Advancing From Subjective to Confirmatory Personal Introspection in Consumer Research

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ABSTRACT

Research findings support the view that a multiple-methods approach is necessary to surface the substantial amount of relevant thinking processes that occur both consciously and unconsciously within different phases of consumer decision making. This article advocates viewing all studies that ask informants questions as representative of researcher-informant introspections. Because answers to questions differ substantially depending on how the questions are framed, applying multiple, explicit, question frames to acquire conscious and unconscious thoughts in researcher-informant introspections is helpful. This article reviews multiple methods, including metaphor elicitation of unconscious thinking, useful for achieving and confirming thick descriptions of conscious and unconscious thinking associated with informants’ deep-seated beliefs and observable actions. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

A substantial body of consumer research now supports a “creative destructive” (Lowenstein, 2001) view of consumer decision making (see Bargh, 2002; Zaltman, 2003). Such a view proposes that in actuality consumers have far less access to their own mental activities than marketers give them credit for. A stream of studies supports the conclusion that informants are able to only partially retrieve and report the reasons for their
actions (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Woodside, 2004; Woodside & Wilson, 2003). “Ninety-five percent of thinking takes place in our unconscious minds—that wonderful, if messy, stew of memories, emotions, thoughts, and other cognitive processes we’re not aware of or that we can’t articulate” (Zaltman, 2003, p. 9).

Consequently, this article offers a workbench model of informant’s thinking related to interpreting and answering questions that the informant asks him- or herself or is asked by another researcher (e.g., another person addressing a question to an informant). The article suggests the use of a combination of introspective conscious and unconscious thought-retrieval elicitation techniques to achieve three objectives: (a) confirming both the belief and evaluations held consciously and unconsciously by the informant, (b) confirming the existence of experiences and related outcomes as described by the informant, and (c) achieving a deep understanding of how consumers become aware of their own desires (see Belk, Güliz Ger, & Askegaard, 2003) that affect their search behavior, purchases, and use of products and services.

Figure 1 portrays multiple issues related to thinking about an issue raised by a researcher—regardless of whether or not the researcher is the same or a person different from an informant. Table 1 summarizes some of the research concerns and findings that relate to the first nine issues in Figure 1.

Given that the dominant logic in consumer research continues to rely on asking questions and that attempts at answering questions require introspection (i.e., interpreting the questions, retrieving information from memory, editing, and reporting), Levy’s (1996, p. 172) views represent a sound defense for advancing introspection research methods:

![Figure 1. Introspective thinking process related to answering a question.](image-url)
In a casual sense, introspection is an inevitable part of consumer research, used by all research workers, as it means looking within one’s self to know one’s ideas and feelings. That is, introspection is another word for being self-conscious, aware, thoughtful, having ideas, and knowing what they are.

### Table 1. Research Concerns and Findings for 10 Issues Related to Introspection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Research Concerns and Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Researcher (R) frames and asks question.</td>
<td>1. Alternative question frames have large influence on how informant (I) interprets and answers the question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Informant (I) aware of question asked?</td>
<td>2. I may not attend or interpret R’s statement as a question.</td>
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<td>3. Metacognition: I asks herself why question asked.</td>
<td>3. Metacognition likely to be an implicit step that I does not verbalize unless unsure, not confident, about rationale.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I crafts meaning; reframes question and topic.</td>
<td>4. Meaning/interpretation I assigns may poorly match with R’s framing of the issue and general focus of the inquiry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I’s search of long-term for experiences and knowledge relevant to question as I has framed it.</td>
<td>5. I’s initial search is done automatically; a spreading activation occurs quickly among easily retrieved concepts; evaluations are assigned automatically among concepts retrieved based on unconscious thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Unconscious thinking activated.</td>
<td>6. Most thinking occurs unconsciously; I partially able to uncover unconscious thinking by reflection and use of thinking probes (e.g., metaphor elicitations).</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I retrieves experiences and knowledge from memory; interprets own thoughts; assigns meaning.</td>
<td>7. I automatically and unconsciously decides when to stop retrieving experiences, interpreting, and assigning meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I crafts answers; does editing of thoughts.</td>
<td>8. Crafting and editing done automatically partially and by controlled thinking as well (I may ask, “Will I get in trouble if I say what I really think?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I verbalizes answer.</td>
<td>9. I unlikely to provide rationale for beliefs without probing by R in order to limit cognitive effort and limit interviewing time.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In a casual sense, introspection is an inevitable part of consumer research, used by all research workers, as it means looking within one’s self to know one’s ideas and feelings. That is, introspection is another word for being self-conscious, aware, thoughtful, having ideas, and knowing what they are.
Relevant to the researcher asking a question (the starting oval in Figure 1), some amount of national and micro-culture-based unconsciousness (see Hofstede, 2001) occurs in framing and verbalizing questions. For example, how an Australian, a Brit, and an American frames and asks a respondent about beverages that the respondent consumed for breakfast will vary unconsciously by word content, dialect, and speaking pattern—even though the three researchers are using the same language. Hofstede’s (2001, p. 4) view about provoking behavior applies to the researcher asking questions: “Strategies using provoking behavior inevitably contain a Heisenberg effect, in that the researcher interferes with the behavior observed. This means that such behavior [as reported by the informant] cannot always be extrapolated to circumstances in which the researcher is not present.” Also, the events and thinking process reported retrospectively by the informant may be viewed accurately as only approximations and highlights of the events and processes that actually occurred. Researcher interference with the behavior observed also applies to the researchers’ recordings and interpretations of nonreactive measures (for a discussion of this point, see Chapter 1 in Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000).

SUBJECTIVE PERSONAL INTROSPECTION

Subjective personal introspection (SPI; see Holbrook, 1986) includes a family of research methods that rely extensively or even exclusively on the researchers’ life experiences as data (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). Holbrook (1986, 1995, 1999, 2003, in press) provides a stream of introspective empirical reports focusing on one method of introspection: “impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer’s own private consumption experiences” (Holbrook, in press, p. 3). Holbrook’s contributions stimulated the work of other consumer researchers (e.g., Gould, 1991, 1995; Hirschman, 1992; Williams, 1992) and work with a colleague (Holbrook & Kuwahara, 1998).

Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) discern five categories of introspection on the basis of the level of closeness or intimacy between the researcher and introspector:

- **Researcher introspection:** The ultimate level of closeness in which the researcher is the sole introspector in the study; while several studies are available using this method, “our review of the social science literatures indicates that consumer research may be alone in this regard” (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993, p. 141).
- **Guided introspection:** People other than the researcher are asked to introspect or think aloud about themselves and their actions; answering a written questionnaire is one form of guided introspection.
- **Interactive introspection:** The researcher assists others in their introspections but the object of the study is the “emergent experi-
ences of both parties” (Ellis, 1991, p. 30). Wallendorf and Brucks comment that “beyond Ellis’s initial discussion, there does not appear to be a social science literature that has used and refined this method.” The present study does advance Ellis’s perspective and includes an interactive introspection among the triangulation of methods employed.

- **Syncretic combinations:** The most common form expands the sample beyond the researcher but also incorporates details of the researcher’s life experience that she or he is willing to document; unlike interactive introspection, this combination does not have the researcher share his/her introspections with informants (e.g., Freud, 1908/1965).

- **Reflexivity within research:** Ethnographic studies using participant observation and relying on two sources of data: (a) observational and interview material from people in a cultural group being studied and (b) reflexive material that emerges from being a participant studying that cultural group.

**ADVANCING TOWARD CONFIRMATORY PERSONAL INTROSPECTION**

Employing a syncretic combination of methods likely leads to deeper sense making than SPI, as developed and advocated by Holbrook (1986, in press). Such syncretic combination includes two or more of the following methods: (a) researcher self-introspection and written description of an observable stream of behaviors and thoughts occurring while the behaviors occurred; (b) the researcher interviewing any mentors who participated in the behavioral process under study; (c) the researcher interviewing a cohort to learn the cohort’s interpretations about the researcher’s own understanding of the occurrence of specific acts in the stream of behavior, and the antecedents that lead to each act; (d) the reflective use of decision and conscious processing tools by the researcher to help surface prior conscious thought (see Park, Hughes, Thurkal, & Friedman, 1981); (e) metaphor-generating tools (e.g., Christensen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman, 2003) and the use of experimental research designs (e.g., see Bargh, 2002) to uncover unconscious thinking relevant to the behavioral process being investigated; and (f) the use of an independently developed survey schedules to assist the researcher–informant in his or her introspection.

The objectives of this combination of methods include:

- Confirming the occurrence of milestone behavioral events and decision heuristics used in making choices in specific phases of the behavioral process;

- Uncovering unrecognized paradoxes and resolutions in differences in opinions held by multiple persons participating in several phases of the behavioral process under study;
• Helping to make explicit the “implicit mental model” (Senge, 1990) relevant to decision making within the original time frame of the introspection study; and
• Surfacing thoughts held unconsciously that are applicable to choices made in the process under study.

In his report of the following incident, Holbrook (in press, p. 11) offers a backhand (i.e., he is not an advocate of the need for independent assessments of researcher introspections) application of syncretic combinations in his interpretive analysis of photographs from his family's archive: “I often find myself musing over what rampant lack of self-confidence would encourage a mechanical reliance on such self-imprisoning safeguards and such vision-restricting formulas. The closest I have come to a member check [an independent assessment of an SPI for accuracy and completeness] has been inviting my ninety-one-year-old mother to attend a conference where I presented some of this material and dutifully making revisions in my comments as she called out occasional corrections from the audience.” Note that he reports that his mother’s comments helped to revise his incorrect remembrances and her silences imply confirmation of other parts of his narration.

Thus, the attempt here is to illustrate how unique forms of introspective syncretic combinations can be planned that help to (at least partially) overcome the Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) conclusion that researcher self-introspection offers severely limited potential in contributing useful research in consumer behavior.

The application of multiple research methods transforms Holbrook’s SPI to achieve a confirmatory personal introspection (CPI) that includes many of the criteria of scientific approaches to research without the loss of the criteria representing the artistic approach (see Brown, 1998, for a review of both approaches). CPI is likely to be found useful for designing products and marketing communications that consumers find desirable and that motivate their purchase behavior. These two views respond to Andreasen's (1985) and Well's (1993) “research backward” guideline to answer the “so what?” question before implementing an empirical investigation.

Given the substantial scientific evidence that most thinking is unconscious (for reviews, see Bargh, 2002; Zaltman, 2003), the research tools to surface unconscious thoughts described subsequently are worthy of attention. Field studies applying CPI may demonstrate the usefulness for working from several complementary literature streams to extend Zaltman’s (2003) treatise on how consumers think—including strategies for theorizing from process data (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999); decision-plan net theory of individual-choice models (see Park et al., 1981); “autoethnography” and other personal introspection methods (Holbrook, in press; Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993), as well as related views on sense making (Weick, 1995); and unconscious and automatic influences on consumer judgment, behavior, and motivation (see Bargh, 2002).
In bare-knuckle terms, the view here attacks the current dominant logic in consumer research on learning the reasons for consumer choice of brands or store sites by relying principally on a written, self-completed surveys using mostly closed-end (fixed-point) questions. Although most consumers are able to complete such surveys, such a highly cognitive method excludes data collection of most thoughts—embracing the finding that most thinking occurs unconsciously, consumers have only limited accessibility to the unconscious, and “people generally do not think in words” (Zaltman, 2003, p. 13). Behavioral research methods that enable consumers to access their unconscious thoughts need widespread adoption in studies on product and brand knowledge held by consumers. CPI research includes methods designed to reduce the inherent attempts to self-edit and block unwelcomed, or socially unacceptable (see Fisher, 1993), thoughts, and to stimulate informants to report reasons for their actions seemingly “too minor to mention” in open-ended written responses.

Subsequent to this introduction, the literature review suggests placing introspection in consumer research within grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and building theories from case study research (see Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999; Woodside & Wilson, 2003). The third section urges the adoption of Hirschman’s (1986) humanistic inquiry philosophy and method recommendations as much as possible for researcher introspection. The fourth section describes the application of multiple methods focusing on the same empirical ground covered by a researcher’s introspection—multiple methods that are useful for surfacing unconscious thoughts and aiding retrieval of conscious thoughts generated during the process being examined. The fifth section offers implications for theory construction that follow from CPI. The final section covers limitations, conclusions, and suggestions for further research.

INTROSPECTION, CASE-STUDY RESEARCH, AND CONSTRUCTING GROUNDED THEORIES

Building theories from case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Woodside & Wilson, 2003), the organizational decision-making literature (see Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Posada, & Saint-Macary, 1995), and the historical method in consumer research (Smith & Lux, 1993) provides useful theoretical grounding for researcher self-introspection. Eisenhardt (1989) informs that, “The case study is a research study which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings . . . Moreover, cases studies can employ an embedded design, that is, multiple levels of analysis within a single study (Yin, 1994).”

Langley et al. (1995) review organizational literature that recognizes phases in some decision making that often involve an iterative feedback
process, but nonetheless often lead to some form of choice agreement among multiple participants in the process, followed by action. These authors emphasize that even when a decision can be isolated, rarely can the processes leading up to it.

Thus, most of the literature notwithstanding, we believe that no decision can be understood *de novo* or *in vitro*, apart from the perceptions of the actors and the mindsets and cultures of the contexts in which they are embedded. On the contrary, we shall argue that decision making must be studied *in toto* and inspiration, emotion, and memory, and at the collective level to include history, culture, and context in the vast network of decision making that makes up every organization. (Langley et al., 1995, p. 261)

Several authors in separate but complementary research streams emphasize that subconscious processes play major roles in decision making. Thus, Langley et al. (1995, p. 268) wish to add to Simon’s administrative man, an “insightful man, who listens to the voices emanating from his own unconscious, or perhaps, better expressed, who sights the images that well up in his own imagination.” Smith and Lux (1993) call for the study of unconscious motives ($M_u$) in their historical-method exposition in consumer research, “Unlike transparent motives that “just are,” unconscious motives arise from social circumstances that do not necessarily have to stand as they are, but of which the individual may not be consciously aware at the time the act occurs. Such unconscious motives might be likened to unreflected experience (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) in that they constitute a ground against which behavior is the figure.”

Unconscious processing is an additional observation found in the literature on decision-making and thinking research. “It is often difficult to say who decided something and when—or even who originated a decision” (quoted in Quinn, 1980, p. 134; and Langley et al., 1995, p. 265).

**Core Propositions for Examining the Buying Process for Major Services**

Consequently, the core proposition ($CP_1$) offered here is that consumer choice processes include recognizable phases involving several persons participating in one or more phases with conscious and unconscious thoughts/motives affecting the buyers’ beliefs and actions, and that one or all of the participants may be unable to consciously explain the causes of specific milestone subdecisions occurring in the process. However, $CP_2$, relating to the purchase process for a major consumer durable (e.g., motor vehicle) or service (e.g., the selection of a university to attend for a 3- or 4-year degree), states that one or more phases of the process are likely to include substantial conscious effort, and some of the thinking involved (not all) can be retrieved within a researcher introspective study.
ADOPTING THE HUMANISTIC-INQUIRY PARADIGM FOR RESEARCHER INTROSPECTION

Hirschman (1986) provides four criteria appropriate for humanistic inquiry that, if applied, are useful for increasing the usefulness of researcher introspections—including subjective personal introspections:

- **Credibility**: Representing the multiple realities of the process examined adequately, possibly by the researcher submitting the interpretation to the scrutiny of the participant in the process who provided some of the original data and seeking responses as to the report’s authenticity.
- **Transferability**: Transferring the resulting interpretation of the process to other contexts, such as the purchase of a major service different from the one being examined (e.g., processes involved in buying a medical procedure versus processes for a university degree).
- **Dependability**: Use of multiple human investigators enhances internal stability of measures taken.
- **Confirmability**: Seeking neutrality and objectivity, possibly by asking outside auditors to confirm or disconfirm the interpretations by the researcher.

Crafting Formal Survey Protocols for Self-Interviews

One step toward increasing credibility in researcher self-introspection is for the researcher to formally interview him- or herself on two or more separate occasions. Although such a suggestion may seem absurd, calls for further reflection by decision makers for more useful sensemaking of events and causes of these events are made elsewhere (e.g., Weick, 1993). The use of a formal survey protocol for completing by the researcher, with him or her adding and answering additional questions, is another suggestion that may improve credibility—thus, the use of a written interview schedule of questions crafted earlier by an informant and others serves to guide, broaden, and deepen emic interpretations during subjective personal introspections.

Learning while Talking

One step toward accomplishing confirmability occurs by having two researchers interview one another while interviewing themselves. This method helps operationalize Weick’s (1993) famous proposition, paraphrased here as “How do I know what I think until I hear what I have to say? How do I know what I’ve done until I tell aloud what I did?” Another step toward confirmability, as well as dependability, is having
an “inside auditor” answer questions that confirm or disconfirm as well as deepen the interpretations reported by the researcher self-introspection (e.g., the corrections offered by Holbrook’s mother on his interpretations of her father’s behavior).

**The Inside Auditor**

The use of such an inside auditor, as one’s mother or another person involved directly in the focus of the introspection, is almost certain to be helpful for clarifying and deepening researcher introspective reports. Consequently, an advance toward CPI is made by using inside auditors as well as agreeing with Hirschman’s (1986, p. 246) advocacy of an outside auditor:

To assess whether or not the interpretation is drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner from the data gathered and the rationale employed, humanistic inquiry relies on the judgment of an outside auditor or auditors. These individuals should be researchers themselves, familiar with the phenomena under study.

**The Cohort Auditor**

To stimulate the mental surfacing of observations about self and the process being examined by the introspection, an additional category of auditor is possible: the cohort auditor. The cohort auditor (CA) is a person living in the same current environment as the researcher completing a self-introspection that the researcher–introspector (RI) asks to comment on the process and outcome under study. Thus, the RI both tells his/her story to the CA and asks for questions and comments from the CA as the story is being told. Besides being a sounding board, the CA is likely to provide information that triggers retrievals relevant to the focus of the study by the RI that might otherwise not occur.

**The Forced Metaphor-Elicitation Technique (FMET)**

The FMET has the goals similar to the Zaltman metaphor-elicitation technique (ZMET) and the Doyle and Sims (2002) “cognitive sculpting” technique. Using metaphor analysis as a research tool to understand more deeply the unconscious linkages associating with a behavior; Sims and Doyle (1995) illustrate cognitive sculpting research with informants’ use of tabletop objects as metaphors of what they are saying and have done—resulting in what Sims and Doyle refer to as “explicating knowledge.”

Christensen and Olson (2002) provide an application of the ZMET for a study of 15 very highly involved mountain bikers: “Approximately 1 week prior to the interview, each recruited participant was contacted and given a set of instructions. First, they were asked to think about
mountain biking. Then they were told to select 8–10 pictures that represent their thoughts and feelings about mountain biking and bring the pictures to the interview. Each picture is a metaphor that expresses one or more important meanings about mountain biking . . . Respondents participated in in-depth interviews conducted by three interviewers trained in the ZMET methodology and experienced in conducting ZMET interviews.” See Zaltman (2000) for further details.

The FMET is a tool for surfacing metaphors for use in researcher introspection. FMET includes four distinct steps. First, the respondent is asked to draw or select pictures for three sets of two objects each (Figure 2 shows the FMET design):

- The animal that first comes to mind that the RI believe that “represents some aspects of who you are, what you are like.”
- The animal that first comes to mind “that you admire, might select to be if you were an animal other than a human.”
- The beverage that first comes to mind that is most representative of “that best represents you most of the time during the daytime.”
- The beverage that first comes to mind that “best represents you at home or a party on a Friday night.”
- The motor vehicle that first comes to mind that “best represents the vehicle you really would most likely be if you were, in fact, a motor vehicle.”
- The vehicle that first comes to mind that “best represents the fun, carefree side of you.”

Nearly all individuals can identify themselves as more than animal, beverage, and vehicle, depending upon the situation being framed by the question (cf. Dichter, 1985; Woodside, Floyd-Finch, & Wilson 1986). Thus, the FMET attempts to capture the several unconscious beliefs about the RI. Unlike the ZMET, the FMET does not focus on selecting items in pictures related directly to the behavior being examined—the ZMET is more likely to cause greater cognitive effort and strain caused by attempts to find pictures that associate with the behavior being examined than the FMET. The ZMET appears to require great cognitive effort and substantial interviewer training and skill in order to interpret the pictures selected by the informant; as discussed subsequently, the FMET is designed for the RI to self-interpret how the specific objects selected associate with the choice behavior under investigation.

Second, the FMET asks the RI to say or write the two to four features that first come to mind about each of the six objects in the pictures. Third, the FMET asks the RI to mention the first thoughts that come to mind—“what each of these features tells you about yourself.” Finally the FMET asks the RI “to tell a story or true event that illustrates the concepts and description” of the features just mentioned about you
Figure 2a. Metaphor and story-telling exercise: Part one.
Figure 2.b Metaphor and story-telling exercise: Part two.
related to the choice behavior under investigation. Figure 1 illustrates
the fourth step for the choice of buying a major consumer service—the
choice of a university for an undergraduate degree. The RI then has the
opportunity to include the results from using the FMET into her inter-
pretation of her service choice.

Figure 3 is an example application of one informant’s use of the FMET
related to the topic of selecting a university or college for an under-
graduate degree. Note how the informant’s responses in the fourth step
help to uncover the matching of personal features within the informant’s
desires to the features provided by specific brand (in this case, Parma
University, Italy).

Achieving personal independence relates to the pictures that include
animals that hunt alone, a motorcycle—a vehicle often with one rider, and
a two-seat sports car. The RI refers to being “independent” to describe the
cat and the motorcycle. “Independent” is used by the RI to describe her-
self as well. Such information is helpful to achieve a deep understand-
ing of the motivation to attend a university as far away from her high
school friends and her parents as possible—within the felt limits of the
reported inadequate transportation system. High need for achievement,
independence, freedom, and health via sports are core themes that con-
nect the animal, beverage, and motor-vehicle metaphors with the RI’s
university decision. The FMET findings increase understanding of the rea-
sons for the RI’s choice of product-service features for evaluating and
ranking alternative universities.

**Consumer Decision-Plan Nets**

Informants are likely to consciously or unconsciously process attributes
about products and services differently in their purchase deliberations.
Park et al. (1981) describe the process of creating decision-plan nets that
identify and link the presence of three products or services features
according to three dimensions:

- **Rejection-inducing dimension (RID):** A dimension leading to imme-
diate rejection of any alternative failing to reach a satisfactory level
of that dimension.
- **Relative-preference dimension (RPD):** A dimension that is highly
desired, but its absence does not lead to automatic rejection of the
alternative.
- **Trade-off dimension (TD):** A dimension specified in terms of a con-
ditional acceptance in the absence of its satisfactory level, requir-
ing an offsetting improvement on another primary or secondary
feature.

Figure 4 shows findings for a decision-plan net following multiple inter-
views with one couple while the couple considers buying a house. Note that
RIDs, RPDs, and TDs all occur in this couple's deliberations. The numbers in circles in Figure 4 describe the rankings of houses in the couple's short list (i.e., their consideration set) of houses found during their search.
A CONFIRMATORY-INTROSPECTION RESEARCH EXAMPLE

Figure 5 shows the phase theory used to consider possible subdecisions that may be involved in the purchase of a major consumer service; that is, the selection of a university in order to attend for a 3- or 4-year bachelor of arts degree. The rejection-inducing dimensions (RID), trade-off dimensions (TD), and relative-preference dimensions (RPD) (cf. Park et al., 1981) shown for each decision phase in Figure 5 is to indicate the possibility of such feature dimensions and not that they always occur for each phase.

This university-choice topic is a useful focus for several reasons. First, the selection of a university for such a degree represents the purchase of a major service, due to the time and often the financial expenditure for the student and her or his parents—an important decision made relatively early in life for many persons in many developed nations. Second, based on pretest interviews, most college students are likely to be able to identify distinct phases in their choice process, which include becoming aware of alternative universities; collecting information from family members, friends, and teachers on what attributes to consider in making the decision; selecting universities and colleges to visit; and making the final choice. Thus, the decision is complex and time consuming, and one or more phases are likely to include the combination of substantial amounts of conscious and unconscious thinking.

**Figure 4.** Example decision-plan net.
Third, for some phases of such an important service purchase, RIDs, TDs, and RPDs are likely to be used. Fourth, this choice decision is relevant to the RI from whom the data were collected: The RI was still attending her chosen university and felt capable of reporting the details occurring in most of the phases of the process.

Figure 6 serves to demonstrate the value in using multiple methods in collecting data to confirm and deepen the process under investigation. Note that Figure 6 depicts each method as confirming one or more pieces of data learned by one or more other research methods as well as certain amounts of information found unique to a particular method. Also, note that not all the information relevant to the process is shown to be captured even when multiple methods are used. Figure 6 includes cylinders to indicate that a certain amount of information not relevant directly to the process is recorded. Seemingly nonrelevant information may enable the uncovering of information directly relevant to the process under study, for example, an informant may need to talk and say little that is directly relevant to the specific study to get to the point of being comfortable about what she is saying, as well as to learn enough about what she thinks to elaborate deeply on her motivations. Thus, although some data are identified as not directly relevant to the phases in the process, it is preferable not to label any part of the data collected as useless information.

Figure 5. Propositions (Pi) for the unconscious and conscious thinking-doing process for buying major product-service.
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY CONSTRUCTION

In some substantial sense, an informant always engages in researcher introspection whether he or she is asking questions implicitly or explicitly to him- or herself, as well as whether the questions are written or presented verbally. The informant creates an interpretation of the question posed from whatever the source—thus, the informant engages in researcher introspection. Also, metaphorically speaking, the informant has to search the file drawers of his or her mind to find the drawer somehow labeled by one or more concepts interpreted to be in the question. Then the informant has to find the folder in the file drawer; open the folder; read and interpret the folder’s contents; and select and use words, sentences, and other tools that he or she feels can be interpreted by him or her and possibly by others in a manner that he or she desires. Thus, respondents must make sense of the questions asked of them, and autobiographical memory in retrospective thinking is involved in all survey research.

The work of Payne (1951), Grice (1975), Hilton (1995), Ericsson and Simon (1993), and Schwarz (1999) supports the view that “question comprehension involves extensive inferences about the speaker’s intentions to determine the pragmatic meaning of the question” (Schwarz, 1999, p. 96). Such inferences apply to whoever asks the question, no matter if the question is asked implicitly or explicitly. Consequently, the informant is always an active participant in framing a question, as well as in answering it.

Figure 6. Research toolkit for surfacing relevant unconscious and conscious thinking-doing processes.
From this perspective, the severe problems that Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) note for researcher introspection does not lead to the conclusion that the method should be abandoned in consumer research. Rather, the more useful conclusion is that researcher introspection needs to innovate to include carefully executed (rigorous) research procedures and the combined use of multiple data-collection instruments. Such data-collection instruments should include tools designed explicitly to surface unconscious thinking processes, especially because substantial scientific knowledge now exists that unconscious thinking processes represent most mental activities by individuals (for a literature review, see Zaltman, 2003).

Researcher introspective case studies aid in “opening up decision making” (Langley et al., 1995) by demonstrating that different models of decision making are likely to be relevant for different phases occurring in the process. For example, decision making as convergence without consciously considering alternatives may best describe the process whereby the student RI became committed to attending a university for the purpose of acquiring a degree. After such a convergence has been completed, the phase involving visiting alternative universities reflects decision making following Simon’s (1960) three-step sequence: first intelligence (i.e., diagnosing the problem), then design (i.e., finding alternatives to evaluate), and finally choice. Langley et al. (1995) refer to this view as Model 1, organizational decision making as sequential.

Regarding the selection and use of criteria to select universities to visit and reach the choice of university to attend appears to represent “insightful man,” that is, the RI may listen “to the voices emanating from his [her] own subconscious, or perhaps better expressed, who sights and images that well up in his [her] own imagination” (Langley et al., 1995, p. 268). However, the relevancy of these features is questionable because the data from the FMET were collected after, rather than during, the choice process. The FMET data do appear to provide useful clues into the deep meanings of the rejection-inducing dimensions in the RI’s decision plan net. Thus, decision making as insightful, identified by Langley et al. (1995, p. 259) as Model 5, appears relevant especially for the selection of dimensions to use for evaluating university alternatives.

Generalizing the results of the RI report to theory suggests that different models of decision making are at times more or less relevant to the decision process, depending on the phase in the process being examined. Thus, asking whether or not the purchase of a major durable or service is made consciously or unconsciously is less useful than asking where and how both thinking processes contribute to the decision process.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The use of multiple methods in research introspections does appear helpful in confirming the occurrence of specific phases in the decision process.
and in achieving a deep understanding of primary motivations within the individual that help to explain the presence of attribute dimensions used in his or her choice of a university. The combined use of decision-plan net analysis, the FMET, schedules of survey questions completed by mentors, an inside auditor, and the RI him- or herself represents a blending of emic (conscious and unconscious views of the individual native informant) and etic (interpretation of the researcher after acquiring some distance from the research site) perspectives. Though at first blush the view may appear to be an oxymoron that an etic perspective can be acquired in researcher introspection, asking others to confirm the occurrence of specific actions that relate to the behavior of the RI that the RI is examining, as well as seeking views from an inside auditor, serves the RI in viewing herself in the third person. To increase sense making about what one has done and to deepen understanding of why it was done, Weick (1995) advises that one reflect (e.g., sleep on it) on the meaning of what one does and says, as well as seek the views of mentors about the meaning of what has happened—steps to achieve distance, an etic view of what happened and why it happened. The use of explicit tools, including survey forms designed and used explicitly by the RI to interview herself and others, as well as the additional tools described in this article, is more likely to result in achieving a useful etic view than is adopting Holbrook’s (et al., p. 13) emic-is-enough assumption (e.g., “I assume that my own introspections resonate so strongly with the photos taken by my grandfather because ATH [Holbrook’s grandfather] has, in effect, captured the essence of my own subjective personal introspection-based recollections.”).

Along with the RI asking herself multiple and the same sets of questions on different days (e.g., for an example of same topic, consecutive weekly interviews and informant reflections over 18 weeks, see Cox, 1967) regarding the process being examined in the study, the interviewing of other persons involved directly in the process as well as insider auditors is likely to always improve researcher introspections. The following views by Weick (1995) and Allport (1985) as well as Hirschman’s principles for humanistic inquiry are rationales for this suggestion. “Those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting. Conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). Social psychology is “an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others” (Allport, 1985, p. 3).

Of course, the intention is not to generalize from one RI case study to many consumers. The specific findings are applicable only to the RI. However, the two core propositions are confirmed by the findings that CP1, the decision process examined, includes recognizable phases involving several persons participating in one or more phases with conscious
and unconscious thoughts/motives affecting their beliefs and actions, and that one or all of the participants are unable to consciously explain the causes of specific milestone subdecisions occurring in the process. CP$_2$, relates to a purchase process such as the selection of a university to attend for a 3- or 4-year degree. One or more phases of the process likely includes substantial conscious effort, and much of the thinking involved (not all) can be retrieved within a researcher introspective study. Such seemingly intuitive propositions need confirmation and extension by additional research before concluding that they are obviously valid. Heretofore, the view that whether or not to buy a major retail service, such as whether or not to attend university, can be a convergence process instead of being a decision (organizational decision-making Model 4 of Langley et al.) receives scant attention in the service marketing literature.

Unfortunately, the Webb et al. (1966, 2000) observations are still accurate early in the 21st century.

Today, the dominant mass of social science research is based on interviews and questionnaires. We lament this overdependence upon a single, fallible method. Interviews and questionnaires intrude as a foreign element into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit atypical roles and responses, they are limited to those who are accessible and will cooperate, and the responses obtained are produced in part by dimensions of individual differences irrelevant to the topic at hand. *But the principal objection is that they are used alone.* No research method is without bias. Interviews and questionnaires must be supplemented by methods testing the same social science variables but having different methodological weaknesses. (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000, pp. 1, 2)

Ironically, although Holbrook (in press) criticizes using a “member check,” his use of family photographs and incorporating of his mother’s corrections to his subjective personal introspection are two examples of applying supplementary methods for transforming SPI into CPI. The irony extends beyond illustrating the Webb et al. (2000) point that no research method is without bias to the observation that subjective personal introspections alone are unlikely to detect substantial biases in method and in the accuracy of reported findings.

REFERENCES


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