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Performing the field: The role of the researcher's identity & self in conducting interpretive consumer research

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Performing the Field:

The Role of the Researcher's Identity & Self in Conducting Interpretive Consumer Research

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Introduction:

This paper was prompted by numerous discussions focussed on our shared fascination of the emic/etic debates voiced within ethnographic and phenomenological enquiries, which underpin both of our research agendas. A further point of debate was based on our discussions about our separate, but convergent, personal experiences of getting our 'hands dirty' in the field; reflecting on how these experiences implicated ourselves, and the emotional challenges and ethical considerations of interpretive research for all involved. Such discussions led us to the realisation, and frustration, that despite the perhaps over-abundance of literature from across the social sciences which prescribes how interpretive research should be conducted, there is a relative dearth of material describing how it is carried out in practice and what the implications are on the individual researcher. Perhaps most critically, as Coffey (1999, p1) comments *"… issues of* [the researcher's] *identity, selfhood and emotion are often referred to, and thereby understood, in tangential and semi-detached ways".*

This paper addresses these interrelated issues head-on through sharing our experiences of conducting interpretive consumer research. In doing so, we wish to extend the discourse surrounding the personal aspects of researching consumers in such a way which is useful to others, indeed ourselves, and call for a wider appreciation, and greater transparency, of the researcher's 'lived experience' of the field.

2. Interpretive Consumer Research: "La Femme Fatale"?

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After the metaphorical dust has settled on what has been called the 'spirited' methodological debates within consumer research of the last two decades, we have seen the hegemonic acceptance and legitimacy of interpretive understandings of consumption. Such interpretive approaches, in their various guises, are no longer labelled simply as the 'other stuff' (Sherry, 2004) to that of the dominance of neo-positivism orientations, echoing, albeit in a softer tone, the interpretive 'turn' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) which has taken place across the humanities and social sciences. This has led to a greater awareness of the inter-paradigmatic, inter-perspective, inter-disciplinary, conditions of postmodernity, embracing the experiential, socio-cultural, spatial and temporal dimensions of consumption. Whilst this paradigmatic shift has liberated researchers from the inadequacy of orthodox approaches, what is perhaps more perplexing to the interpretive researcher is the potential range of methodologies open to them as the domain becomes complex and intellectually 'fuzzy' in which to operate.

3. Representing the Interpretive Researcher:

Issues of representation and reproduction have been well documented within qualitative research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1997; Hammersley, 1992), as is the need to recognise that interpretation will always be partial and value-laden; the appropriation and expression of such values is dependent on the researcher's epistemological stance. Likewise, the process and practice of conducting fieldwork, perhaps even more so in qualitative research, inherently brings with it the researcher's intellectual, social, moral, political and emotional 'baggage', which impacts the phenomena under investigation, how the phenomena is investigated, and, indeed, why the phenomena is under investigation in the first place. Parallel to such redefined conceptual acknowledgements, consumer researchers have increasingly turned their attention to an array of reflexive methodological techniques falling under the umbrella of auto-biographies, including introspection (Holbrook, 1995; Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993) and retrospection, to address the challenges posed by the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sherry, 2004). While such accounts seek to personalise accounts of fieldwork, collapsing the binaries of researcher/researched subject/object author/reader, much to the general annoyance of neo-positivists, yet they continue to be silent in the ways in which fieldwork research and textual practice affects us and we affect the field. This latter issue is particularly pertinent as Smith, Kline & Kimmel (2002, p7) suggest that:

"... developments in [consumer research] *point to a greater likelihood of more severe deceptions or at least the potential for inadvertent harm. These developments include*

attention to new substantive domains, such as research on vulnerable populations, on health-related consumption and on the 'dark side' of consumer behavior, as well as a new emphasis on theoretical domains, such as emotion. Greater use of qualitative methodologies such as ethnography has also brought researchers closer to their participants, in terms of physical proximity and intimacy, increasing the salience and immediacy of various ethical considerations…"

4. Performing the Field:

Through a comparative appraisal of our 'lived experience' of conducting interpretive consumer research, as described below, we wish to celebrate the richness of data facilitated through the "personal characteristic" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), whilst explicitly embracing the influence of the researcher's own intrinsic subjectivities and preconceptions. Using Featherstone's (1991) concept of the "performing self", we highlight the multiple identities and roles that are 'played', or '(en)acted', by the researcher in the pursuit of social scientific discovery. In extending this notion of the research process as 'performance' we offer a by no means exhaustive series of metaphors of the roles that the researcher may play within the field, namely: as detective, as a gendered individual, as friend, as expert, as novice, as counsellor, as politician, as consumer, and as boundary spanner. These metaphors serve to illustrate that the researcher's identities and roles are not simple abstract constructs, solely conceived and formulated by the individual researcher prior to the field setting, but negotiated and re-negotiated within the specific social and temporal context of the field and embodied in material practices (Elliott, 2004).

5. The Lived Experience of Conducting Interpretive Consumer Research:

Jon's Story:

The focus of my doctoral research was to gain a broader understanding of why, if consumers have access to the Internet, and if they fell within a supermarket's delivery catchment area, would choose to shop within a store rather than online, and vice versa. More specifically, how these 'complementary' modes of shopping, within these relational consumption spaces, fitted in the wider social and cultural experience in the life-world of the consumer. A further personal objective was the desire to conduct research which was in consumers' interest, at a rudimentary level addressing food provision. In turn this led me to adopt a methodology which was emergent in design, and rejecting traditional, neo-positivist, empiricist, epistemological principles, in favour of multiple complementary, consumer-orientated, quasi-ethnographic methods (Elliott & Jankell-Elliott, 2003)

Armed with preconceptions of how I should behave and how I should conduct myself, combined with my own limited experience of conducting qualitative research, the desire to be a ‘good’, ‘critical’ researcher, following the, albeit vague, advice given in the literature, I entered the field. What became evident from the outset of the research was my naïve underestimation of the impact of ‘me’: a young(ish), middle class, white, male; arguably the archetypal ‘marketing man’. An extreme example of this was my experience of conducting a particular focus group, as a small part of my pilot study, which comprised of eight mothers in a local community centre. The focus group began with me issuing the moderator’s standard protocol, opening the discussion with the statement: “when was the last time you went supermarket shopping?” This was met with the response of one of the women, pointing to her chest: “I’m having a problem with my sticky label [name badge]… could you stick it back on for me?” This was met by an upsurge of laughter from the other women, leaving me slightly stunned (ok, terrified) to which I replied: “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I cannot do that”. Then followed a series of questions directed to, and at, my personal life; whether I was married, how old was I, and did I have children, would I be suitable for their daughters, etc. Having experience in running several focus groups, and a moderate degree of common sense, no matter how I tried to steer the conversation and control the dynamic, despite my best efforts their experiences of supermarkets was up for little discussion.

Moving on from a (more successful) number of focus groups and depth interview, I ventured onto the main study of my thesis. As with all ethnographic style research, one of my central concerns related to the gaining and sustaining access to eight households that participated for the 12 month duration of research. My interest has been in the main grocery shoppers of the household, three of whom were women, three couples who shared the role, and the other two who were single men. In accordance with the ethnographic objective of being “experience-near” as possible (Geertz, 1973) with the lives of the participants, in this case within the home and within the supermarket, the task then became to build rapport and trust with all informants, as without such the data could be of poor quality (Agar, 1996). What again became transparent in households where a male figure was present, was that I felt I was being continually screened, in a sort of ‘what are you doing with my wife/partner/mother/sister?’ kind of way (this speculation was later confirmed when I saw less and less of such figures as the research progressed as well as being discussed by a number of women during briefing). Whatever my good intentions, this was hardly surprising.

Another parallel issue that emerged was how do I build rapport and empathy, be intuitive, towards those I had little shared life experiences? How could I hear and present their voices? In a bid to as address such issues, or least try to 'tune in' to the participants, I utilised a combination of techniques, with various degrees of success. One was to allow the participant to control access and discussion, as Agar (1996, p140) comments: "*everything is negotiable. The informant can criticise a question, correct it, point out that it is sensitive, or answer any way they want to".* This led me finding myself changing my accent and terminology to suit the narrative. Another was to change my clothes/attire to what I thought appropriate, to what the participants would respond 'best to', what Coffey (1999) refers to as "impression management".

Such techniques facilitated a wealth of insights into the life-world of the consumer, in terms of both content and context. In gaining these insights, I had to embrace the highs household life; births, celebrations, engagements, close relatives returning home from visits overseas, as well as the lows; death, illness, suicide attempts. Some of these issues resonated in my life; at times I felt obliged to share, while at other I felt I couldn't emotionally, or shouldn't ethically. Does this mean that I am an unethical, or even a bad, researcher/person? Who far can we 'bend' the truth to make respondents feel more comfortable or conversely to shield ourselves from difficult emotional, even physical, circumstances? On a final note, over the months that had past interviews were conducted, shopping trips were accompanied, and so on, friendships were made, trust was earned, participants were debriefed, and we said our goodbyes - Ok, who is going to debrief me?

Sue's story

Although familiar with a range of quantitative and qualitative research techniques, this was the first study in which I had utilised an existential-phenomenological approach. The detailed guidelines provided by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989), together with previous research experience gave me a certain degree of confidence in what to say (or not say), how to say it, and what I thought I could expect from the interview and the participant. There were, however, a number of issues that impacted on me both as a researcher and as a woman. Whilst these issues may not be unique to this particular research method, they challenged me to critically reflect upon my own involvement, interpretation and responsibilities in the whole process. Forty-six women, who were self-identified and subsequently screened as addictive consumers, were interviewed. Each interview started with the same broad question and followed a path determined by the participant and not the researcher.

One of the first issues to emerge was that for most of these women, I was the first person ever in whom they had confided about their addictive behaviour. This made the experience sometimes painful and emotional for them, and placed me in the position of being something of a "mother confessor". To remain the implacable, objective researcher when it was apparent that some of these women were hoping I would provide support, understanding and comfort created a dilemma. I felt, ethically, that I had a responsibility to "give something back". This was eventually resolved to a certain extent by having an informal debrief after the interview.

The second research issue arose with three of the woman I interviewed, who provided very short responses and felt unable to elaborate on many of their comments. They were constantly looking to me to lead the interview, ask the questions and provide direction for the discussion. Instead of the "conversation" format (Thompson et al. 1989; p.138) the interviews risked becoming rigid question and answer sessions – how do I have a circular dialogue with someone waiting for questions and seeking to give the "right" answers? The other extreme of this scenario arose with a couple of women who completely dominated the interview situation to the point of me having no input at all. Unable to get a word in edgeways, the monologue galloped away into detailed descriptions of past holidays, the progress of the children at college and how the country would be ruined if the Labour Party won the next General Election. In both cases, the wealth of detail and opinions from four hours of transcribed interviews was rich and fascinating - but not always relevant to the topic in hand!

As an experienced researcher, the most valuable lesson I learnt in relation to using existential-phenomenological interviews was understanding how to be, and to cope with being in and/or out of control with the situation. By its very nature, this research method enables – indeed necessitates that – the locus of control is with the participant leading the conversation. Having set up and controlled all the administration of the interview, I now found that I had to allow the control to be taken by the other participant. Whilst not always a comfortable situation to be in, I believe it provided the right forum for the voices of these addictive consumers to be heard. However, this last point also raises the final issue. The voices of the participants could literally be heard - in this case by myself as the researcher, and on audiotape. How could I adequately interpret and represent them? At this stage, the locus of control returns back to the researcher. Interpreting the transcripts and writing up the research places me back in a safe and known environment, both physically and intellectually. In the spirit of existential-phenomenology, a small interpretive group was formed to interpret the interview transcriptions (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Emergent themes were discussed and debated. In accordance with phenomenological interpretations, we sought to avoid both imposing our own meanings on the reflections of the participants, and incorporating 'hypotheses, inferences and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript' (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989, p. 140). But inevitably there is the recognition that, by representing the voice of others, distortion may arise. The language I use to communicate with an academic audience is very different from the language I used to communicate with the research participants (see Standing, 1998 for a powerful discussion about this point). Both are, arguably appropriate and valid, but the question remains of how much is lost in translation and compromise. Should or could both audiences share one voice? How should I as the communicator react to the needs of both audiences, and do I do this effectively?

Inevitably situations such as this led me to constantly question my own role and performance as researcher. Was I doing something "wrong"? Could I or should I have handled the situations differently? To whom could I turn for support and guidance? By revisiting Thompson, Locander and Pollio, and reading other contemporary publications, I sought reassurance that my approach was as rigorous and professional as possible. It seems that it is only in the last two or three years that I have been able to hear the concerns, questions and intellectual conflicts of other researchers (see, for example, Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Understanding their experiences has allowed me to more fully understand and reflect upon my own.

6. Conclusion:

In presenting our 'lived' experience of conducting interpretive research we highlighted that the identities and roles that researcher performs with in the field; these roles resonate between what is conscious and intentional, and subconscious and fortuitous, something which the researcher can be prepared for and, conversely, be ill equipped, be in control of and out of control. Furthermore, our analysis highlights that the practice of interpretive consumer research is both a source of pleasure and enjoyment as well as considerable emotional angst and ethical torment, and we wish to provoke consumer researchers to explicitly recognise, and self-examine, their personal impact when representing themselves and others.

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