

Not just focus groups

Heather Maitland delves into the history of qualitative research

I bet that when you saw the title of this issue of *JAM*, you thought 'yeah, yeah, focus groups'. Qualitative research is a lot more complicated than that. The Office for National Statistics defines it as 'a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs, values and the like within their social world, and understanding the mental mapping process that respondents use to make sense of and interpret the world around them'.¹ The emphasis on interpretation is important – qualitative researchers don't just report what respondents say.

Qualitative research is also a lot older than you might expect. One

academic suggests that Joseph (the one in the Bible with the technicolor dreamcoat) was an early qualitative research expert: he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and from that developed a strategic marketing plan for corn.² Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, economists and ethnographers have always been interested in analysing how and why people consume stuff. This means that market research can borrow from a treasure trove of tried and tested methods – psychological economics, anyone?

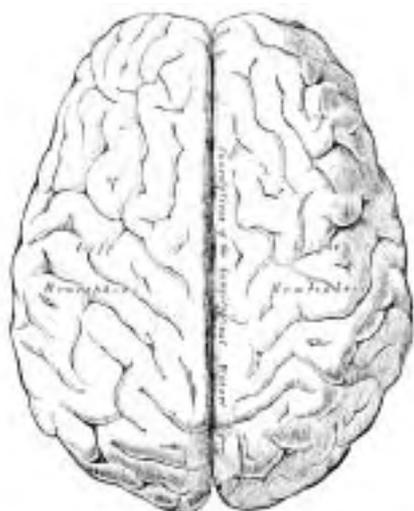
It's not just methods that marketers borrow but whole theories, too. We use Maslow's hierarchy of needs to help us understand consumer motivations but that wasn't what it

was intended for. Albert Maslow was a psychologist working in the 1950s to develop a humanistic framework for understanding personality, in part using studies of concentration camp survivors.

A lot of qualitative research methodology is rooted in anthropology and ethnography. In 1948, Audrey Richards wrote *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*, exploring attitudes to food and nutrition in Bantu communities in Africa. Thirty years later, Sydney J Levy wrote *Hunger and Work in a Civilised Tribe: or The Anthropology of Market Transactions* which used the same methods to look at food and social status in the US.³

Ethnography is usually thought to have emerged in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century but early studies are often criticised because they take a colonial (racist) perspective. Even so, their observation-based approaches are still in use as they allow marketers to see what people actually do in a real-life context rather than what they say they do when shut in an interview room. As Philly Desai says, 'if we're researching toothpaste, let's get in the bathroom'.⁴ The key difference between studies then and now is that researchers acknowledge that their work is just one possible interpretation of reality rather than the objective truth.

The field of linguistics has had an impact on how researchers approach observation. Peter Finch argued that we can never fully understand someone from another culture speaking another language. This means that cultures can only be





explained in their own terms and any attempt at comparison just distorts them. Researchers deal with this by analysing the client's perceptions and understanding as well as those of the consumer. By exploring the differences between them, they can help bridge the gap.⁵

Researchers trained in Freudian psychoanalysis played a key role in developing motivational research methodologies that explore how consumption decisions are shaped by unconscious psychological impulses. Jungian psychoanalysis contributed the concept of the brand archetype. Gestalt psychology has given us a better understanding of 'insight' – the researcher's goal of understanding the relationship between things.⁶

So, ethnographic methodologies allow researchers to understand what people do. Interview techniques developed by psychoanalysts and, more recently, educational and clinical psychologists allow them to understand why they do it. Semiotics seeks to decode the signs and symbols of contemporary culture, providing the researcher with tools to understand the context that shapes those behaviours and motivations.

There has always been a tension between qualitative and quantitative research in the social sciences as well as in marketing. We want a rich, deep understanding but we also want statistical reliability and the two don't easily mix. In the 1940s and 1950s, the focus was on the market researcher as an objective analyst trying to define the average consumer. Qualitative research therefore looked at measurable behaviours. As society developed an

understanding of individuals as diverse and differentiated, clients and researchers demanded insight, which Peter Cooper defines as 'intuitively sensing the inner essence of things'. At the same time, complexity theory meant a shift away from ideas of linear cause and effect towards an understanding of the world as a network of relationships. This has meant a return to motivational research methods, but this time informed by brain science.⁷

Technological developments such as MRI brain scans have shown us that decision-making is much less rational than previously thought. The process is largely unconscious and the senses and emotions play a key role. Quantitative research methods tend to be better at measuring the rational and qualitative research is better at exploring emotions. This is where the projective techniques developed by psychologists come in. They use drawing, modelling, role play and story telling to bring hidden emotions to the surface – to project them.

Focus groups are just the most obvious thing that we see qualitative researchers do. They are important – Peter Cooper suggests that around half a million are carried out every year⁸ – but behind them is a raft of analytical techniques, all with an impeccable academic pedigree. The editor of this issue of JAM, Lisa Baxter, suggests in her article that the problem in the cultural sector is our tendency to take a narrow view of qualitative research that simply reports back to us what our audiences, visitors and participants say. We need a much richer understanding than that. ■

1. Definition derived from **J Ritchie and J Lewis** (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, Sage, London: 2003, consulted at www.ons.gov.uk/about/who-we-are/our-services/data-collection-methodology/what-is-qualitative-research-
2. **Sidney J Levy**, 'History of qualitative research methods in marketing', *The Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Russell W Belk (ed.), Edward Elgar Publishing, 2006, p. 3
3. **Sidney J Levy** (2006), p. 4
4. **Philly Desai**, *The Future of Qualitative Research*, Turnstone, consulted at www.turnstone-research.co.uk/clientUpload/pdf/14.pdf
5. **Philly Desai**, 'Truth, lies and videotape', In Depth, Association for Qualitative Research, 2004 downloaded from <http://www.aqr.org.uk/indepth/autumn2004/>
6. **Peter Cooper**, *In Search of Excellence: The Evolution and Future of Qualitative Research*, ESOMAR, 2007, p. 10
7. **Peter Cooper** (2007), p. 10
8. **Peter Cooper** (2007), p. 15



Heather Maitland
Consultant and author
e hmaitland1@aol.com