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Commentary—Qualitative Methods, Part III

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Before and along with achieving generalizability, consumer researchers need to achieve accuracy in description and depth in interpretation. These are two great truths that come from a careful reading of Holbrook's Volume 10. Chapter 3 is particularly relevant to this observation. Examining external researchers' observations as well as photographs on objects in-situ joined with the study of one's own possessions serves to increase accuracy of meaning and depth of interpretation in an individual's subjective personal introspection (SPI).

Thus, reflection alone is insufficient in achieving accuracy and depth of interpretation in SPI. Rather than SPI using reflection alone, additional tools necessarily apply—what Woodside refers to as confirmatory personal introspection (CPI; see Chapters 5 and 6 in Woodside, 2010). Holbrook (1988) recognizes this point in Chapter 3, “For me, as an informant, the most remarkable thing about this collection of photographs. . .is their revelation of a clear and repetitious theme that was, for me, completely unconscious prior to its discovery by my fellow Odysseans.”

In Chapter 11, Holbrook (2005) fails to recall his important observation in 1988 and backs away from his 1988 view about what Woodside (2010) refers to as CPI:

I often find myself musing over what rampant lack of self-confidence would encourage a mechanical reliance on such self-imprisoning safeguards and such vision restricting formulas. (The closest I have come to a member check has been inviting my 91-year-old mother to attend a conference where I presented some of this material and dutifully made revisions in my comments as she called out occasional corrections from the audience.)

Note that Holbrook reports that his mother's comments helped to revise his incorrect remembrances and her silences imply confirmation of other parts of his narration.

Thus, the point here is to illustrate how unique forms of introspective syncretic combinations can be planned that help to (at least partially) overcome Wallendorf

and Brucks' (1993) conclusion that researcher self-introspection offers severely limited potential in contributing useful research in consumer behavior. The application of multiple research methods transforms Holbrook's SPI to achieve a CPI that includes many of the criteria of scientific approaches to research without losing the criteria representing the artistic approach (see Brown 1998 for a review of both approaches). CPI is likely to be found useful for designing products and marketing communications that consumers find desirable and that motivate their purchase behavior.

Fortunately, in Chapter 13 (the most recent publication in Volume 10), Holbrook (2006) improves his vision about direct observation and using photographs—a shift from SPI to CPI. Here, he suggests, “it pays to keep pushing down to more and more minute levels of analysis, plumbing the depths and probing the details of every consumption reality: which hand we use to hold the toothbrush; how many squares of toilet paper we devote to each wipe; what utensils we use to beat eggs...” Thus, direct, explicit observation of oneself is a useful tool in CPI.

Holbrook closes Chapter 13 with a profound observation for building theory-from-method:

I recommend use of the photographic essay as a window onto the sorts of subjective personal introspections (SPI) that often raise questions about consumer behavior not elicited by other sorts of empirical approaches. Put simply, photos stimulate introspections in ways that shed light on consumption-related phenomena. Aspects of consumption experiences are illustrated because photography shines a light on them.

Jung (2009) makes a similar point about painting mono-scenic stories of one's own dreams and then interpreting the unconscious thoughts and feelings appearing in the paintings.

Tucker (1969) and Jung (2009), among others (e.g., Jesus explaining his conversations in the Wilderness for 40 days and nights), come to my mind automatically when reading Holbrook's Volume 10. Tucker (1967) provides an early application of “the long interview method” (McCracken, 1988) in consumer behavior, including detailed case studies on the buying behavior of specific individuals and families. Tucker's work represents an early reporting of thick descriptions of the complex relationships among cultural, sociological, psychological, and marketing variables involved in need creation, buying, and consuming of products and services.

Tucker (1967, p. 134) offers two simple yet profound propositions for modeling consumer behavior. Proposition 1: Someone goes through some process and acquires something with some effect. Proposition 2: Someone uses something in some way with some effect. In Tucker's opinion, not enough reliable information is available for the construction of an operational theory about the four elements in these propositions—namely, someone, process, something, and effect. CPI with photographs, paintings, and additional confirmatory steps, along with the long self-interview, is a research method particularly suitable for providing reliable information for examining Tucker's propositions.

Given the substantial scientific evidence that most thinking is unconscious (for reviews, see Bargh, 2002; Zaltman, 2003), the research tools to surface unconscious thoughts are worthy of attention. Field studies applying SPI/CPI may demonstrate the usefulness of working from several complementary literature streams to extend Holbrook's SPI contributions and Zaltman's (2003) treatise on how consumers think—including strategies for theorizing from process data (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999); decision-plan net theory of individual-choice models (see Park et al., 1981); “auto-ethnography” and other personal introspection methods (Holbrook in Volume 10 of the present series; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), as well as related views on sense-making (Weick, 1995); and unconscious and automatic influences on consumer judgment, behavior, and motivation (see Bargh, 2002).

In bare-knuckle terms, Holbrook and others attack the current dominant logic in consumer research on learning the reasons for consumer choice of brands or store sites by relying principally on a written, self-completed survey using mostly closed-end (fixed-point) questions. Although most consumers are able to complete such surveys, such a highly cognitive method excludes data collection of most thoughts—ignoring the findings that most thinking occurs unconsciously, that consumers have only limited accessibility to the unconscious, and that “people generally do not think in words” (Zaltman, 2003, p. 13). Behavioral research methods that enable consumers to access their unconscious thoughts need widespread adoption in studies on product and brand knowledge held by consumers. CPI research includes methods designed to reduce the inherent attempts to self-edit and block unwelcome or socially unacceptable thoughts (see Fisher, 1993) and methods intended to stimulate informants to report reasons for their actions seemingly “too minor to mention” in open-ended written responses.

Who knew that consumer research could be so enlightening as well as fun? Volume 10 confirms that the answer is Morris Holbrook!

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