

What Claims To Be New,
What Is New
&
What Should Be New In Qualitative Research

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1. Introduction

Twelve years ago I presented a similar paper to this (1) in order to keep up to date with what was happening in qualitative research. The fact that I have not addressed this issue for twelve years, at least in writing, either says something about me or possibly about qualitative research. However it is now time to have another look at what is happening – at least in the literature.

I will use the same rules as I used last time in order to make the task more manageable. These rules are:

1. The “new” qualitative techniques I will address here need to have been published.
2. The publication must be post 1998 (indeed most articles discussed here are post 2000).
3. The publication needs to have a marketing research orientation, and this of course rules out some excellent articles published in various Psychology journals.

Almost certainly I have missed out on some of the worthwhile articles in this review, but hopefully I will address the main ones of interest.

2. So What Has Been Published?

Little excitement in 1990: Last time I addressed this topic 11 articles were included in the discussion, and I commented that only three or four were really recommended reading. Interestingly enough one of the key recommended references was a book by Gordon and Langmaid (Qualitative Market Research: A Practitioner’s and Buyer’s Guide), and this time one of my recommendations is another book by Wendy Gordon (5) – notwithstanding its lack of an index section.

More articles, higher quality: From my reading of the literature, there is little doubt that more articles on qualitative techniques have been published in the last two years on qualitative research than was the case for the period 1988 to 1990. On this occasion, as can be seen from the reference list, 20 journal articles and one book have been addressed. Back in 1990 it was difficult to find more than about 10 or so articles, but on this occasion I rejected at least as many articles as I have addressed here. And not only are the publications on this occasion are more numerous, they are of higher quality than was the case last time I addressed this task. Indeed at least 17 of the articles deserve to be read, as does the book.

New ideas: A further difference between this group of articles and those of twelve years ago is that there are really some new approaches discussed on this occasion, whereas back in 1990 a key criticism was that few of the ideas discussed were really new.

But focus group orientation (as usual): But a major similarity between these articles and those of 1990 is that they centre on focus groups as the main technique rather than consider other qualitative approaches. While some of the article give consideration to other qualitative techniques, for most, the only qualitative technique that seems to exist is group discussions. As will be seen later, this could well be the biggest problem confronting qualitative research – the assumption that everything we need to know qualitatively can be accessed from groups of consumers.

For convenience, the main topics addressed by each of the articles are summarised in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: Articles Addressed

| Key Topic Addressed | Articles |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Approaches to selecting respondents for groups | Tuckel & Wood Nancarrow et al |
| Use of moderators | Cowley |

| | |
|---|--|
| | Prince & Davies |
| On-line groups | Comley Langer Sweet |
| Use of multiple qualitative techniques (convergent validity, or possibly “bricolage”) | Valentine & Gordon Vallaster & Koll |
| Semiotics as a group technique | Harvey & Evans |
| Projective techniques | Marsden Dalbec Hall |
| “Multivariate” groups/combining quantitative & qualitative approaches | Wade Pawle & Cooper |
| Computer analysis of qualitative data | Dembkowski & Hanmer-Lloyd |
| Narrative theory & dimensional analysis | Shankar & Goulding |
| Nominal grouping sessions | Langford et al |
| Quantifying focus group outputs | Schmidt |

In the past, three topics were addressed in the document, but on this occasion, due to the number of articles, I have added an additional topic (What’s worth looking at). Thus the topics to be addressed in the remainder of this paper are:

1. What is really new,
2. What’s worth looking at,
3. What claims to be new, but is not,
4. What should be new.

It is important to note that I do not aim to provide a full and detailed description of all the techniques mentioned here. The paper merely aims to provide a brief overview of the technique and to provide interested researchers with the location of the original information.

3. What is Really New

In one sense none of the publications addressed here really address new techniques. More often than not the “new” techniques described in the recent literature have already been applied in the past by non-market researchers.

A noticeable characteristic of market researchers is their capacity to source and use techniques developed in other fields. For example look at the degree to which researchers use a wide range of multivariate statistical procedures (e.g. conjoint measurement, factor analysis) that were first developed by other professionals. Another example was quoted in my last paper where I discussed the use of the “New Qualitative Techniques” (see Cooper, P., “Comparison Between the UK and the US: The Qualitative Dimension”, Journal of the Market Research Society, 31, 4, 509-520).

These “new” techniques turn out to be projective techniques that had been used for many years by Psychologists, and indeed rejected by many Psychologists as useful tools. (1).

As an insightful advertising agency commented quite some years ago, “Creativity is merely undetected plagiarism”.

Notwithstanding the above qualifications, at least three and maybe four of the above articles could be considered to be addressing new approaches in qualitative research. Let me address these.

3.1 “Serial Moderating Techniques” (SMT)

Prince and Davies (15) suggest the use of moderator teams in order to overcome single moderator potential bias. They argue that training, personality and orientation inevitably varies and thus the combination of these issues may lead to moderator bias.

As a solution Prince and Davies argue for several moderators in succession be used during the group. The concept involves moderators with varying skill bases and other characteristics (e.g. male versus female, Psychology training versus Marketing training) moderating various parts of the discussion that is consistent with the moderator’s specific characteristics and training. The concept further involves the moderators observing one another and sharing insights during moderator change-overs.

They argue that this type of approach delivers a range of benefits including:

1. Overcoming moderator “preference” for group participants (that is, bias toward some group participants),
2. Ensuring that all issues of relevance are covered during the group,
3. Allowing for ideas to be generated during the group process that enables moderators to more effectively address specific problems and issues arising during the group (e.g. strategies for dealing with particular topics),
4. Allowing for the “new” moderator to identify “inhibited” respondents and then to address these inhibitions,
5. Overcoming problems associated with selective reporting of data (the argument being that multiple moderators enables a broader perspective of the data),
6. “Provide legitimacy for the client to act on focus group results” due to “greater weight can be allocated to them in comparison to those associated with a single moderator” (p213).

It seems likely that the SMT approach may well deliver other benefits including greater synergy resulting from insights from a number of skilled moderators.

However as the authors acknowledge, SMT incurs greater costs to the client.

I would argue the approach would almost certainly demand more time from the perspective of group participants, greater logistical demands on the research process, and perhaps most importantly, remove the ability of the moderator to pursue a more unstructured approach. A further potential problem with this approach concerns determining what particular mix of moderators is most appropriate for which groups of respondents (and possibly sourcing those moderators).

The authors provide no evidence to support the efficacy of the approach, but it certainly warrants consideration for some group discussion approaches.

3.2 Narrative theory & dimensional analysis (and other matters)

Shankar & Goulding (17) have produced a particularly interesting paper that all qualitative researchers should read. While the thrust of the article deals with the use of narrative theory and a version of grounded theory (Dimensional Analysis) in qualitative research, the authors argue strongly for the qualitative researcher to be more explicit regarding their methods of interpretation. They argue:

1. Researcher need to acknowledge (to the client) how their “pre-understandings” (or theoretical platforms) affect the interpretation process, and
2. The researcher should engage in argument and counter-argument with the client until both the client and the practitioner agree on interpretations.

Of course the implication of their argument is that too many researchers tend to play the “guru” without justifying their interpretation basis to their client.

Narrative analysis: Shankar and Goulding are not the only writers to mention “narrative analysis”, (see 9) and this is not surprising as it is a technique that has been applied in other areas. Narrative analysis is based on the notion that “consumption experiences and other marketing related phenomena can be interpreted narratively”. The concept involves treating data from consumers (via depth interviews or groups) as stories (“or more precisely, as a chapter in the ongoing story of the participant(s)”). The analysis approach is based on the notion that narratives have five key features:

1. The establishment of a valued end point,
2. A selection of events relevant to the goal state,
3. The ordering of these events,
4. The establishment of causal sequences and,
5. Demarcation signs (i.e. recognisable beginnings, middles and ends).

By understanding these characteristics of the narrative the authors argue that it is possible to gain insights into consumer behaviour. As Vallaster and Koll comment (21), “Personal narratives or “story telling” as it is often termed, make people create order and construct texts in a particular context. By examining how the informant’s story is put together, personal narrative allow us to see how respondents impose order on the flow of experience in order to make sense of events and actions in their lives. The research method enables the narrators to speak in terms that seem natural and provide insight to the questions of why the story was told that way.”

There is little doubt that, by either encouraging respondents to “tell a story” about their consumption related experience, or by treating interview or other data as a “story”, value may be gained by the researcher in understanding consumer behaviour.

Dimensional analysis: Dimensional analysis (or “natural analysis”) is an extension of narrative analysis in which the story provided by the consumer is assigned “dimensions” (or influencing factors) by the researcher as a result of questioning of the consumer. An example provided to explain this process by the authors involves shopping behaviour. It is pointed out that “shopping involves motivations that instigate actions. Conditions may be influenced by a range of factors such as mood, emotion, disposable income or even compulsion. Specific contexts may include retail environments while consequences may range from satisfaction levels to falling into debt. Within each of these there may be range of influencing factors (dimensions) which contribute to the experience. However there will usually be a small number of dominant motivations driving the behaviour which allows the researcher to take a “perspective” as to the main theme of the story.”

The authors use this concept as the basis of a strong argument for including quotations in reporting as a means of better illustrating the underlying dimensions. In addition they suggest using techniques such as sentence completion and thematic apperception tests as one means of collecting this type of data in group environments.

Like narrative analysis, dimensional analysis appears to provide an additional useful tool for potential use by qualitative researchers.

3.3 Nominal Grouping Sessions

Langford et al (9) provide an interesting description of research that appears to suggest that Nominal Grouping Sessions (NGS) are not only highly reliable and valid, but that NGS procedures produce responses in greater depth and breadth than is demonstrated by focus group approaches.

So what are Nominal Group Sessions? In effect NGS are highly structured focus group sessions where individual level data is collected and later used for focussed discussion with other group members. The procedure is similar to the following (Langford et al, p59):

1. Individuals are assigned to small groups based on similarity to target market,

2. Silent and independent generation of discussion points on specific topic provided by researcher,
3. Each group member presents each of their discussion points *without discussion* until all members' points are recorded,
4. Discussion amongst group members aiming to rank each point by its importance to the original topic (criticisms of points are discouraged) and produce reasons for the importance rankings,
5. Discussion ends when all points are ranked by the group in terms of importance to the original topic,
6. The procedure is repeated for all the topics of interest to the researcher,
7. The final report addresses the importance rankings for each subject and the reasons for those rankings along with a comparison of outputs from other NGS.

Langford et al provide detailed procedures for generating rankings.

While the outputs of Langford et al's research strongly supports their argument that NGS works better the conventional groups, I have to wonder whether it illustrates the orientation of many US researchers toward using groups (and other qualitative techniques) as pseudo-quantitative approaches. To a large extent NGS procedures are very focussed on generating quantitative outputs (rankings etc). In fact the procedures described in the article are very reminiscent of a qualitative questionnaire.

There is little doubt that NGS techniques have their application, but I wonder whether these techniques can be effectively used in all qualitative situations. Perhaps more importantly, I wonder whether these techniques should be compared to quantitative questionnaire oriented approaches rather than focus group approaches.

3.4 Participatory Group Analysis

Perhaps one of the best articles surveyed here is that by Vallaster & Koll (21). The key weakness of this article is that it is not concerned with consumer applications, but is more oriented toward Industrial Psychology or perhaps Business to Business research applications. However this problem is well compensated for by the excellent overview the article provides of qualitative techniques, and the innovative approach it suggests to conducting qualitative research.

Perhaps one of the most useful aspects of this article is that it goes a long way to providing a very useful definition of qualitative versus quantitative research. Here Vallaster and Koll make use of the "magic triangle" approach. An adaptation of this is illustrated in Exhibit 2.

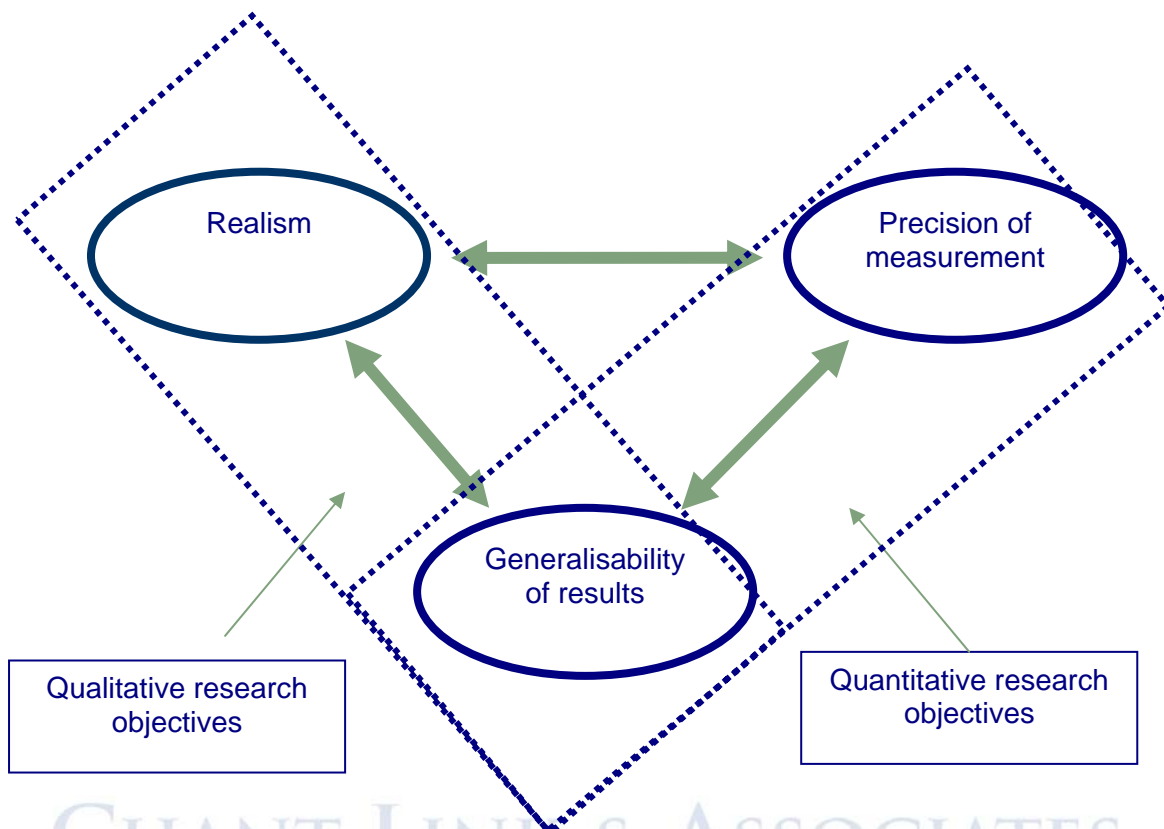
The fundamental concept here is that research aims to address three key objectives:

1. Realism,
 2. Generalizability of results and,
 3. Precision of measurement,
- ... and all three of these objectives interact together.

I would argue that qualitative research is more concerned with the first two of these objectives whereas quantitative research is more concerned with the latter two of these objectives.

This point leads to some fundamental issues for qualitative research, the main one being, are the approaches currently being used by qualitative researchers likely to deliver in terms of the first objective – the search for Realism? This is a point I will return to later.

Exhibit 2: The “Magic Triangle”; Three Key Objectives of Research



Participatory Group Observation: Vallaster and Koll use “Participatory Group Observation” as a means of addressing three components of group decision making:

1. Cognitive variables,
2. Affective variables and,
3. Communications-oriented variables.

The important point here for market researchers is that Vallaster and Koll suggest different qualitative techniques for these three decision making components. A good summary of their approach is provided in the exhibit on the following page (Exhibit 3).

Not only do Vallaster and Koll suggest that different approaches are more appropriate given different research objectives (e.g. assessing cognitive versus affective issues), but they introduce an excellent approach for analysis of observational material (Bales Interaction Styles – see footnote on following page). Vallaster and Koll also provide sound arguments for using these techniques for differing research objectives.

As will be seen later I tend to believe that projective techniques are often used inappropriately and far too frequently in marketing research. Nonetheless Vallaster and Koll take quite an innovative approach to using projective techniques (asking respondents to bring pictures or paintings from newspapers etc to the groups reflecting various issues for discussion during the group).

Exhibit 3: Data Collection Methods and Techniques

| Information to be researched | Data collection method | Source of information | Analysis |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Cognitive level: Similarly on content and process knowledge of group members | Personal narrative | Individual | Text analysis |
| | In depth interview | Individual | Text analysis |
| | Archival analysis | Organisational material | Text analysis |
| Affective level: Affective “atmosphere” within the group | Personal narratives | Individual | Text analysis |
| | Observation | Groups | Bales interaction styles ¹ |
| | Projective techniques | Individuals | Interpretation |
| | In depth interview | Individuals | Text analysis |
| Communications patterns: As triggers for events on a cognitive and affective level and as a central vehicle for the development of a shared meaning | Observations | Groups | Bales interaction styles |
| | In depth interview | Individual | Text analysis |
| | Archival analysis | Organisational material | Text analysis |

Convergent validity: The article implies the value of convergent validity in qualitative research. That is, collecting data from a number of sources (e.g. different qualitative techniques), using a range of researchers and looking for evidence pointing in the same direction.

Vallentine and Gordon (20) refer to this technique as “bricolage” (“A pieced together, close-knit set of practices that provides solutions to a problem in a concrete situation. It is a contraction that changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods and techniques are added to the puzzle.”), although as the preceding quote implies Vallentine and Gordon use the term in a more complex fashion.

All in all, Vallaster and Koll’s article provides some very insightful and thought provoking ideas for researchers to consider in applying qualitative techniques.

4. What’s Worth Looking At

While not new, a number of the articles mentioned in Exhibit 1 warrant attention.

Selecting respondents: Tuckel and Wood (19) provide some interesting ideas on selecting respondents (for groups). They show (not surprisingly) that “respondents who place less emphasis on the monetary incentive as a reasons for attendance, who are better educated and who have a stronger civic orientation are judged by moderators top be more invested in the research process”. In addition the authors found no relationship between previous focus group experience and commitment to the research process.

¹ See Wilson, G. L. (1996), “Groups in Context; Leadership and Participation in Small Groups”, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.

However this article raises some additional issues that deserve consideration. First, a key criterion used to assess “good” groups is associated with the degree of cooperativeness and/or commitment to the research by the respondents. If realism is a key objective of qualitative research (see Exhibit 2) an important question then is; should qualitative researchers expect cooperative or committed groups to really reflect realism? Surely many groups (in real life) will not be cooperative with or committed to research?

Second, as the authors mention early in their article, US researchers often select group respondents using qualifying questions that attempt to screen out people who may feel uncomfortable in expressing their opinions. Indeed this writer has seen many US screeners for groups that expressly aim to select people who are talkative. It seems clear (at least to the writer) that selecting respondents using these approaches actively removes research from reality.

Thus given Australian researchers appear to be pursuing the US trend of observation of groups by multiple observers, it is hoped that future trends do not include selection of cooperative/talkative/committed respondents.

Nancarrow et al (12) addresses a range of “myths” of qualitative recruitment (including the need for “virgin” respondents – it will be noted that this issue was addressed in my previous paper where it was pointed out that other researchers had also questioned the necessity of accessing “virgins”). However the value in this paper is that it raises many issues that deserve consideration by thoughtful researchers (and recruiters) and especially argues for the need to use eclectic recruitment approaches that relate to the nature of the research problem.

Client involvement: Cowley (3) provides an interesting paper focussed on understanding skills required by strategic qualitative market researchers (SQMRs), and from this perspective the article deserves consideration. However only one implication of that paper will be addressed here, and that concerns a question raised by Cowley; “perhaps anyone can conduct a focus group(?)”.

This question deserves careful consideration, and not just for the reasons suggested by Cowley (these include that many non-market researchers claim to run groups, such as management consultants, students and various others).

In recent times it has become much more common for clients to observe groups with the objective of not only gaining insights into the objectives of the specific research project, but to gain a better “face to face” (perhaps face to one-way screen to face) understanding of their customers.

While some researchers (including the current writer) question the effects this has on the realism being addressed in the qualitative process, an even more worrying phenomenon seems to be appearing. In recent times it has been suggested that a good way for clients to gain a better understanding of their consumers would be for the clients themselves to run groups. Of course this has major implications for research.

On-line research: A number of papers have been written on on-line research (see 2., 8., 11., 12. and 18.), and their quality is highly variable. However the papers by Marsden (11) and Sweet (18) warrant attention in that they provide a good overview of this approach. Sweet provides an especially good overview of how to approach on-line qualitative (group) research.

Marsden provides an especially interesting approach to using a game on the Internet to obtain word association responses, and then uses an interesting approach using Microsoft Access to analyse the data.

These writers also acknowledge some of the traps of on-line research and suggest various ways of dealing with these problems.

Pawle and Cooper (13) also provide a useful literature review of on-line qualitative techniques that suggests on-line qualitative techniques deliver high levels of validity.

However it must be said that the phrase “on-line qualitative research” sounds awfully like an oxymoron to this writer.

Quantification of qualitative data: Two articles address this issue (see 13 and 16). In the first Pawle and Cooper (13) suggest an on-line approach that combines projective and quantitative techniques (“QualiQuant™ Technology”). However the previous paragraph sums up this writer’s view of the concept.

The second article by Schmidt (16) provides an interesting approach to capturing and analysing qualitative data using sophisticated statistical procedures. The paper is well worth reading for those interested in this type of approach, however it should be noted that the author comments; “It is doubtful, though, that quantitative techniques will replace well-established qualitative approaches.”

5. What Claims to be New, But is Not

Rorschach has a lot to answer for. Back in the late 1980s Peter Cooper was talking about the “NQT”², or the “New Qualitative Techniques”. And back then I argued that the techniques were not new, they were old techniques that had been rejected by most practicing Psychologists (see 1).

Now in 2002 market researchers are still sounding the virtues of projective techniques as a means of getting into the heads of consumers (4., 6., 13.). Perhaps more importantly my observations in the Australian research context suggests more and more researchers are using these techniques as a matter of course, and what is more, they are being expected to use the techniques by clients – how often have you seen briefs that call for the use of projective techniques.

I do not intend to repeat all the points made in my previous paper. However there are a number of issues that researchers should be aware of regarding projective techniques:

1. **Rarely used professionally:** Projective techniques are not commonly used now by Psychologists or Psychiatrists (if you do not believe this, phone a few Psychologists or Psychiatrists who practice in the counselling area),
2. **Used in one on one situations, not groups:** When projective techniques are employed in Psychology/Psychiatry, they are almost always used in one on one situations – not in group environments,
3. **Trust and rapport first required:** When these techniques are used, it is first necessary to develop a high level of rapport and trust with the person to whom the technique is being applied (this is rarely possible in a 90 minute depth interview let alone a group environment),
4. **Associated with highly emotional and protected issues:** The whole concept underlying the use of projective techniques is to enable counselees to reveal issues that are emotionally very difficult for them to reveal in normal conversation. How likely is this to occur in a focus group situation – especially with observers behind a one way mirror?

But we all use them: I am not arguing that researchers should not use projective techniques. As a matter of course we all use them frequently (for example when we ask respondents to imagine something, or to reflect on how other people might respond to some stimulus).

What I am arguing is that these techniques should only be used when they are really necessary, and even then primarily in depth interviews rather than groups (why don’t we all use more depths anyway? Why is all consumer research focussed on group decision making rather than individual decision making?).

² Cooper, P., “Comparison Between the UK and the US: The Qualitative Dimension”, Journal of the Market Research Society, 31, 4, 509-520

Why not directly ask respondents what they think of a product/company rather than to ask them to imagine that product/company walking into a cocktail party as a person? Of course you first have to build a relation of trust with the respondent(s), but once this trust has been built, you'll be amazed at what questions you can ask and expect a forthright answer.

6. What Should Be New

There are six key issues that have not been addressed in the recent literature (or for that matter in less than recent literature). These are:

1. What are the most appropriate qualitative techniques to use by occasion?
2. What should moderators do in groups (and depth interviews)?
3. What effects does client observation have on moderators and group participants?
4. How should group outputs be analysed?
5. What is the optimum group size?
6. What are the implications of realism being a key objective of qualitative research?

Let me briefly address these issues.

6.1 What are the most appropriate qualitative techniques to use by occasion?

Most of the articles reviewed here assume that only one qualitative technique exists – group discussions. But as some writers have pointed out, a range of techniques exist including groups, depth interviews, paired depth interviews, observational techniques, and so on. What is more we can use teams of moderators/interviewers, we can combine qualitative approaches with quantitative approaches (e.g. the Delphi technique) and we can employ a range of techniques during the qualitative intervention (e.g. narrative analysis).

But few researchers appear to have carefully thought through when each of these techniques is likely to be most effective. Vallaster and Koll (amongst others) have given some thought to this issue. And on the last occasion I wrote on this issue I pointed out a range of rules exist for deciding between groups and depth interviews (see 1, and especially the reference to McQuarrie and McIntyre).

However a key point to consider when at least making decisions between groups and depth interviews is: Are we addressing group processes in our research objectives or are we addressing individual processes? I would argue that, on most occasions in consumer research the issues are more likely to be associated with individual processes than group processes – so why aren't more depth interviews conducted?

6.2 What should moderators do in groups (and depth interviews)?

When was the last time you read an article that specifically explained what moderators should do when running a group or what depth interviewers should do when conducting an interview? Or what would you answer your client if they asked you to explain what made a depth interview or a group work?

Market researchers need a detailed description of exactly what moderators/interviewers should do to optimise the efficacy of the specific research intervention.

A good start has been made by writers such as Wendy Gordon (5), but more work is required.

6.3 What effects does client observation have on moderators and group participants?

It is now the accepted practice that group should be observed by clients. And this does not just apply to the client who has the research responsibility, but to the ever widening group of interested marketing and other clients. As commented earlier, some are arguing that ever broader observation practices are warranted (and those of you who have conducted qualitative research in the US will be aware that these wider observation requirements are well catered for in the group facilities that are available in the US).

Indeed my company just recently lost a project because we refused to allow a client to observe depth interviews (by sitting in on the depth interview).

As I argue later, this practice has major implications for addressing the reality objectives of research. It may well also be the case that observation will be affected by the new privacy laws in Australia.

A minor amount of research has been conducted on this issue (see 1, and especially Elliot, B), but much more is warranted. Researchers and clients need to know whether the ever increasing practice of observation of groups is delivering ever decreasing levels of validity/realism.

6.4 How should group outputs be analysed?

I have yet to see a paper on the analysis of group outputs (except perhaps for the comments made by Shankar and Goulding (17)). Clearly this is an issue that warrants careful attention.

But let me make a few points:



1. **Listen to the tapes:** In my view moderators should always listen to tapes of groups before reporting. There is overwhelming evidence that few people are capable of remembering what happened throughout a 90 minute group discussion, let alone a number of such discussions.
2. **Don't rely on transcripts:** Researchers who rely on transcripts are abdicating their analysis/interpretative responsibility to a typist. No matter how professional the typist, they will never record what all members of the group said, they will never understand all the comments, and they will selectively report.

6.5 What is the optimum group size?

Any number of text books that discuss groups will tell you a group consists of 8 to 10, or 6 to 10 respondents. Many US clients expect a minimum of 12 people in groups. I am aware of some groups that have been run with 20 respondents.

But I have seen little evidence of what number is optimal for group discussions.

But let me give you my opinion.

If groups are about realism, then researchers should be looking for group sizes that reflect realistic group sizes in the community. So look around you. What size groups do you see functioning effectively in the workplace, in the pub, at dinner parties, in amongst cocktail crowds? My guess is they are rarely larger than six in size, and more often four to five people.

So if we are really conducting research on groups, shouldn't we be looking at groups that are never more than six in size?

We need to research the issue.

6.6 What are the implications of realism being a key objective of qualitative research?

As Vallaster and Koll argue, realism is undoubtedly a key objective of qualitative research. It is also the key differentiating feature between qualitative research and quantitative research.

Qualitative research attempts to collect data from real situations;

1. Conversations → individual decision making → depth interviews,
2. Group discussions → group processes and decision making → focus groups,
3. Everyday behaviour → observations/ethnography.

So if realism is the key issue, we researchers should be attempting to ensure the data collection environment we are using is as real as is possible.

Thus, ask yourself the following questions next time you design your qualitative research approach:

1. Is it real to collect information from a group when you are interested in individual decision making?
2. Is it real to collect information from a group of strangers when the topic is one that demands group discussion between group members who are familiar with one another?
3. Is it real to collect information from groups of people in environments that are very unfamiliar or threatening to them (group facilities with one way mirrors and video cameras)?

7. Finally, A Potential Hot Topic

Anyone who reads the articles mentioned in this review will note that there is frequent mention of “observation” as a qualitative technique, but little in-depth discussion of this approach apart from Vallaster and Koll’s suggestion of using Bales’ Interaction Styles classification as a means of analysing observational data.

However in the popular press there have been increasing mentions of using observational approaches (especially in the US) where video cameras are used to tape consumers’ behaviour in various situations (shopping, preparing meals, etc.). In Europe more and more researchers are talking about ethnography. And even in Australia some recruiters are commenting that they are being asked to recruit for more observational studies than they have in the past.

There is little doubt that observational/ethnographic approaches have great potential for some qualitative data gathering needs (and they always have). But the use of video cameras and similar technology raises a number of issues that may need to be addressed by researchers. Two issues in particular that may warrant attention in the future are:

1. While observations, in many senses, represent the most realistic of all qualitative interventions, the use of videos may well diminish this valuable outputs of observational research. There is a parallel here somewhere with the current over-use of one way mirrors and client observation in conjunction with group discussions.
2. Observations with video cameras may well have implications for the new privacy laws that are currently being introduced.

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