



phenomenological study of visitor experiences at heritage sites), and ethnographic descriptions which are based on snap-shot observations and limited participatory interaction (Goulding, 2002). However, there is increasing acknowledgement, not only in academic circles, but also among marketing practitioners, of the need for the application of qualitative methodologies in their truest and most fundamental sense in order to gain valid insights, develop theory and aid effective decision making. This paper examines three qualitative methodologies, grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology, which have seen a steady growth in their application within marketing. It points to a number of studies that have applied the techniques and summarises the key procedures associated with each in order to differentiate between them and highlight their potential for future marketing research.

## A grounded theory approach

Although traditionally associated with sociology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), nursing and health (Sandelowski, 1995; Morse, 1994), and organisational studies (Parry, 1998; Hunt and Ropo, 1995; Brown, 1994, 1995; Turner, 1981, 1988), grounded theory has, in recent years, started to enter the repertoire of marketing and consumer research (Goulding, 1998, 1999a, 2000a; Pettigrew, 2000). For instance, the "Odyssey" team (Belk *et al.*, 1989) utilised aspects of grounded theory in their ground breaking analysis of the sacred and profane in consumer behaviour. Other examples include Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) grounded theory analysis of advertising and the mass media, Burchill and Fine's (1997) examination of product concept development, De la Cuesta's (1994) study of marketing and health visiting, Houston and Venkatesh's (1996) interpretation of health care consumption practices by Asian immigrants, and Goulding's (1999b, c, 2000b, c) research into consumer experiences at heritage sites and museums. However, in comparison to other qualitative methodologies its application is still fairly confined to experiential consumer behaviour, despite its potential for theoretical developments across a range of marketing phenomenon that are predicated on a behavioural component.

## Contextualising grounded theory

Essentially, grounded theory has its origins in symbolic interactionism, a paradigm which holds that individuals engage in a world that requires reflexive interaction as averse to environmental response. Accordingly, behaviour is goal driven, evolving from social interaction that is highly symbolic in itself. This behaviour involves various forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal and the notion of symbols is intrinsic to the perspective (Schwandt, 1994). Nonetheless, while symbolic interactionism was a key school within sociology particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, there were few guidelines for using its concepts to conduct research. Much of the work evolving from this paradigm was also emerging at a time when qualitative research was under attack for lacking "scientific" procedures and rigour. Consequently there was recognition of the need for a methodology that could track and validate the process of theory building.

During this period two American sociologists, Barney Glaser, who was trained at Columbia University New York and was heavily influenced by the formal theorising of Paul Lazarsfeld, Paul Merton, and Herbert Hyman, and Anselm Strauss, a scholar

According to the basic principles of grounded theory, once an area of research has been identified, the researcher should enter the field as soon as possible. Consequently the literature is not exhausted prior to the research, as in many studies, rather it is consulted as part of an iterative, inductive and interactional process of data collection, simultaneous analysis, and emergent interpretation. In other words, the developing theory should direct the researcher to appropriate extant theories and literature that have relevance to the emerging, data grounded concepts. However, it must be noted that the way this has been expressed in the earlier works of Glaser and Strauss has resulted in confusion regarding the nature of “induction”. A common misconception is that the researcher is expected to enter the field ignorant of any theory or associated literature relating to the phenomenon and wait for the theory to emerge purely from the data. Such perceptions have resulted in accusations that both originators have “conned” those they have influenced by preaching the notion of theoretical avoidance, while marching into the field themselves armed with a life-time of concepts and experiences (Goulding, 2002). Nevertheless, this was not necessarily the case. Indeed Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 253) state that:

For marketers the dilemma is just the same. It involves a delicate balancing act between drawing on prior knowledge while keeping a fresh and open mind to new concepts as they emerge from the data. This means using the literature differently as the process evolves, getting closer to direct sources as the conceptual categories take shape and gain explanatory power.

In addition to the use of literature grounded theory differs in a number of respects from other qualitative methodologies, particularly with regard to sampling. According to Coyle (1997), most sampling is purposive and defined before data collection commences. In the case of grounded theory, sampling begins as a “commonsense” process of talking to those informants who are most likely to provide early information. This information is then analysed through the application of open coding techniques, or line-by-line analysis (looking for words and sentences in the text that have meaning) which should help to identify provisional explanatory concepts and direct the researcher to further “theoretically” identified samples, locations, and forms of data. According to the original rules of grounded theory, the researcher should not leave the

field and stop sampling until saturation is reached, or when no additional information is found in the data. On this subject, one of the appeals of grounded theory is that it allows for a wide range of data, the most common of which are in-depth interviews, observations, and memos which describe situations, record events, note feelings and keep track of ideas. However, these are not exhaustive, as noted by Glaser (1978, p. 6):

Grounded theory method although uniquely suited to fieldwork and qualitative data, can be easily used as a general method of analysis with any form of data collection: survey, experiment, case study. Further, it can combine and integrate them. It transcends specific data collection methods.

Therefore, data may comprise of life histories (McKinley-Wright, 1995; Clondinin and Connelly, 1994), secondary data (Szabo and Strang, 1997), introspection (Corbin, 1998), and even numbers (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Nevertheless, despite the open and flexible nature of the data that may be used in a grounded theory study, there exist a set of specific principles for analysing and abstracting the information. These include the “constant comparison” method, where, for example, interview texts are analysed line by line, provisional themes noted, and subsequently compared with other transcripts in order to ensure consistency and also to identify negative cases. The next stage is to search for links through the identification of concepts that may go some way to offering an explanation of the phenomenon under study. This process is normally associated with axial coding that is achieved by specifying relationships and delineating a core category or construct around which the other concepts revolve. Axial coding is the appreciation of concepts in terms of their dynamic interrelationships and they should form the basis for theory construction (Spiggle, 1994).

The final stage of the theory development process is the construction of a core category (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A core category pulls together all the concepts in order to offer an explanation of the phenomenon. It should have theoretical significance and should be traceable back through the data. This is usually when the theory is written up and integrated with existing theories to show relevance, fit, and/or extension.

Grounded theory as a methodology emerged from the discipline of sociology, an area of enquiry that is focused on society and the individual. However, given the broadening of the marketing discipline over the last two decades to incorporate such issues as ethical marketing, social marketing, green issues and experiential consumption, all of which have significant behavioural implications, the application of grounded theory would seem appropriate. The rigours of the approach force the researcher to look beyond the superficial, to apply every possible interpretation before developing final concepts, and to demonstrate these concepts through explication and data supported evidence. The main problems associated with the methodology appear to stem largely from its misuse and abuse. Examples include studies labelled grounded theory that have not followed the principles of theoretical sampling, inductive coding, constant comparison and so on. However, this is possibly truer of studies stemming from the organisational behaviour literature than it is of marketing. For example, Mullins and Roessier's (1998) research into employment outcomes ignored theoretical sampling and constant comparison, drew on an established model and collected data through structured mail surveys which featured a rating scale. Consequently, while the study may well have been rigorous, it is hard to claim that it produced a "grounded" theory in the accepted sense.

A final significant issue that may act as a deterrent to using grounded theory is that theoretical saturation of the data and the interpretation of that data can make it difficult to anticipate an accurate time scale for the research. This, while problematic in the general sense of planning research strategies, creates even greater difficulties when applying for research grants (Goulding, 2002). However, grounded theory is only one of a wide range of qualitative methodologies currently being used to investigate contemporary marketing phenomenon. The next section examines the ethnographic position within marketing by first discussing its application before providing an overview of the ethnographic process.

### An ethnographic approach

The roots of ethnography lie in cultural anthropology, with its focus on small-scale societies and the original central concept remains paramount today; that is a concern with the nature, construction and maintenance of culture. Ethnographies are always informed by this concept as ethnographers aim to look beyond what people say to understand the shared system of meanings we call "culture". In her review of ethnography in consumer research Pettigrew (2000) argues that consumption represents a phenomenon that can be effectively addressed with the use of ethnographic techniques, based on the understanding that the social meanings found in material possessions can be viewed as cultural communicators. Arnould (1998, p. 86) provides an in-depth discussion of consumer-oriented ethnography suggesting that "ethnography attempts to explicate structured patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than merely cognitive, behavioural or affective". Stebbins (1997) further illustrates the potential of ethnographic research to the study of lifestyles given the cultural or sub-cultural context within which they are enacted, while Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) discuss the relevance of market-oriented ethnography to developing marketing strategy. Indeed within marketing, the ethnographic turn in enquiry is becoming widespread (Brown, 1998) and critically appraised (Brownlie, 1997). Moreover, there is a growing body of literature, based on ethnographic methods, which

- Ethnography should aim to explain the ways that culture constructs and is constructed by the behaviours and experiences of its members.
- Ethnography involves prolonged participation within a specific culture or sub-culture.
- Ethnography in consumer research tends to be particularistic rather than generalisable, espousing pluralistic accounts of consumption.
- The potential for ethnography lies in applying multiple data collection methods at a single phenomenon. These may range from surveys to observational data, video tapes, photographs and recordings of speech in action.
- Ethnography requires tactics for representing research findings. These representations should aim to unravel the layered meanings that marketing activities hold for the customer.



The reflexive nature of ethnography is a characteristic which implies that the researcher is part of the world that is under study and is consequently affected by it (Boyle, 1994). In a catch 22 situation, this view has resulted in criticisms of "value laden" interpretations (Borman and Preissle-Goez, 1986). However, the interpreter does not take the data on face value, but considers it as a field of inferences in which hypothetical patterns can be identified and their validity tested. This usually entails a long and discursive process over data interpretation, reasoning, and the fit to related studies (Agar, 1983; Borman and Preissle-Goez, 1986). Additionally, with ethnography, insider and outsider views combine to provide deeper insights than would be possible by the "native" alone. This two-sided view produces a third dimension that rounds off the ethnographic picture, which is a theoretical explanation of the phenomena under study. The emic perspective is at the heart of ethnography, while the etic perspective is the researchers abstractions or scientific explanations of reality (Boyle, 1994). Boyle further suggests, that although ethnographies vary, most combine some element of etic and emic analysis, although the emphasis may differ according to the philosophy of the researcher.

With regard to the analysis of ethnographic data, this involves the search for patterns, and ideas that will help explain the existence of these patterns, taking into consideration emic and etic interpretations. This is frequently done through the application of content analysis, a technique for making inferences from text data. Each word or phrase in a text is categorised by applying labels that reflect concepts such as aggression, denial and so forth inherent within it. Some counting may be done (but not always), and some researchers use factor analysis, although this runs the risk of substituting numbers for rich description and it is rare to see this in an ethnographic study. More often than not, the ethnographer identifies categories and instances within the data by desegregating the text (notes) into a series of fragments which are then regrouped under a set of thematic headings. Comprehension is thought to be complete when the researcher can describe the events, incidents and exceptions from an emic perspective (Morse, 1994). Synthesis, involves coding and content analysis where the data is pooled and the constructed categories are linked. Often, however, ethnographic analysis is not developed beyond the level of "thick description", presented as informants' stories and case studies. Furthermore, the analytical phase of theorising is seldom separated from the descriptive discourse and treated as a separate level with a distinct purpose (Morse, 1994).

With regard to theory, ethnography is embedded in cultural theory and the establishment of macro/micro, or etic/emic, distinctions are ultimately linked to established theory. Finally, recontextualisation is achieved by forcing the theory to a level of abstraction, the degree of which determines the generalisability of the theory.

However, according to Atkinson and Hammarsley (1995) the degree to which ethnography is conducted in its "truest" form is sometimes controversial. To some it constitutes a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses where and when appropriate. Furthermore

With regard to the development and application of phenomenology it is probably fair to say that it has had a long, controversial, and often confusing history within the social sciences (Rehorick and Taylor, 1995). Moreover, depending on one's epistemological and ontological position, it is either conceptualised as a philosophy,



for those who adhere to the thinking of Husserl (1962) and Heidegger (1962), or a methodology, for those who adopt the position put forward by Schutz (1967). While Husserl's intention was to develop a schema for describing and classifying subjective experiences of what he termed the life world (Langenbach, 1995), Schutz (1967) developed the approach as a method which incorporated details of experience often at the level of mundane everyday life. The lifeworld is defined as the world in which we, as human beings among fellow human beings, experience culture and society, take a stand with regard to their objects, are influenced by them, and act on them (Schutz, 1966). Gregova (1996), distinguishes between the lifeworld and the social world, proposing that the lifeworld consists of formal structures about which we are less explicitly aware, while the social world relates to everyday familiar actions and experiences. Essentially, the goal of phenomenology is to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences (Spiegelberg, 1982). Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii) suggests that the results of phenomenological enquiry should be "a direct description of our experience without taking account of its psychological origin". Phenomenology therefore is a critical reflection on conscious experience, rather than subconscious motivation, and is designed to uncover the essential invariant features of that experience (Jopling, 1996).

### Phenomenological process

As one of the major influences on phenomenological enquiry Schutz proposed that individuals approach the life world with a stock of knowledge made up of common sense constructs and categories that are essentially social in action. These stocks of knowledge produce familiarity, but they are always incomplete and open ended. Naming requires the interpretative application of a category to the concrete particulars of a situation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Language is the central medium for transmitting meaning and as such provides a methodological orientation for a phenomenology of social life that is concerned with the relation between language use and the objects of experience. The meaning of a word is taken to be what it references, corresponds with, or stands for in the real world. This is based on the premise that the essential task of language is to convey information and describe "reality". It is also assumed that there is a degree of commonality in that others experience the world in fundamentally the same way, intersubjectively sharing the same meaning. The basic assumption is that a person's life is a socially constructed totality in which experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully. With regard to the process of enquiry, the phenomenologist has only one legitimate source of data, and that is the views and experiences of the participants themselves. This in itself assumes that the participant's view is taken as "fact". Furthermore, participants are selected only if they have lived the experience under study. Sampling is therefore purposive and prescribed from the start and the main instrument of data collection is the interview.

Thompson (1998) suggests that the relevant implication of the life-world is that the consumer as text metaphor needs to be reflectively adapted and enriched through a dynamic combination of consumers who interpret their experiences and consumer researchers who interpret consumer's narratives. In other words "it is important to recognise that human existence has some text like qualities but it is not text *per se*" (Thompson, 1998, p. 129). As a means of interpretation, Thompson (1997) in his analysis of consumer experiences, advocates part to whole analysis of participant

accounts by proceeding through an interactive process. This involves reading texts (interview transcripts) in full, in order to first gain a sense of the whole picture. After several readings of the text, the next stage is hermeneutic endeavour (Thompson *et al.*, 1990), or intertextuality (Thompson, 1997), whereby patterns and differences are sought across transcripts. This strategy of interpretation must broaden the analysis to include a wider range of considerations that helps the researcher arrive at a holistic interpretation. There must also be recognition that the final explanation represents a fusion of horizons between the interpreter's frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Thompson, 1997). This is largely concurrent with the process outlined by Colaizzi (1978) who suggests a series of seven steps:

- (1) The first task of the researcher is to read the participants narratives, to acquire a feeling for their ideas in order to understand them fully.
- (2) The next step "extracting significant statements", requires the researcher to identify key words and sentences relating to the phenomenon under study.
- (3) The researcher then attempts to formulate meanings for each of these significant statements.
- (4) This process is repeated across participants' stories and recurrent meaningful themes are clustered. These may be validated by returning to the informants to check interpretation.
- (5) After this the researcher should be able to integrate the resulting themes into a rich description of the phenomenon under study.
- (6) The next step is to reduce these themes to an essential structure that offers an explanation of the behaviour.
- (7) Finally, the researcher may return to the participants to conduct further interviews or elicit their opinions on the analysis in order to cross check interpretation.

These structures provide the researcher with an understanding of the world that contributes towards the development of theory. On the question of theory Morse (1994) suggests that phenomenologists do not label themselves as theorists in the strictest sense, rather linkages from the data to theory are based on reflections of theoretical literature. Recontextualisation comes from writing and rewriting, which as a practice sensitises the researcher and provides new insights. This increases the level of abstraction by moving from the "particular" sphere to a "universal" sphere where themes are readily comprehensible to the humans which they seek to describe.

However, there are a number of misconceptions and *ad hoc* interpretations of phenomenology to be found in the literature. First, the philosophy that underpins phenomenology is often misused to refer to the qualitative paradigm as a whole. This is not the case. Phenomenologists seek guidance from existential philosophers in the interpretation of their data. Through careful study of individuals they hope to discover the deeper meaning of the "lived" experience in terms of the individual's relationship with time, space and personal history (Stern, 1994). The collection and analysis of data using this methodology is also specifically prescribed. Phenomenology demands that intense reflection is an integral part of the process, but above all, the primacy of the subjective experience is felt to be crucial. Analysis is conducted by scrutinising the text

for meaning “units” which describe the central aspects of the experience. These are then synthesised to provide a general description of the “whole”.

## Conclusion

This paper has looked at three different qualitative methodologies, each quite distinct in their procedures for data collection, interpretation and theoretical development. For example, grounded theory is flexible in terms of data, but insists on theoretical sampling and saturation of both data and theory before theory development can be claimed. It is also a methodology particularly suited to situations that have a symbolic and, or, an interactional element to them. Consequently, it has potential for a number of research directions and contexts that go beyond consumer behaviour, for example, relationship marketing or even the sales situation. Ethnography is generally concerned with culture and power with the main forms of data generally participatory observation and interviews. Again, research agendas that focus on, for example, inter-departmental dynamics, gender issues, ethical marketing or green consumption, may well benefit from the application of an ethnographic approach. Finally, phenomenology has its own unique characteristics and philosophy, which may be beneficial in terms of theory building based around lived experiences, whether these be consumption or strategic decision making. In sum, each has its own strengths and weaknesses, but each are suited to the study of marketing phenomenon. However, despite the flexibility of the methodologies described, their application remains largely in the field of experiential consumer behaviour with their potential for theory development within the broader field of marketing yet to be fully realised. Possibly, this may be the next step in the development of qualitative research with marketing.

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