Are current research approaches in marketing leading us astray?*

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Abstract

This article is about methodology in research in marketing. It questions the mainstream choice of approaches and suggests alternative directions with qualitative rather than quantitative inquiry in focus. It deals with my personal journey through Methodologyland; the establishment of a Hall of Fame of my favorite research approaches supplemented with a Chamber of Horrors; and a brief commentary on some pivotal concepts in science. It concludes that the absence of the development of general marketing theory is partly due to the preoccupation with erroneously chosen methodology and claims that scholarly research boils down to four basic strategies: curiosity, courage, reflection, and dialogue; the rest is technical support.

Key words: action research; case study research; grounded theory; interactive research; narrative research; research methodology; theory generation

1. Evert's adventures in Methodologyland

Vedic philosophy 5000 years ago described the unfolding of knowledge as a synthesis of three elements: *the process of knowing*, *the knower*, and *the known* (Gustavsson, 1992). The object of this article is the process of knowing, that is the methodology used in generating marketing theory. However, this process is inseparable from the knower (the researcher) and the known (the outcome of the research, here: general marketing theory). Although these two phenomena will not be the locus of interest for this article, they will be considered whenever necessary to retain the context.

I do not see science as objective but as an interplay between objective and subjective forces, both equally important. I will be unabashedly self-centered. 'I'am writing this, not 'the author' or 'we'. I see the researcher as the number one research instrument. I feel at liberty to use myself and my experience as evidence. This would

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traditionally be classified as a qualitative approach, or worse, as unscientific (see the later section "My Chamber of Horrors", p. 43). I do not subscribe to the assumption that words are unreliable and fuzzy and merely preliminaries to numbers, which are precise and uncover the truth. The English language uses letters and words; the computer uses zeros and ones; mathematics and statistics use numbers, letters and graphs; non-verbal language ('body language') communicates with facial expressions, gestures, postures and artifacts. All are languages that represent phenomena with different symbols and a different grammar; all have strengths and weaknesses, and they cannot be ranked in order of excellence. To complicate matters, there is also tacit knowledge, which has no explicit language but communicates through advice, decisions and action.

The academic praise of the supremacy of quantitative measurement shuts out most marketing reality and hence the creation of more valid and general marketing theory. For example, econometricians have high status in economics. They work with highly formalized and quantitative approaches. Unfortunately they have to make outrageously unrealistic assumptions for the sake of mathematical and statistical beauty. The 2000 Nobel Laureates in the Economic Sciences, James Heckman and Daniel McFadden, are microeconometricians. They use economic theory and statistical techniques to analyze data about individuals, households and corporations. They come from the tradition of microeconomics, one of the areas from which marketing grew but has largely left, as microeconomics offered only superficial understanding of what is going on in companies and among consumers.

I am not against quantitative approaches per se. What I am against is their misapplication, their claim that they are better, even the only science, and their far too successful warfare to implant that claim in the academic system and acquire disproportionate 'market share', close to monopoly. Van Maanen (2000, p. x) has succinctly expressed the dilemma:

> Qualitative research is back and back with a vengeance as many of the promises of quantitative research have come up empty. Counting and classifying can only take one so far. Meaning and interpretation are required to attach significance to counts and classifications and these are fundamentally qualitative matters. The two approaches are then bound together, neither capturing truth alone nor trumping the other. But, while quantitative skills are broadly identifiable and widely taught, qualitative skills are not.

I will explicate my current scientific standpoint by inviting the reader on a journey through my own Methodologyland. This is a country of discovery, magic and surprises, just like Alice's Wonderland. It may be seen as a paradox that Lewis Carroll, who wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865 and *Through the Looking-Glass* in 1872, was a reverend, a lecturer in mathematics and a prolific author of stories, non-sensical poems, and learned mathematical treatises. In his annotation to the books, Gardner (1970, p. 8) says that 'It is only because adults - scientists and mathematicians in particular - continue to relish the Alice books that they are assured of immortality.' Obviously this pluralism in professions and activities need not be in conflict. They seem supportive to each other and perhaps

the message is: Be pragmatic, use all roads available to gain knowledge. Alice ventured on a journey that did not follow any of the regulated paths of quantitative inquiry. She met with the unexpected, she asked the unexpected, and the answers were unexpected. The hero of today's best seller, Harry Potter, is doing similar things with unprecedented support from the readers.

But what is happening with marketing as a discipline and its theory? My contention is that general marketing management theory has not developed in any substantial way during the past decades. Specific marketing theories have emerged and gradually become accepted but only as special cases, deviations and extras. Marketing management is currently a patchwork of fragmented models, assumptions, case stories and checklists on top of a partially obsolete foundation: microeconomics, marketing mix, four Ps, and the marketing of packaged consumer goods. This 'theory' is promoted worldwide through comprehensive marketing textbooks that started to appear in the 1960s. Services and B-to-B (business-to-business) marketing, relationships, networks, quality, knowledge management, brand equity, green marketing, information technology and other developments have had some impact but have not made marketing theorists bake a cake according to a new recipe, just to add decorations on the glazing of the old cake. In northern Europe the Nordic School of Services and Relationship Marketing (Gummesson, 1994; Grönroos, 1997; Gummesson *et al.*, 1997) and the network approach to B-to-B advocated by the IMP Group (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) have continuously challenged the mainstream marketing management paradigm since the 1970s.

This visit to Methodologyland will first take the reader through a chronological journey. Although the borderlines between the periods are blurred, the division in decades helps structure the material and improve legibility. The journey will make a stop at the Hall of Fame of my favorite methodological approaches. The third event is a brief lecture on some principal scientific concepts. It is followed by a visit to my Chamber of Horrors of what I consider unfair criticism of research that deviates from a narrow positivistic, rationalistic and mainstream standard.

The journey ends with an epilogue, comparable to a stopover at an airport where you change flights to continue your journey around the world. Like the earth is round, thus lacking a natural end, the journey in Methodologyland has no end. You search again and again and again, just as the term says: re-search, re-search, re-search.

2. A personal journey in time

This personal journey has a serious purpose; it is not just a self-centered biographical trip. I consider my current standpoint - as well as any other researcher's standpoint - the outcome of a series of events that are intimately intertwined with the individual, the knower. Although I raise criticism, the purpose is not to peck on individual researchers and textbook writers. The issues are raised because I want to direct attention to them - which is my duty as a scholar. It is a call for change to increase the validity of marketing theory.

2.1 The 1960s: a quest for rigor

I majored in marketing, having learnt about the then novel ideas of marketing management and marketing research. After graduation I worked with consumer goods marketing. It was an era of consumer surveys and the application of sampling techniques as a basis for marketing strategy, planning and product development. It taught me two lessons in particular.

The first consisted of the sampling techniques and the rules of drawing probabilistic inferences from quantitative data. It was an intellectual exercise in mathematical and statistical logic, claiming to have scientific status. In the bewildering mix of experiences, speculations, turbulence, rules-of-thumb, fads and fashions, and constant insecurity that constitute marketing, it offered security and rigor. This had advantages and was useful in my work, but at least two conditions posed a threat. One was the acceptance of subjective answers by consumers, which in the spirit of phenomenology were treated as hard facts. The other was the crucial predicament of validity that had been 'solved' - or rather, worried minds were given a break - by using operational definitions, thus appointing the results from a specific technique to be a proxy for the phenomenon under scrutiny. Both these conditions were set up qualitatively; they were the outcome of peer consensus, that is intersubjectivity and not objectivity.

The second lesson was social and, to the chagrin of the marketing researcher, often abducted much of the security that the techniques offered. It concerned the interpretation of survey results when confronted with the experiences of managers and data from other sources; how to get acceptance for results that were contrary to the pet ideas of top management; how to overcome the threat to careers and power structures that new data could pose; how to reach decisions on what action to take; how to obtain a sufficient budget; and how to execute decisions and monitor the outcome, learn, and amend the strategy.

The issues from the second lesson are equally alive 40 years later; they have not improved an iota. The survey techniques have been polished and are useful in selected situations, but I am not convinced that they have fundamentally improved in their ability to provide more valid information.

2.2 The 1970s: doubting the techniques, the professors and the textbooks

In the 1970s I worked in a large international management consulting company. One of their services was market research, mainly in B-to-B. Data came from analyses of written sources and from expert interviews that were informal conversations guided by a checklist of pertinent issues. It was primarily a qualitative approach although it did not exclude quantitative data. Sampling was purposeful; we tried to speak to those who could contribute the most, not to the average or a representative sample. The norm for saturation was 10 to 30 interviews.

A management consulting company is a B-to-B service company; it is not mass-marketing packaged consumer goods. I began to wonder about the role of services

and B-to-B in marketing. There was nothing on services in the textbooks and there was little about B-to-B although my research disclosed that together these two constituted the bulk of marketing, much bigger than the marketing of consumer goods. The consulting company did not follow the recommendations of the textbooks in its own marketing. What stood out was their reliance on networks of relationships and the necessity of retaining a long-term relationship with existing clients, which is exactly what relationship marketing, CRM (customer relationship management) and one-to-one marketing are preaching today. Yet, the methodology books recommended, and still recommend, statistical surveys, multivariate analysis, and sophisticated, computer-based data processing with structural equations such as LISREL, as the highway to knowledge enhancement.

The marketing management professors to whom I talked claimed that their theory was general and that services and B-to-B were only anomalies that essentially fitted under the umbrella of consumer goods marketing or could be ignored. I engaged in a PhD program parallel to my full-time work and presented a thesis on the marketing and purchasing of consulting services (Gummesson, 1977); it became the first book on services marketing in Scandinavia. At that time services were considered of no particular urgency, despite the fact that at least 60 percent of employment came from services. I started to fight with the concepts of generalization, theory generation and paradigm shifts. The research techniques gave no clue. It was perplexing and frustrating. It gave rise to insecurity: Could I be right and the textbooks wrong? I did not really feel that could be so, and the professors told me with such heavy argumentation that I was a child lost in the desert. My self-confidence was shattered.

Eventually I plucked up courage to acknowledge a gap between the reality I encountered by working in services and B-to-B and the claims of the marketing management textbooks and professors. A corollary was that the scientific methods in marketing did not lead up to the generation of valid marketing theory and paradigm shifts, but only to the testing and refinement of existing theory.

2.3 The 1980s: theory generation and qualitative breakthrough

The 1980s stood out for two types of experiences. The first was practical. I worked as a consultant to the management of Ericsson, the global provider of telecom systems and equipment. During many of those years I worked full time for them, having my own room at the international headquarters, my own parking space, and my personal napkin in the executive lunch room. I was fortunate to be able to carry out many of my assignments by being involved in actual events, not only getting data filtered through the minds of intermediaries, that is reports and respondents in interviews. I could often make first-hand observations of how high tech was developed, produced and sold globally to large customers. It was B-to-B in its most elaborate form, both goods and services.

The second type of experience was academic. I had gradually got in contact with case studies as research tools and not just as classroom learning tools or examples,

with hermeneutics, anthropology and ethnography, and action research. I became progressively aggravated by the shallowness of quantitative studies in marketing.

For example, in a statistical survey, tacit knowledge remains just that - tacit. Polanyi (1958) had already described the phenomenon of tacit knowing, and later Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) pointed to its significance for Japanese industry. A meeting with Barney Glaser, co-founder of grounded theory, became the beginning of close collaboration. He made me aware of the hazards of forcing received theory on reality.

I wrote a book on qualitative methods and the roles of management consultants and academic researchers. A reason for writing it was that very few books on qualitative methodology come from the management and marketing disciplines - the bulk is found in sociology, education science and ethnography - and consequently do not deal with research in a business environment. The book was first published in Swedish and was very well received, then in an extended English version by Sage in the USA. It recently came out in a revised version (Gummesson, 2000); in total it has been reprinted 10 times.

During the latter half of the 1980s I worked part time as a professor and became gradually more absorbed in scholarly research. My research converged toward a relationship marketing paradigm as a synthesis of marketing management, services marketing, B-to-B, quality management and other developments. At that time, relationship marketing was only one of several terms; others were interactive marketing, marketing in networks of interaction, and marketing as long-term relationships. My earlier doubts about the validity of the current marketing management paradigm were nourished. I became preoccupied with the generation of marketing theory, which is not many substantive, fragmented bits and pieces but a more general, formal grand theory that could condense the essence of marketing with high validity.

2.4 The 1990s: getting it all together and the arrival of a dark horse, the Internet

From being a practicing businessman with academic research as a hobby, albeit a serious hobby, (my relationship to academic research equaled that of the golfer to his handicap) I now took the full step into academia. I was persuaded to become a tenured professor at Stockholm University. The roles were reversed and the practice of business became the serious hobby. I did this with some reluctance and I am still wondering whether it was the right move. Relationship marketing became a household term for a series of phenomena in marketing, with relationships, networks and interaction as core variables and loyalty, trust, and individual treatment of customers as some of the sub-core variables. I completed a long-term project from the early 1980s, a book on relationship marketing. I felt ready to finish the book and felt that the market was ready to receive it, which, by the way, turned out to be correct. It was published in Swedish in 1995, in English in 1999, and the book is under continuous revision for new editions in several languages.

The breakthrough for the Internet and other information technology (IT) applications in the mid-1990s tinted the research landscape in praise of technology and the complete change that it would allegedly bring about in marketing. In the wake of relationship marketing and IT came one-to-one marketing and CRM with call centers, data warehousing, data mining and other developments. IT and e-business offer a new research platform with new techniques, which include surfing the net for data, using chat groups and interaction between customers for data collection, and Internet research conferences.

Data warehousing has emerged from new IT as the next generation of databases. Knowledge residing in organizations can now be collected, stored and integrated in more elaborate ways. For CRM, this is marketing knowledge about customers; in a broadened relationship marketing sense it is data about all the actors in a firm's network. If the data warehouse is the intangible goldmine of The New Economy, data mining is the work to extract the gold. It is a systematic process using modeling techniques. The computer searches for patterns, combines data, and develops hypotheses and propositions. With this knowledge, the firm could better customize and target its messages, products and services, thus gaining competitive edge and increased customer retention.

Does this high tech research leave any room for the human touch? Yes, what is left is still what I learnt in the 1960s about the use of market research for decision making and implementation and where social mechanisms have not changed. CRM adds other dimensions to the social context: to decide what data to store in the warehouse, and which results from the data mining process to implement. The complications of managing data do not evaporate with computers and telecom.

2.5 The new millennium: leaving the past in search of a future

What the new millennium will mean is yet to be learnt, but I believe there is much ahead. Being interviewed for a book on the emergence and future of services marketing, one question asked which marketers I was most influenced by and whether these were the same as 'in my formative years' (Fisk *et al.*, 2000, p. 115). My spontaneous reaction was:

> 'I vehemently object to the way Question 3 implies that my formative years are over. I consider my current period just as formative as the early days, maybe even more so. (Whether this is a sign of senility or unwillingness to mature I cannot judge. I hope it is the latter ...).'

Whatever it is, the journey in Methodologyland continues.

One area that deeply concerns me is analysis and interpretation, the Achilles heel of all research in marketing. Whenever possible, my own analysis is explicitly systematic. When complex and ambiguous social phenomena like marketing are studied, intuition is also required, as it is often impossible to know exactly how to process data and arrive at conclusions. Intuition as a concept goes back to the 5th century and has been a topic for philosophers ever since, representing a wide span of

interpretations (Larsson, 1892). In everyday speech, intuition is often used to designate something as emotional rather than rational, but philosophers also define intuition as 'complete knowledge of reality', the 'ability to quickly draw conclusions', and 'the instantaneous perception of logical connections and truths' (Matti, 1999, p. 5-7). In the sense I use intuition here, it is not ruled by whim. It is an elaborate integration of huge amounts of data, in a good sense subjectively processed in a nanosecond; it can be specified as 'implicitly systematic'. The trouble is external control, reliability and credibility, usually counteracted with rich descriptions and discussions on alternative interpretations. Quantitative analysis is rule-bound but not entirely so because it is also influenced by subjective and intersubjective assumptions and judgment calls. Qualitative research is less rule-bound and contains a variety of fuzzily defined data that often overwhelm and frustrate researchers. The interpretation of findings is equally uncertain for quantitative and qualitative research: What decisions and actions to take and what effect they will have on the bottom line. Computer software has a long history in quantitative analysis, but over the past two decades more sophisticated software for qualitative analysis has also been designed. It began with word processors, enabling researchers to add codes to field notes and interview transcripts; with crude content analysis, mainly word frequency counts; and can now offer elaborate programs for building conceptual networks and theory (Fielding and Lee, 1998). I was alerted to these developments in the 1980s during my collaboration with the late Renata Tesch, who was a keen reviewer of software for qualitative research. Although we ran a series of workshops, only few of the participants used the software and they found that it demanded a lot of work. Even if the software is now much more powerful, I have not seen it widely used in research in marketing, and my own ability to use it is not well developed. It is a critical area for future qualitative research.

Up until the turn of the millennium I had tried a series of research approaches which I have packaged and branded *interactive research*. It is an effort to formulate my current mode of operation. Next, this package and its content will be exhibited in my recently inaugurated Hall of Fame.

3. My Hall of Fame of research approaches

This section describes my present standpoint by offering a short-list of my favorite methods. They fill my Hall of Fame of Research Methodology in Marketing. They are not distinctly separated from one another; they are inter-supportive facets of a 'research diamond', each facet illuminating a different piece of marketing reality.

3.1 Case study research: recognizing complexity and ambiguity

In case study research one or several cases are used to arrive at specific or general conclusions about certain phenomena, recognizing the multitude of

variables, complex interrelations and ambiguities of social life. Case study research provides the researcher with an input of real-world data from which concepts can be formed and propositions and extant theory can be tried. A case study can be primarily inductive, where the case provides data for conceptualization and theory generation, or primarily deductive, where cases are used to confront existing theory with reality. Cases can be selected and defined in many ways depending on the problem being examined, the access, time, and other available resources. The purpose of case study research is usually systemic and holistic in order to give a full and rich account of a network of relationships between a host of events and factors, and not just to identify single cause and effect links or piecemeal models.

Sometimes cases are labeled 'anecdotal evidence', usually in a derogatory sense. Marketing educators use cases as illustrations and examples. The cases then are not meant to prove anything, just to make general concepts more tangible. Case study research on the other hand is not anecdotal and the data can be used for exploration, description, explanation, theory generation and testing. Cases are not merely conceptual overtures to statistical hypothesis testing. The quality criteria for statistical surveys, such as reliability and representativeness, cannot be applied to case study research, nor to any other of the approaches described below. These criteria are not scientifically general. For example, a general rule for the number of cases needed to draw conclusions cannot be set up; anything from one case to several, even hundreds, can be justified depending on the situation. The sample is theoretical and purposeful: - it finds the cases that give a maximum of information - and guided by saturation - stops when the new information of additional cases approaches zero. Hamilton's (2000) single case study of the successful launching of Absolut Vodka not only helps us understand a specific vodka-case but teaches us general lessons about marketing. For further aspects of case study research see Yin (1994), Perry (1998) and Gummesson (2000).

3.2 Grounded theory: letting reality tell its story on its own terms

I am attracted by inductive, empirical research, and above all the strategies employed to create grounded theory as developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. To start a theory-generating research project by first designing clear-cut categories and criteria in a complex and dynamic area like marketing might kill or mutilate reality. As long as the search is directed to an area of interest, patterns will emerge with the gentle assistance of the researcher, not through forcing (Glaser, 1988).

An effort by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to popularize grounded theory into a more structured qualitative research manual led to heated arguments from Glaser (1992) with focus on the forcing versus emergence issue. The issue is experienced by most researchers as an impediment, even an oxymoron. For the academic researcher to be 'unpolluted' by experiences and received theory seems impossible, especially as preunderstanding is the capital and the hallmark of the professional.

I eventually settled for a reconciliation. It means that those in search of grounded theory as individuals have to train themselves to disregard existing knowledge while

breathing in new real-world data. This is no doubt a demanding balancing act; you are a tight-rope dancer in a scientific arena. At a later phase , new data is compared with extant theory and a snowballing learning effect is achieved.

I consider the systematic work to achieve grounded theory the most complete and balanced method available. Today it is one of the most frequently cited methods in the social sciences literature. Grounded theory concepts and guidelines are not necessarily new or unique but they have been inserted into a context and reached a high degree of completeness combining theoretical sensitivity, memos, comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, saturation, open and selective coding, the identification of core variables, and the generation of substantive and formal theory.

3.3 Anthropology and ethnography: the importance of being there

Van Maanen (1982, pp. 103-104) makes the following characterization of ethnographic inquiry in a specific culture or setting: 'It calls for the acquired knowledge of the always special language spoken in this setting, first-hand participation in some of the activities that take place there, and most critically, a deep reliance on intensive work with a few informants drawn from the setting.' Its prevailing data collection technique is direct or participant observation supplemented by interviews and conversations. The research is systematic and in-depth, documented not only in field notes but also in photographs, films, audiotapes, and artifacts.

Anthropologists have traditionally defined their domain far from the business enterprise and the ordinary consumer. They have produced studies of primitive tribes in Africa, social dropouts in slum districts, and the like. There is, however, a growing use of 'corporate anthropology' among researchers and consultants. 'Being there' has a time and a space dimension. Characteristic of true anthropology are the long periods over which a culture is studied - several months or years - as compared to the minutes or hours allocated to interviews in surveys. When the setting is physically defined and accessible, such as a small village, the researcher can be reasonably present and register what happens. But where is the setting of consumers in a metropolitan city, driving to and from work, spending the day in their offices and their spare time with friends and on a sports ground, disappearing into the privacy of homes, and so on? Observation is no easier in a corporate setting or in the virtual 'market space' of the Internet. Ericsson, for example, operates around the world and around the clock. Their marketing and sales staff are more often found in airplanes, in hotels, and at their client's premises, than they are found in their offices. Product development takes decades and production and delivery take years. Their Internet, intranet and extranet activity amounts to hundreds of thousands of messages every day and night. Where and when is 'being there'? In observation you need all your senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

You also need a sixth, seventh and n-th sense - feeling, intuition, sound judgment, common sense, social competence - for the registration of unobtrusive and subtle non-verbal stimuli. Practicing marketing managers and sales people are

dependent on 'reading' non-verbal language, but too many researchers behave as if it did not exist. In his grounded theory study of Folkoperan, an opera in Stockholm, Lowe (1995) used observation as one of his data collection methods.

He did not understand Swedish but turned this handicap into a strength; he was forced to sharpen his perception of non-verbal data. His observations were later discussed and checked with the opera staff.

For a further discussion on anthropology and ethnography, see Bernard (1995) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000).

3.4 Action research: making it happen and reflecting

Action researchers take action. The concept of action research (or action science) is reserved for the situations in which researchers assume the role of change agents of the processes and events they are simultaneously studying. In contrast to the mainstream researcher who is serenely detached, the action researcher is deeply involved. Applied to the study of business corporations and marketing, the action researcher can be a person who is both an academic researcher and either a marketing practitioner or an external consultant, a consumer or a citizen.

Like Pangloss in Voltaire's satirical novel *Candide* from 1759, researchers in marketing live in the best of worlds. As consumers, citizens and scholars, we are users of goods and services provided by business and government. We represent half of the economy. We are offered constant and close access to reality, far superior to that of any other type of data collection method. Why ask others and discard our own closeness to reality and the richness of the experience in which we have a stake and which sometimes gives us sleepless nights, where we act, use our intellect and our emotions? Compared to this, the survey stands out as deprived of access to data. In her study of consumer buying behavior on the Internet, Frostling-Henningsson (2000) followed 22 households over an extended period, her own household included. The research is involved and subjective, yes, but it can be consciously detached, objective and reflective as well. We are the instrument; it is us fine-tuning our ability to observe and reflect and offer interpretations. The scientist balances a schizophrenic personality to get the best out of both Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. In action research, role conflict and ambiguity are part of the researcher's day-to-day life. It is more demanding of our personality than any other approach. In practice it is hard for action researchers to score top points on all the demands made of them, a plight, however, shared by other types of researchers, not least those who apply statistical techniques. Action research should preferably be conducted in real time, but retrospective action research should not be wasted by the marketing community. There is a wealth of information stored in the minds of people who have lived through important and often dramatic events with unique access. They did not see themselves as researchers at the time, but afterwards started to reflect on what they had been through.

Further discussion on action research and action science is found in Argyris *et al.* (1985); Gummesson (2000); and Coghlan and Brannick (2001).

3.5 Narrative research: making reality come alive

Narrative research is concerned with the ways 'in which social actors produce, represent and contextualize experiences through narratives' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 54). Narratives are accounts - stories - about experiences, and they can take many forms. There is usually an initial state of affairs, then actions and events occur and there is perhaps a plot, and then there is an end, at least a temporary end, and more rarely the definitive 'and they lived happily ever after'.

Narratives can be chronological but can also weave a web of events around various themes or concepts. This journey through Methodologyland is a narrative. By presenting research as a story, we can avoid the fragmentation that is inevitable when we break down a statement into concepts and categories.

There are many ways of analyzing and interpreting stories but what has struck me as particularly exciting about narrative research is how stories can be used to present cases and other research to an audience. An important area of marketing is communication, i.e., to submit palatable messages on the terms of different target groups. In this respect researchers in marketing can learn from novelists, moviemakers, and true investigative journalists, but should not, however, add fictional elements. The narrative approach can improve the dissemination of research by making it interesting and stimulating to read and listen to. On the topic of quality in research in management I found only one common dimension which

> ... is not even mentioned in books on scientific methodology but seems to have implicit, universal acceptance: *A scientific report should be boring and difficult to read*. If it reads well, and even inspires a smile or a good laugh, the scientist will be suspected of being 'unscientific' or having written a popular textbook, the latter being scorned in many 'scientific' circles.
> (Gummesson, 2000, p. 185)

Drucker (1987: 11) notes that 'it is only in the last twenty or thirty years that being incomprehensible has become a virtue in academia.' In Hamilton's book *Absolut: Biography of a Bottle* (2000) the case is presented in a thrilling and amusing way, still a documentary and not fiction, but unfolding the drama of the coincidences, personalities, risks, and ambiguities of successful marketing. (It has been criticized, though, for ethical reasons, such as the author having been too uninhibited about the embarrassing mistakes and less flattering personality traits of the people involved.) For a further discussion of narrative research, see also Czarniawska (1998) and Gabriel (2000).

3.6 Interactive research: my current methodology-in-use

Interactive research is the name I have chosen for my current methodology-in-use. The choice is based on the conviction that interaction and communication play a crucial role in the research process. On an abstract and general level, I see life, including both marketing methodology and theory, as networks of relationships

within which interaction takes place. Instead of searching for simple and partial causality, I search for a systemic whole with individual and complex patterns of interactive relationships. 'Interactive' will be used as the core property of this type of research.

Interactive research is a 'package' of the aforementioned approaches with the addition of some dimensions which are potentially inherent in these approaches, but have not stood out clearly enough to me. Earlier I used the metaphor of the research diamond in which each facet illuminates a different piece of marketing reality, together producing marketing theory. A diamond is beautiful when it sparkles and glistens, just the way I would like scientific research to enlighten our minds.

Let me recall the heart of each contribution to interactive research presented so far: recognizing complexity and ambiguity (case study research); letting reality tell its story on its own terms (grounded theory); the importance of being there (anthropology/ethnography); making it happen and reflecting (action research); and making reality come alive (narrative research).

These approaches represent various interactions, such as between the researcher and the object of study and its actors; between your consciousness and the qualities of your inner self; between substantive data and general concepts; between the parts and the whole; between words, numbers, body language and tacit language; and the concurrent, non-linear and dynamic interaction between data collection, analysis, interpretation and conclusions. These elements of interactive research all strive to achieve close access to reality and high validity.

My addition to interactive research is *interaction with audiences and with computers*, stressing both high tech and high touch aspects. Without an audience all research is dead. By presenting tentative research approaches, concepts, ideas and results, we test our ability to interact with a variety of audiences: students, colleagues, CEOs, marketing managers, salespeople, media people; with those from B-to-B and B-to-C (business-to-consumer) marketing, and from manufacturing and services; with people from different cultures and countries; and in different languages. Encounters with audiences are not merely the end of a research program aiming to sell our findings, rather, they are a simultaneous activity to be added to data collection, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and future research. Presenting research makes demands of us. To make overhead and Powerpoint slides legible, we are forced to structure and condense data and conclusions, or the viewers, listeners and readers will not respond. But we are also given extra options to play with words, diagrams, drawings, scanned pictures, colors, photos, animation and sound, making our message attractive. The availibility of these aids does not rule out close human contact and informal dialogue. In recent seminars with two of Sweden's best-known Internet consultants, neither carried a laptop or a multimedia presentation, but sat on a table chatting with the audience, occasionally scribbling and sketching graffiti-like notes and images on the whiteboard. The computer also offers interaction between myself and my text as it allows me to write, draw, edit and print as a continuous and technically almost effortless process. The screen speaks back as I see my words and pictures neatly appearing, and so do the printouts.

In interactive research, theory generation and theory testing are Siamese twins and not separate, consecutive stages. It is not a matter of doing conceptual, qualitative pilot studies first and then 'doing the real thing and going empirical' by testing hypotheses with numbers. Through further theory generation in never-ending iterations we gain a spiralling effect and build a helix of continued development of knowledge. We go from pre-understanding to understanding to a new level of understanding and so on; and from substantive, specific data to concepts that serve as vehicles for reaching more general theory levels. In certain phases, statistical deductive testing can occur, but the strategy is continuous theory development, where improved or completely changed theories consitute the test results.

Like each of its constituent parts, interactive research should be governed by a humanist, hermeneutic and phenomenological paradigm, although elements from a quantitative and positivistic paradigm may be included. It cannot be evaluated by the criteria that currently dominate research at most business schools. Contrary to common belief, those criteria are not general but only specific to quantitative research. Interactive research perhaps only codifies the best of common sense. Most research is about trivial things that we are all familiar with and have to handle to survive the day. We may lack the ability to go beyond our experiences and therefore scientific research can add new insights. Water, air and temperature are everyday phenomena that any person knows about and are salient issues in the natural sciences. Buying, pricing and relationships are examples of marketing phenomena encountered by every consumer every day and they are important parameters of marketing theory. Common sense is often obscene language to mainstream academics, probably because they associate it with folklore, opinion, ignorance, superstition and irrationality. In my book on relationship marketing, however, I advocate more common sense in marketing and science (Gummesson, 1999). Intuition has already been mentioned as part of the analytical process, and it is there whether we approve of it or not. Common sense and intuition are like brother and sister; other family members are sound judgment, instinct, experience, wisdom, insights, and tacit knowing. A definition of common sense found in *Brewster's Dictionary* from 1870 is similar to that of intuition: 'Common sense does not mean that good sense which is common ... but the point where all five senses meet, supposed to be the seat of the soul, where it judges what is presented by the senses and decides the mode of action.' We can broaden the definition to include our whole personality with emotions, intellect, values and ethics.

With such common sense in marketing, marketing theory could not have missed services, quality, relationships, and green issues for decades.

4. A concepts commentary

This section comments on some concepts from the theory of science where I have found oddities in their application in the marketing discipline. These are, first, misconceptions about objectivity, intersubjectivity and subjectivity; and, second, the favoring of old mathematics and the little use of new mathematics.

4.1 Objectivity, intersubjectivity and subjectivity

Subjectivity is foul language in fundamentalist science and used as a curse; a 'correct' research strategy requires objectivity. However, objectivity may be a unicorn, the mythical beast from James Thurber's fable. Objectivity requires research to be independent of the scientist and the research technique. At the same time, we recognize the subjective statements and feelings of consumers and redefine them as hard facts, aggregate them, and in a democratic voting sense turn them objective. We operationalize in order to adjust an issue to our research techniques and claim this as objective. The chosen process of knowing will partly decide the known, or in the words of physicist and Nobel Laureate Werner Heisenberg: 'What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning' (quoted in Capra 1997, p. 40). For example, the 'interviewer effect' is well known in marketing.

Role model researchers are instructed to be dispassionate and not let emotions and commitment distort their work. In contrast, Game and Metcalf (1996) advocate 'passionate sociology', claiming that passion is necessary to ignite the spark of life in scientific research. It requires close involvement and commitment, but also the ability to swing between that and distant detachment. The more detached, the less access and closeness, the less risk of being corrupted by the studied situation, but the less validity.

There is good and evil objectivity and good and evil subjectivity. *Good objectivity* refers to the effort to ascertain that data are facts and not opinion or wishful thinking, not conjectured for political or personal interests, that they are not faked, or simply that the research is not silly. *Evil objectivity* appears when science is controlled in the bureaucratic, ritualistic sense, when non-compliance with established procedure and the rule-book is automatically rejected as false science. *Good subjectivity* recognizes aspects other than just the explicit logical intellect, such as the value of intuition and common sense. *Evil subjectivity* is what good objectivity tries to restrain.

If subjectivity is a 'two-legged paradigm', intersubjectivity is 'a centipede paradigm'. In 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, still being reprinted in all major languages and claimed to have sold 30 million copies. It deals with the importance of good, sustaining relationships in private life, politics and business; it is essentially today's relationship marketing gospel. Carnegie (1936/1999, p. 148) quotes an old adage: 'When two partners always agree, one is not necessary.' It could be paraphrased to marketing: 'When 1000 marketing professors always agree, 999 are redundant.' Truth is not a voting issue; the majority vote is not the same as objectivity, quality or progress. Those who advocate objectivity in marketing usually - and probably unknowingly - refer to intersubjectivity, that is what has been the approved standard by an academic marketing jetset through peer review or sheer power. But when paradigms and discoveries are new, they only have one or a few votes. However, intersubjectivity can be a way of enhancing knowledge if used in the dialogic sense; through open

dialogue between peers a higher quality knowledge can be achieved (Edfeldt and Janson, 1995).

No science, be it natural or social, can do without subjectivity, not even mathematics and physics, much less medicine, and much, much less marketing. Creativity and lateral thinking - generating new theory and a basis for propositions or hypotheses - is subjective. If we realize that excluding subjectivity is the same as excluding the personality of the scientist, the knower, we may also realize that science battles with self-imposed limitations like Don Quixote battled with windmills. For example, it is known that to become a top mathematician, the candidate must demonstrate extreme intuition and instant understanding of mathematics at a very early age. What is not in the personality cannot be compensated for through hard studies of math later in life. All science includes elements of subjectivity as well as elements of rigorous procedure with objective properties. The selection of a problem, its variables, and the design and purpose of a research program are subjective. Although the processing of numbers may be objective to some extent, the interpretation of statistical tables is subjective and the decisions to act on the data are subjective.

4.2 Old mathematics and new mathematics

The majority of business schools in the world teach and do research as if statistical techniques and deductive research were the only genuine science. They claim that statistical hypothesis testing, operational definitions, clearly defined independent and dependent variables, cause and effect studies of two (or sometimes a few more) variables, experiments with control groups, and representative averages of aggregated statistical data constitute true science, even the only true science.

The Greek word *empeiria* originally meant ‘knowledge based on experience and observation’. In science, empirical research came to mean real-world data collected and processed through certain methods and techniques. In marketing, ‘empirical’ has been narrowed down to quantitative data and statistical techniques.

Other real-world data generating and processing methods are called qualitative, conceptual, exploratory, anecdotal or speculative, all being viewed as merely antecedents to deduction and quantification.

Modern natural sciences deploy new mathematics and logic from the 20th century. New mathematics includes systems theory, chaos theory and dissipative structures, fractal geometry, autopoiesis with self-healing and self-organizing systems, and others. They are all geared to accepting and addressing complexity, dynamics, indeterminism and ambiguity. They are not looking for simplistic and partial cause and effect links, but for patterns and wholes. They dissolve the artificial demarcation line between qualitative and quantitative; in fact, the new mathematics is more qualitative than quantitative. Networks, as patterns of relationships within which interaction takes place, are stressed. These are the same core variables that are stressed in interactive research and in relationship marketing.

Contrary to the conventional view of the natural sciences being ordered, controlled and objective, the new mathematics and its applications deal with complexity, ambiguity, fuzzy definitions, consciousness, intuition, experience, tacit knowledge, and a holistic and systemic view.

The transfer of theories and methods from natural sciences to social sciences is often branded as pseudo-science. Their application gradually appears in management disciplines (Stacey, 1996; Zohar, 1997; Morgan, 1998). Paradoxically, the very same people who scorn efforts to transfer new mathematics to social sciences advocate the use of old mathematics on social issues, all the way from Euclid's geometry (approx. 300 BC) to the mechanical worldviews of Galileo (1564-1642), Descartes (1596-1650) and Newton (1642-1727) and later developments in statistical theory. The preoccupation with the old mathematics is a paradox because the *new* mathematics, deriving from the 20th century and much of it from the past few decades, opens up new opportunities.

5. My Chamber of Horrors

One could expect those who claim they work with superior quantitative scientific rigor to be well equipped to defend their standpoint and do it with the application of the same rigor as they claim they use in their scientific studies. I have learnt that this is not so and have frequently experienced that they merely claim they are right. They are willing to discuss as long as the discussion does not threaten their scientific credo. Market economy values, embraced by most practicing and academic marketers, encourage competition and oppose monopoly. When it comes to doing research, however, a command economy is advocated. Their arguments are often the same as those of Karl Marx, who branded those who disagreed with his ideas as 'unscientific' (Johnson, 1989). I have been disappointed when meeting heavyweight professors in marketing, who are not used to having their beliefs queried and just dictate answers to questions without dialogue and humility, and when hearing PhD students and new PhDs from top-ranking business schools echo the approved gospel from books and authorities without reflection. They sell hard, they defend their position, but they do not listen. They belong in my Chamber of Horrors.

A well-known representative of scientific research methodology, Mario Bunge, professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, is an ardent protector of traditional research methods, and a prosecutor of what he calls charlatans in science. Though an extremist in his scientific approach, his extremes have an audience and he makes the scientific dilemma stand out clearly. In a 'Charter of Intellectual Academic Rights and Duties' he presents 10 'commandments' of science (Bunge, 1996, p. 110-11). The intentions are commendable: we are all longing for simple guidelines that will lead us on the right path of science. His goal is to separate science from the 'bunk' that has managed to infiltrate academia, disguised in false scientific clothing, 'a postmodern Trojan horse' that has become the most lethal enemy of all, the enemy within.

His commandments all sound acceptable, but how will they be practiced?

Having read his 15-page text, a lasting impression is left by the well over 100 occasions where he applies abusive designations to research and researchers who deviate from his norm. They represent mysticism, freewheeling, deceit, anti-intellectualism, guts over brains, instinct over reason, contrived willful ignorance, gobbledygook and much, much more. Such diverse personalities as the Nobel Laureates in the Economic Sciences Gary Becker and Milton Friedman, and philosophers Herbert Marcuse and Michel Foucault, are bunched together as bad guys. Bunge's commandment no. 6 reads: 'Every academic has the right to discuss any unorthodox views that interest him, provided those views are clear enough to be discussed rationally.' The immediate problem is who determines what is 'clear enough' and what is 'rational': it is a matter of interpretation. If the ethics, good intentions and wisdom of the scientist are lacking, no rules will rectify the situation. That can only be done through subjective, individual reflection and intersubjective, peer group dialogue, not through a series of parallel monologues.

Criteria such as rationality, clarity, and rigor are not creative qualities; they correspond to regulations in a bureaucracy. They do not spawn innovation although they may maintain temporary order. Just like in business and government two archetypes can be found in universities, the bureaucratic researchers and the entrepreneurs. The bureaucratic researcher is testing and polishing: 'I am a scientist, I go by the book, I cannot be blamed.' The entrepreneur researcher is a theory generator: 'I am a scientist too, but I am a risktaker, I break rules, I will make mistakes.' We need both, but we are now churning out bureaucrat researchers, not entrepreneur researchers. We are educating measurement technicians, not scholars. At the same time Bunge is emphatically rejecting subjectivity and discarding interpretation as mere guesswork, he makes continuous subjective interpretations and evaluations of a diverse range of research. He is right in doing so if he is guided by his common sense, including high ethics and good intentions. But he denounces the right of others to use their good subjectivity. Hence his discussion becomes an oxymoron.

A recent anthology in Sweden (Hansson and Sandin, 2000) reviews studies published at universities concerning telepathy, the use of the divining rod to find water, astrology and other methods that are not recognized by the scientific community. Although the authors are not as extreme as Bunge, they advocate playing safe 'because a few inferior dissertations or reports from an academic research institution can undermine the trust for the whole system'. This is to me a lethal modus operandi for science. To generate new knowledge in marketing, scholars should be guided by curiosity and the search for truth. Science must take risks and make mistakes; it must be entrepreneurial, not bureaucratic.

6. Epilogue

It has been obvious that my answer to the question in the title, 'Are current research approaches in marketing leading us astray?' is Yes. What is taught to

students and PhD candidates in business schools is still essentially that quantitative techniques will give us the truth and that qualitative approaches are just preliminaries. We are promoting a vicious circle, as these people will make up our next generation executives and professors who in turn will guide their next generation. Quantification has become so engrained in mainstream education that complying with its specifications and publishing accordingly is the fast lane to a university career, even the only lane. This is a waste of talent, brain-power, and creativity. At the same time, we fail to offer proper education in qualitative methods, which require more personal maturity, sound judgment, involvement and interaction. We must realize that every method and theory has its limitations. Like a rope, however strong, breaks at some point, mathematical formulae and other rigorous techniques break if stretched too far. And many quantitative 'ropes' are no more than shoe-strings. As we learn in marketing, the time to market - the period between innovation and profit-making sales - is lengthy and needs speeding up. This could be applied to marketing theory itself. The problem is not only to generate new marketing theory but to market it to professors and textbook writers and hope that they will be prepared to accept challenges and take them further, and not just preserve the status quo. In my view, however, general marketing theory has not made any striking progress beyond the marketing management paradigm since the 1960s.

Seminal contributions to a general marketing theory such as services marketing (services today embrace 80 percent of all jobs), B-to-B marketing as networks, relationship marketing in its wide sense as interaction in networks of relationships (not just IT-based loyalty programs or how to 'own' and 'lock in' the customer), quality management and its revival of marketing-orientation and customer satisfaction, the network organization in a network society, the need for broadened accounting systems embracing both financial and intellectual capital, and the freewheeling technological infrastructure of the Internet and other IT developments that badly need marketing theory and context are not truly integrated into marketing theory. This article has focused on methodology, the process of knowing. Most of what I have said has been written about before. Some of the greatest methodologists have told us not to get stuck. Among these are Kuhn (1962): Don't get stuck in mainstream research, realize that knowledge is only cumulative to a point, then a paradigm shift is needed to provide a fresh scientific foundation; Glaser and Strauss (1967): Don't get stuck in received theory but let knowledge be grounded in reality and be generated and tested through continuous comparison; and Feyerabend (1975): Don't get stuck in methodological rites and technicalities, choose the tools that are most fit to investigate the issue being studied. The variety of possible methods in marketing has been debated long ago by many; see for example Hunt (1983), and later Wallendorf and Brooks (1993) and Stern (1998); see also a historical review by Saren (1999). Currently, postmodernists in marketing are, in varying degrees of radicalism, challenging the mainstream marketing paradigm and its favored research techniques (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Brown, 1998).

I summed up my methodology-in-use as interactive research. At the end of the day, I would like to underscore four strategies that drive science, including marketing theory development. These are *curiosity*, *courage*, *reflection* and *dialogue.*

The rest is technicalities and support to make reflection and dialogue healthy and productive. Whether the research is labelled quantitative or qualitative, deductive or inductive and so on, is immaterial (irrelevant?); it is the productive process of knowing what counts.

As researchers we should be curious and never rest on our laurels. Curiosity requires us to take risks and show courage. Reflection allows our inner dialogue, our 'innernet', to blossom; it is introspection and faith in instinct. Internal dialogue goes with external reflection, 'outrospection', or what we usually call just dialogue, where we learn from each other with open minds and sensitivity. When we find a gap between our perceived reality and the reality suggested by received theory, and we have compared, reflected and conducted a dialogue to ascertain that we are not trapped by our own bias, we should rely on our perception of reality. We should propose that theory be changed and challenge the mainstream paradigm in a constructive way. We should not say: 'I have to comply with the system I live in or I won't get published and my career will go down the drain.' You will of course meet with resistance, but do not get stuck in frustration or cynicism, acting like the misunderstood genius. Instead, listen to criticism and learn from it without giving up (unless, of course, you find you have been mistaken).

This article has focused on the process of knowing, that is, the application of research methodology. The knower (the researcher) and the known (the outcome) were only mentioned to recognize a context within which knowledge is generated. An article with a focus on the known, that is the outcome of the process of knowing and particularly the road to a more a general marketing theory, is in progress. An article on the knower is also being planned. Among other things it might discuss the dual incentives and strategies of academic leaders of the marketing discipline to simultaneously encourage and block theory development.

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