thematic Apperception Tests
* Kelly Repertory Grid
* Story-telling

Remember *Projection* aims to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the individual *about themselves* – i.e. techniques to explore the unconscious and repressed, as per quadrant IV of the Johari Window.

In contrast, *enabling* techniques seek to help respondents articulate things they find hard to say (e.g. issues they regard as socially unacceptable; things they don’t have the *words* to describe - quadrants II and III of Johari). They generally aim to help people describe the thing being researched – e.g. the brand, the product, or service, *not themselves*.

The wide variety of enabling techniques commonly used in qualitative research today were also developed from psychotherapy, but not until the early 1980s.

* **The group discussion**

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Motivational Researchers is the group discussion. Note however that early Motivational Researchers didn’t **start** with group discussions, nor were they totally wedded to them.

The Institute of Motivational Research started with depth interviews and paper-based records of interviews and their shift to group discussions seems to have been based partly on pragmatic and commercial imperatives.

However, it is vital to remind ourselves that the notion of the ‘group discussion’ has a clear and specific rationale.

Moreover, in reviewing the literature and roots of qualitative research, it was revealing to note that the CONCEPT of group discussions is quite different to that of ‘focus groups’.

In the context of today’s industry where the two terms are used interchangeably outside our industry (and increasingly inside it too), it is important to remind ourselves of the difference.

In terms of **theory**, the distinction is far from semantic.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Focus Group** | **Group Discussion** |
| Purpose | Demonstration | Exploration |
| **Moderator’s Role** | To ask prescribed questions.  To ensure definite types of information is elicited  To confine discussion to prescribed issues | To explore ANYTHING respondents feel is relevant to topic at hand  To manage group dynamics (prevent domination, elicit comments from the quiet)  To encourage debate |
| **Questioning Technique** | Semi-structured, semi-standardised  All major question topics mapped out  Hand-shows, counting | Non-directive questioning  Open, probing |
| **Themes** | Exploration of specific concrete situation respondents have experience of  (i.e. group explore shared experience)  Exploration of situations already analysed prior to the interview  (i.e. group explore known behavioural patterns) | Speculation  Spontaneous ideas and comments  Including the totally unpredictable  Breadth and depth, or range of responses |
| **Output** | **Information** | **Understanding** |

Sources : Merron & Kendall, and Young

Quoted by Peter Sampson, 1967

: Mary Goodyear, 1996

Integrated by Mike Imms

One vitally important point to note is that the UTILITY VALUE of group discussions was quickly recognised by many outside the small community of Motivational Researchers, and it was adopted for a variety of other purposes, which I have labelled ‘not quant’ groups.

* For initial enquiry
* To help define questions for subsequent quantification
* For initial screening

# The role of the moderator

It is from psychotherapy that we retain an enduring model of the role of the moderator and whilst it would be completely wrong to regard moderators as psychotherapists, key elements of ‘best practice’ for moderators arise directly from psychotherapeutic principles of interviewing.

The psychotherapeutic model of interviewing embraces three key principles

1. ‘transparency’, including genuine-ness, authenticity and congruence
2. unconditional positive regard, and acceptance of interviewees in a non-judgmental way.

These first two principles have underpinned key aspects of ‘best practice’ in moderating qualitative market research – i.e.

* non judgmental
* **not** to give opinion
* **not** to answer questions
* **not** to proffer information
* using non-directive questions

This model is still very much in evidence today, albeit alternative models of moderation are beginning to be used – e.g. moderator as ‘team leader’, with respondents as ‘problem solvers’ given as much inside information as they need.

iii) The third principle of the psychotherapeutic model of interviewing concerns empathetic understanding via attentive listening.

This includes re-stating what interviewees say as a way of clarifying its emotional significance, and sensitivity to meanings just below the level of awareness.

This also has an important influence on ‘best practice’ for qualitative research moderators;

* it introduces a FUNDAMENTAL requirement to create within the interview or group an atmosphere where respondents feel safe, respected and trustful (i.e. the so-called ‘warm up’ is a profoundly important part of the process)
* it introduces the need for *specific* skills and techniques – notably
* the use of non-directive question techniques and probing
* active listening skills (including sensitivity to non-verbal communication) and summarising restating skills
* a requirement to *understand* the nature and expression of emotional responses and alertness to the pre-conscious.

# 3. A précis of the state of play in 1969

Thus,by 1969 four key aspects of the UK qualitative market research industry were evident

* the early Motivational Researchers had established a credible presence in the UK, with an impressive blue-chip client base. Yet they were already moving away from the ‘pure’ Motivational Research orthodoxy. Specifically, their work dealt with far broader themes than the unconscious and repressed and was not wholly dependent upon the psychoanalytic. Subsequent commentators have entitled this post-motivational era either ‘post Messianic’ (Collins) or ‘discursive qualitative market research’ (Chandler and Owen)
* nonetheless, the legacy of psychology from the Motivational Researchers remains of fundamental importance to today’s qualitative market research. That legacy includes

1. the whole notion that researching consumer motivation requires techniques that go beyond that which people can and will say in response to simple direct questions
2. a variety of models and concepts for understanding the diversity of influences on human nature and motivation
3. a range of research methodologies and techniques

* By 1969, there was a growing awareness of the value of broader ‘qualitative research’ to explore not simply consumer motivations using psychological techniques, but also
* diagnostic’ enquiry – exploring ‘why?’ and problem solving
* pre-questionnaire design usage to frame questions
* basic screening and ‘reconnaissance’ of complex issues
* The **marketplace** of the time demonstrated that many had recognised the utility value of group discussions
* the richness and vividness of their experience
* the speed and relatively low cost

and some practitioners were using (abusing) ‘the group’ for what I have termed ‘not quantitative’ purposes, that were not strictly qualitative research – i.e. the nature of the enquiry never extended beyond the ‘will say + aware’ quadrant of the Johari Window. By 1969 therefore we already see ‘reportage’ and examples of so-called qualitative research which in fact represented little more than small-scale replica of insights more appropriate to quantitative research.

# 4. The 1970s

### “The 1970s saw no major developments over the previous decade, only a massive expansion of it”

Peter Sampson, Qualitative Research in Europe, ESOMAR, 1985

This is perhaps a little unfair.

The key themes of the 1970s concerned

* continued attempts to define ‘qualitative research’ in a way that was distinctly different to Motivational Research. (Indeed the term ‘Motivational Research disappeared in the 1970s.)
* specifically the approaches used since the 1970s have tended to include a more ‘Phenomenological’ approach – e.g. exploring issues through the eyes of the perceiver (i.e. *“tell me how it seems to you”*) rather than relying wholly on the perspective of the researcher-as-analyst (i.e. *this is how I analyse and interpret how it seems to you*).
* the establishment of the 1½-2-hour group of about eight respondents as the ‘norm’
* concern over the professional standards of the fast-growing numbers of qualitative researchers arising from the expansion of the market, combined with a widespread recognition that qualitative research need not be the sole preserve of psychologists (or indeed psychotherapists), but a sound understanding of the psychological concepts behind qualitative research was needed.

The 1970s also saw a variety of attempts to apply test procedures from EXPERIMENTAL psychology to quantitative research – but generally these failed to develop principally because of a lack of tools for interpreting the findings accurately.

Perhaps the most significant influence on demand for qualitative market research in the late 1970s was the emergence of Account Planning in UK advertising agencies.

# 5. The early 1980s – a re-orientation and an explosion of the market for qualitative research

Major developments in qualitative research came about in the early 1980s as a result of three coincident, but linked, factors;

* changing views of marketing clients – and especially requirements of Account Planners – who wished to achieve a more sophisticated understanding of consumers’ relationships with brands. Specifically, the acceptance of a more ‘humanistic’ model of marketing that recognised that consumers weren’t simply ‘receivers’ of messages about brands and products, but they *interacted* with those brands and messages.

To paraphrase the ethos of the time:

‘it’s not what we do to consumers – it’s what consumers do with our brands and our messages’

This need to understand the nature of consumer relationships with brands and their advertising created substantial demand for qualitative market research.

* the development of additional qualitative research techniques, which acknowledged that consumer had considerable ability to ‘reveal more’ – provided they were helped to express thoughts and feelings they found hard to put into words.

In short, techniques were developed to more rigorously explore the ‘won’t say + aware’ and ‘will say but not aware’ quadrants of the Johari Window.

These so-called ‘enabling techniques’ were founded once again on practices found in contemporary psychotherapy – often child psychotherapy, and included visual techniques - collage

- drawing

along with extended use of existing techniques of word association, analogy, metaphor, sentence completion and Thematic Apperception Tests, story telling etc.

* a switch from using respondents as a ‘collection of single individuals’ to a group with shared socio-cultural values

i.e. the questioning techniques switched from

‘do you like this’ – e.g. individual likes and dislikes about this

[e.g. tell me what you like about Fairy Liquid]

to

‘tell me what this *means’* [e.g. define Fairy Liquid-ness for me]

The theme here is rather more socio-cultural and crucially, it concerns values and meanings *shared* within the culture. The research task therefore concerns revealing the ‘dominant discourse’ for a given target (e.g. users v. non-users, older v. younger).

In essence, these techniques aimed to reveal the relationship of a *given type of consumer* to a market, a brand, a pack etc. – rather than individual preferences. At this level, dependence upon the ‘representative-ness’ of the *individual* respondents, and, therefore validation, became far less important.

Projects at this time tended to be ‘big chunk’ macro studies of market fundamentals and brand essence, and ‘problem solving’.

However, during this period the ‘not quant’ use of group discussions continued alongside these more complete and more sophisticated ‘qualitative research’ processes.

Moreover, the ‘new qualitative research’ was a specific UK phenomenon.

* France remained wedded to ‘deep’ psychological procedures and long, long groups and depths
* the US stayed with ‘Focus Groups’ - and as we have already described, this represents a quite different research concept and method. Interestingly, US business schools have very recently begun to ‘re-discover’ psychology-based consumer qualitative market research (e.g. Michael Belk, Susan Fournier).

# 6. An Aside – rising recognition of the significance of socio-cultural influences

The legacy of early Motivational Research incorporated an emphasis on the individuals’ personal psychology – but a number of important factors have meant that the whole history of qualitative market research is informed by persistent and growing acknowledgement of the importance of socio-cultural influences. With it has come an increase in the application of methods, techniques and thinking from various disciplines of cultural analysis – including

* social anthropology (including ethnographic and observational methods of enquiry as well as anthropological models of analysis and interpretation)
* semiotics

Some key aspects of this evolution include the following ‘milestones’

* to be fair to Dichter, he incorporated anthropological concepts in his earliest work – indeed his ‘Ivory Soap’ case study included the interpretation of soap usage in terms of a ‘ritualistic’ meaning to the Saturday night bathing of young girls going out on a date. Anthropologists would fairly lay claim to the whole notion of rituals (and myths) as the core of anthropology.
* the post-Freudian discipline of psychology itself recognises the importance of socio-cultural influences on the psychology of the individual. As such, qualitative market research merely followed its founding discipline
* the increasing importance of international brands marketing and the rise of international qualitative research brought with it an increasing demand by *marketers* to understand cultural differences and influences on consumers’ relationships with brands, products and services.
* not only does anthropology introduce new methods and techniques to *enquiry*, it also introduces new frameworks of analysis. Anyone who has heard Judie Lannon’s interpretation of the appeal of Timotei in terms of the Arcadian myth and the Princess Myth will recognise how powerfully *different* this use of consumer perceptions of the brand can be.
* rather more specifically and pragmatically, the relevance of observational and ethnographic methodologies from the disciplines of social anthropology have become of increasing importance in exploring BEHAVIOUR. Conventional qualitative market research techniques concern only claimed behaviour, and qualitative observation and ethnographic approaches enable the qualitative researcher to explore actual behaviour (including unconscious, ritualistic and culturally derived patterns of behaviour).

# 7. The Late 1980s

One of the most significant events of the late 1980s was an attack on the ‘new qualitative research ‘ by Gerald de Groot.

At ESOMAR in 1986 (under the title of ‘Deep, Dangerous or Just Plain Dotty’) and at the MRS Conference in 1987 (under the title ‘New, Noxious or Nebulous’) he argued that qualitative research was of value ONLY in

* the development of hypotheses
* the revelation of consumer language to aid questionnaire design for quantitative studies
* to gain insight and explanation of observed phenomenon

and that broader uses in general, and ‘new’ qualitative research in particular lacked:

* relevance to consumer behaviour and marketing
* validity in both theory and practice
* the ethical constraints that should surround all market research

More specifically, he argued that that the ‘new’ qualitative research was not ‘new’, and its more powerful elements could be readily explored with greater reliability using large sample *quantitative* data-capture (e.g. including sentence completion, word association, bubble drawings etc. within structured questionnaires).

Whilst the paper was well argued and stimulated considerable debate at the time, subsequent events have failed to bear out de Groot’s argument.

* the continued growth of the sector and sustained client loyalty provide ample empirical evidence that qualitative market research is indeed relevant to consumer behaviour and marketing
* whilst it is correct that qualitative insights cannot be ‘proven’ to be accurate, the experience of users of qualitative findings suggests they are reliable. Unlike Motivation Research which became discredited in the 1960s, modern forms of qualitative enquiry have become ever more frequently and widely used
* whilst it is indeed possible to use quantitative methods to explore some of the ‘qualitative’ issues – e.g. sentence completion, word association, bubble drawings – this has NOT proved *practicable* or cost effective, and has generated seemingly insurmountable problems of analysis and interpretation.

# 8. The 1990s

The 1990s has seen a variety of *evolutionary* developments in thinking, procedures and applications of qualitative market research.

# Evolution in qualitative market research thinking

This has included a rising acceptance that the proper object of study is the more broadly defined ‘consumer culture’ – and with it wider notions of what constitutes legitimate types of qualitative research enquiry.

* specifically : observational

: behavioural

: experiential

in addition to growing interest in semiotic analysis of cultural meaning (primarily via the tireless efforts of Ginny Valentine).

# Significant steps forward in Procedures

Continued concerns over standards have been reflected in the development and adoption of more tangible methods of monitoring standards

* notably the introduction of quality systems and quality standards (MARQUESA)
* the publication of new guidelines for qualitative research to augment the MRS Code of Conduct
* initial steps to validate recruitment practices

The application of the principles of Neuro-Linguistic Programming to moderating practices in order to achieve more accurate and insightful communication between moderator and respondents is another, rather different example of a new development in procedures.

# New applications

Qualitative market research has begun to appear in new ‘marketplaces’

* the arts and media
* social policy
* staff and organisational research.

We have also witnessed the use of ‘group discussions’ as an instrument of consultation (people’s panels, deliberative polling).

Many clients and practitioners have developed more ‘interactive’ sessions, involving clients *and* respondents working together as brainstorming and problem solving teams (a far cry from ‘moderator’ as therapist model of group discussions).

Another trend is the *deliberate* use of ‘unrepresentative’ respondents to explore ‘leading edge’ themes.

# Changing Client Questions

Another feature of the 1990s is the changing nature of demands from existing clients of qualitative market research – and here two key trends are evident

* the continued rise of international research
* a shift towards ‘micro-issues’

In the 1980s many clients used qualitative market research to explore ‘big chunk’ macro issues concerning the fundamentals of the brand and the market, but it is now quite rare to find clients who do already have a clear understanding of such macro issues.

As such, today’s projects tend to concern more ‘micro’ issues

* changes since the last study
* subtleties and nuances – different consumers, sub-segments
* brand and line extension, pack revisions etc.

# Some less welcome attention

The 1990s also saw increasing media and public attention on qualitative market research. Generally speaking this attention has been ill-informed and hostile. Gradually, the phrase ‘focus group’ came into general usage often as a pejorative term

“Mr White not only managed to pigeon-hole listeners in a way that would do justice to a dreaded ‘focus group’, but also managed to denigrate the excellent work done by Sarah Kennedy and Terry Wogan”

Reader’s letter, Radio Times, 9-15 January 1999

In noting the populist use of the term ‘focus group’ it is important to remember the substantial difference between the theories of ‘focused group interviews’ and ‘qualitative groups’ spelled out earlier in this paper.

The commercial opportunity (and superficial ease) of ‘groups’ also came to the attention of marketing and management consultants in the 1990s – resulting in another wave of inexperienced, inexpert practitioners, and further growth of the less legitimate ‘not-quant’ segment of the market for groups.

# 9. Some over-arching and perennial themes

Whilst the narrative to date has charted important changes in qualitative market research, some things have remained as a constant.

# A consistent underlying ‘client’ theme

Thus far, this paper has explored researcher perspectives on theory and thinking. Whilst it has been noted that various developments in methodology have reflected changing *marketing* thinking it remains true that clients have *NOT generally* taken an interest in the THEORIES behind qualitative market research.

Over the years there have been several important studies of client requirements from researchers, determinants of quality and value for money etc. All have in common an almost total *absence* of interest in theory.

Examples include : Collins & Montgomery, 1969

: Comley & Godfrey, 1989

: AQRP, 1996

: AURA, 1998

This seems to have arisen principally because qualitative research has proved so *insightful*; to paraphrase, clients seem to feel

“I don’t feel the need to investigate the theory – it works, it’s valuable, and I trust and respect the people who I commission”

Whilst this lack of scrutiny of theory by clients has undoubtedly assisted the overall growth of qualitative research, it has probably also facilitated the rise of less professional practices – e.g.

* the ‘misuse’ of qualitative research as a quick and cheap way of exploring inappropriate topics such as behaviour, price-sensitivity and wholly cognitive issues
* the moderation of groups by untrained practitioners
* weak and incomplete analysis, and the acceptance of ‘reportage’

These abuses of qualitative market research have *also* been consistently present.

# The Issue of the Validity of Qualitative Market Research

Since the very earliest days, the validity of qualitative market research findings has been an issue for debate – and it therefore seems pertinent to review the thinking and evidence on this important issue.

Whilst many have commented on notions of validity, there is no one single adjudication on the matter. Key ‘milestones’ include

* Dichter was clear to distinguish between ‘validity’ and quantification as separate concepts
* Tony Twyman, in an oft-quoted experiment in 1973 concluded that because end *recommendations* were different from different researchers on the same topic, all qualitative market research was invalid. This was countered by later commentators noting similarities of basic findings – and the fact that each researcher did just two groups!
* Peter Cooper set up a number of experiments comparing qualitative and quantitative findings on the same topics. As an example, one such experiment reported at the MRS Conference in 1977 concluded that the qualitative study produced essentially the same information (plus added market insights) for around half the cost.
* The R & D Committee of the MRS in 1979 stressed the importance of sample selection and recruitment standards (combined with a clear separation of findings and interpretation) to help maximise the reliability of findings.
* The MRS literature review on validity and reliability in 1990 described a variety of ‘validity tests’ but did not reach a judgement as to whether or not qualitative research *as practised* was valid or reliable
* Martin Callingham, in a 1990 paper about the role of qualitative notions in company decision making commented that *“qualitative notions are not ‘true’ but have great truth about them”* – i.e. their validity is verifiable in the context of existing knowledge and beliefs.

Despite the incompleteness of these observations, there appear to be five key facets to the concept of validity in qualitative market research

* validity can be checked empirically, via *internal* consistency within the project – i.e. consistency of findings in different interviews/groups with similar types of respondent. This highlights the importance of ensuring the project is large enough to enable such checks.
* validity can be checked empirically via *external* consistency with knowledge from other information sources
* validity can be *maximised* by reliable sample selection and recruitment
* the nature of validity is quite different when exploring *shared* values and beliefs rather than personal preferences (e.g. the essence of ‘Fairy Liquid-ness’ has a shared meaning which all ‘normative’ respondents can narrate, whereas the validity of specific individual likes/dislikes about Fairy Liquid is dependent upon a ‘representative’ spread of opinions).
* in a rather different way, some things *JUST ARE* – and once they have been ‘revealed’ their ‘validity’ is self-evident.

As Chris Barnham asked at an AQRP Seminar in 1995

*“how many times would you see ‘King Lear’ in order to make sure that Cordelia dies? The question when framed in this way is clearly nonsensical. We are much more interested in understanding the* ***significance*** *of her death within the context of the play – and this is the qualitative question.”*

# The ‘parallel’ existence of academic ‘qualitative research’

The use of qualitative research is not unique to market research, and the academic community includes a large and well-established group of qualitative researchers. Whilst their methodologies are in many ways similar the two communities have never had much in common – in terms of literature, interests and developments.

Commenting on the definitive *academic* text on qualitative research - ‘The Handbook of Qualitative Research’ by Denzin & Lincoln (1994) - Wendy Gordon said

*“the existence of this large tome surprised me. As a practitioner of qualitative research – my career for the last 30 years – I had no idea that such a handbook is available. The next surprise is that there is nothing in this weighty volume which refers to qualitative market research or any commercial context which I would recognise whatever!”*

The reasons for this divergence of interests can be speculated (and probably relate to fundamentally different commercial imperatives and notions of ‘success’), but appear to warrant further examination. Certainly *in principle* it makes more sense for the two communities to be closer together.

# 10. Summary – the evolution of qualitative market research in the UK

The following chart attempts to summarise this rather long and discursive description of the evolution of qualitative market research in the UK.

* to clarify the terms used on the chart:
* Motivational Research : Dichter-oriented
* Discursive qual : high quality qualitative research that stops short of attempting the psychoanalytic (e.g. Johari quadrants II and III) and based on phenomenological approaches
* ‘Not quant’ groups : the application of the utility value of the group discussion to explore wholly cognitive issues, including legitimate uses such as pre-quant questionnaire design, initial screening of ideas. Including some ‘misuse’ of groups for inappropriate purposes – e.g. inadequately analysed ‘reportage’ styles of reporting findings; non-professional practitioners.
* New qualitative research : the development of enabling techniques to more accurately explore the pre-conscious and non-verbal (i.e. better exploration of Johari quadrants II and III) AND the re-orienting of questioning to explore the shared meaning of things not simply individual preferences.
* ‘Cultural analysis’ : the development of qualitative research to more effectively assess the cultural influences on individuals including semiotic and anthropological frameworks for analysis and new methodologies including observation, ethnography and experiential techniques.

## A Diagrammatic Representation of the Evolution of Qualitative Market Research in the UK

* Small chunk

micro projects

‘changes’ and updates

* International
* New, and non-marketing users

Clients

Never mind the theory – it works, it’s valuable and I trust my researchers

‘Discursive’ qual

New (now established) qual

‘Discursive’ qual

Cultural analysis

‘Not quant’ groups

‘Not quant’ groups

* Big chunk

Macro projects

Brand essence

Market fundamentals

Motivational

Practitioners

New qual

‘Not quant’ groups

‘Not quant’ groups

‘Discursive’ qual

‘Discursive’ qual

Motivational

1999

c. 1983

1979

1969

1960

# 11. Where this leaves theory and thinking today

Forty years on therefore, qualitative research has evolved, matured and embraced a wide diversity of thinking and theory.

In order to fully understand this we need to ‘deconstruct’ qualitative research since the *totality* of professional, high quality qualitative market research comprises four different elements (and different theory and thinking applies to the different elements).

‘Qualitative research’ concerns four linked elements which COMBINE to create the discipline now practised in the UK.

# i) the exploration of ‘qualitative issues’

i.e. it starts from the premise that understanding people, their motivations and desires is NOT *simply* a matter of ‘hard facts’. It presupposes that there are influences beyond the conscious and cognitive.

If the aim is simply to reveal the conscious and cognitive there is no real reason to use qualitative research (beyond the ‘utility value’ of the group as discussed earlier). Equally, it would *in theory* be possible to explore qualitative issues quantitatively – and collect soft data from large samples, but IN PRACTICE this has proved impractical to do (expense) and, more importantly, impossible to ANALYSE.

AND

# ii) the use of concepts, philosophies and theories of human behaviour and motivation to orientate enquiry and form the basis of analysis and interpretation

Without some such conceptual framework for analysis, findings can be little more than ‘reportage’. As we have seen, the dominant concepts and theories underpinning qualitative market research come from psychology and, increasingly, social sciences of cultural study. *However* they could include other theories or belief systems – for example Shamanism, with its emphasis on ‘the spirit of the thing’ could have some relevance for brand enquiry.

AND

# iii) the use of non-statistical qualitative methods of enquiry

Specifically here we mean the use of non-directive questioning techniques, groups and depth interviews, but also including observation, experience etc. Such methods can, of course, be misused.

There is of course a ‘link’ between theory and the method of enquiry, in the sense that the nature and content of enquiry is predicated by the ‘terms of reference’ and data-requirements of the intended analytical framework.

AND, finally but rather differently

# iv) qualitative presentation of the findings

This needs further comment, and does not really relate to any theory of research. However, an undoubtedly important facet of qualitative market research is the nature of the ‘triangulated’ discourse between the researcher and the CLIENT and the RESPONDENTS.

These themes and the theories underlying each element are summarised in the following chart:

## Qualitative Market Research Deconstructed

Using qualitative frameworks of thinking for analysis and interpretation

Using qualitative methods of enquiry

Exploring Qualitative Issues

Presented ‘discursively’

* Psychological
* concepts of cognition & perception
* acknowledging the significance of emotional and intuitive factors
* models of communication etc. (e.g. TA)
* Social anthropology
* myths and rituals
* ethnography
* Semiotics
* Others – e.g.
* Shamanism
* Post-Modernism
* ‘Soft’ data
* value systems
* beliefs
* attitudes
* feelings
* Beyond the ‘aware and will say’
* Groups & depths using
* Non-directive questioning
* ‘therapist’ principles of moderating
* to encourage the ‘won’t say’
* extensive elicitation techniques to elicit the unaware (including projection, enabling techniques, NLP)
* Cultural analysis
* observation
* experiential
* ‘Filtered’ to address client decision-making requirements
* Discursive
* ‘interrogatable’
* debate
* (Based on trust)

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