Redefining qualitative research

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The first part of the paper defines the character of qualitative research and investigates the problem of the potential lack of “objectivity” which is frequently associated with the interpretation of qualitative findings. Reasons why different researchers arrive at different results are identified and it is shown that one of the major reasons is the existence of different qualitative “schools”. These schools tend to stress their own uniqueness, but often disregard their similarities to other schools. Using a case study it is shown that single schools’ analyses tend to become too tunnel-viewed and that future qualitative research needs a wider perspective. The second part of the paper discusses existing models’ tendency to reduce complexity and to work with monocausal explanations. But they are similar enough to each other to share a number of assumptions. These are worth consideration for building a modern model of consumer behaviour. The authors present an action-orientated model with an emotional (world of meaning) and a cognitive (world of probability) sub-system and describe the interaction of both systems for behavioural control. Finally, the paper points to a number of methodological implications of the model including the “unconscious clustering” method.

A. The character of qualitative research

1. The old question: is qualitative research "objective"?

A weighty argument against qualitative research has always been that two different researchers arrive at two different results. The real reproach behind this argument is that qualitative research is never "objective" but largely determined by the personal influence of the researcher. This is a problem which needs to be discussed because it makes clients feel insecure about the nature of what they obtain. It has led more than one client to use two different research companies for the same task. Naturally this cannot be done regularly and, besides, it's no real solution.

2. Why different researchers arrive at different findings

There are a number of theoretical approaches and the representatives of these different "schools" work side by side or against each other. The range is wide – from behaviouristic to psycho-analytical approaches. The dilemma for the client would even aggravate if he knew that the different theories are based on different views of human nature.

We needn't list all these "schools", but just consider two approaches which are "in" at the moment, to explain why qualitative research repeatedly provides inconsistent results. The first approach concentrates on the consumer himself and regards his personality as the critical factor of purchase and usage behaviour. The second approach focuses on the product or the brand and studies its effect on the consumer.

The first approach views the motivation of the consumer as the driving force in the purchase decision process and assumes a basic motivation which is equally valid for all consumers. It's the qualitative researchers' task to find out about this basic motivation. To really find out about consumers' perception and feeling it is necessary to obtain insight into his hidden depths. As soon as this basic motivation has been discovered, there are still two different kinds of consumers: One group who allows the basic motivation free play and the other group where the basic motivation acts under stronger social control.

At first glance this approach is plausible. At second glance there arises the question whether there is really a basic motivation which is equally valid for all people. Who determines what this basic motivation is which is equally valid for all consumers? For the individual consumer there still remains another problem which is typical for psychoanalysis: If the basic motivation is not so obvious with this particular consumer, is it simply suppressed by social control or does it not exist?

The other approach does not focus on the consumer as a personality with a basic motivation but on the product and its effect on the consumer. This approach sees motives as not dependent on the person but on the product. This assumption has led this school to formulate a "psychology of products". Consumer behaviour then is not determined by the individual personality but by so-called psychological effect patterns of products or brands. If the product or brand meets the consumer in a particular mood and if the brand's message matches this mood the consumer will purchase this brand. With this assumption it is not necessary to consider particular targets or consumer types for a brand. Every consumer is a potential buyer of the brand, he just needs to be brought into the right mood.

Traditional psychology and all its personality theories are viewed as too superficial and the whole of market research – except for this approach –

considers human beings as consumer animals and can observe market changes but never explain them.
All this sounds very self-confident and if it was true, it would be a disaster for the whole of remaining market research. But is it true? It's true that it is products which provide specific possibilities of satisfaction. But this is not new. To derive from this a psychology of products is exaggerated and misleading. Naturally products have their effects on the human Psyche. They can even widen perceptions and provide new experiences as far as unique kinds of satisfaction. But all this does not mean that they are able to incorporate the human mind. Further-more they cannot make the human being follow them independently of his own personality. There is no psychological effect pattern of products which every target is exposed to in equal measure.
These are two approaches with opposite starting points and interpretation patterns. The problem with these approaches is that they tolerate no other approach. Without this intolerance one could perhaps regard them as interesting ways of thinking and possibly use them from time to time as additional interpretation patterns. But their exclusive use seems very dangerous as it necessarily leads to results which are at best too tunnel-viewed and often simply wrong.

3. A typical case

To demonstrate this danger we use an interesting case. Let's assume we have got the task to explain something unusual, a passion which you find among some people: collecting coins. Let's further assume the two qualitative approaches have found the explanation in a way which is typical for each of them:

1. The first qualitative approach has identified as the basic motivation for collecting coins to save and store things of personal importance to have them always there. The possibility to touch and look at them whenever they want, provides a feeling of security.
2. The second approach has discovered the following effect patterns in coins: based on their status character they increase the feeling of self worth. The effect pattern is the hope that by possessing something valuable one becomes valuable and unique oneself.

Which approach is right? Both provide explanations which are plausible. So the question arises whether **both** could be right. Right in the sense that they are valid for different types of coin collectors or even for all of them but to an individually varying extent.
There remains another question, possibly the best one: Might there not be additional motives or other effect patterns which explain the collecting of coins much better? Might there not exist a number of different types of coin collectors?
We have in fact conducted a qualitative study using focus groups and in-depth interviews – genuine focus groups and genuine in-depth interviews carried out by qualified psychologists. We found product effects as well as collecting motives which however we located in the personality of the collector. Taking both levels together we came to a much more thorough and deep explanation of the habit of coin collecting. Neither the psychology of coins nor the psychology of collectors alone would have provided a comparably deep explanation of the fascination of collecting coins. We found at first five categories of motives (see Graph 1).

Graph 1

Preservation and maintenance

- Preserving cultural inheritance, saving continuity
- Transferring own convictions to the next generation

Monetary functional occupation

- Capital investment (value saving)
- Object of speculation (increase in value)

Obsession, passion, hunt

- On the border of obsession
- Excitement and tension
- Relaxation or satisfaction
- Obsessive hunting for rarities

Self therapy

- Defence against depression, life support
- Personal challenge, desire for perfection
- Self approval, increase of self worth

Social orientation

- Adaptation to social reference groups
- Communication with similar minded people

On the grounds of these motives we built a typology of coin collectors **and** a segmentation of the product programme. For our purposes it's enough to introduce the motivational typology of collectors. This typology immediately shows that there is much more than just one basic motivation (see Graph 2).

Graph 2

Motivational collector types

The missionary preserver

The cautious saver

The speculator

The obsessive hunter

The loner

The refugee from reality

The self-taught expert

The narcissistic self-portrayé

The contact seeker

The missionary preserver: Collection is cultural performance and preservation of cultural inheritance; leaving something permanent for future generations and continuing survival in one's collection. Value is defined as cultural value.
The cautious saver: Coins as a variant of the piggy bank; spare pennies which promise subjective security in uncertain times; important argument for collecting: preservation of value.
The speculator: Coins as object of speculation, the interest in collecting is motivated essentially by chance of profit; important argument for collecting: increase in value.

The obsessive hunter: Collectors out of passion, with hunting enthusiasm for the search for rarities and good bargains. Completeness and rarity are the main aims, on the border of obsession.
The loner: Defence against depression or frustration, search for support, nostalgic memory of important moments in one's past life.
The refugee from reality: Flight in a bright, shiny world and in big themes (Sissy, Hollywood, Diana etc.). Coin collection is a symbol of valuable treasure; occupation with coins as diversion from everyday problems.
The self-taught expert: Desire for knowledge, for perfection in the hobby, coin collection as challenge to one's own education, intrinsic motivation frequently historical themes (happy historian).
The narcissistic self-portrayé: Prestige-oriented, coins are a means to impress others, collecting as self-approval, possession-oriented, extrinsically motivated.
The contact seeker: Pleasure in communication with similar minded people, swaps coins, visits exchanges and auctions, identification with collector friends, escape to a social island, belonging to a closed club of experts.

4. The need for a wider perspective

It is not always necessary to identify consumer types. But whenever different qualitative researchers arrive at different results, the existence of different consumer types is more than likely. A typological consideration can then solve the problem of results which seem to contradict each other. Qualitative research should basically consider the possibility of more than one relevant purchase and usage motivation – and also the existence of various consumer types. Effect patterns of products constitute a too narrow perception. That there is only one basic motivation for purchasing and consuming or using a brand is at most the exception.

To concentrate on just one theoretical approach can be contra-productive as we have seen. The necessary widening of perspective requires automatically techniques of exploration and analysis from several "schools". Therefore it sometimes makes sense to work on a task with more than just one theoretical approach. If this leads to different results, one should regard this as the best that can happen. Careful consideration has been rewarded in this case. It provides no reason to doubt qualitative research. The opposite is true in fact: one has obtained more information and one should use this information. If different approaches lead to similar or identical results there is also no problem but greater reassurance.

The clear view for the possibility of different consumer types frees qualitative research from its image of lacking objectivity. Where different results remain possible side by side, the verification becomes easier. Consumer types give rise almost automatically to quantitative observation. They remind us how closely qualitative and quantitative research are dependent on each other. At the same time they draw the borders around qualitative research results and define their place and their limits: Qualitative results have to be verified concerning the extent of their validity before determining the extent of their market relevance. Therefore the finest qualitative result is useless if it is not formulated in a way which allows quantitative verification. To omit this verification means to run an unnecessary risk.

On the other hand one should not ignore the fact that every quantitative research only makes sense if it is based on previous qualitative insight. The very conception of a quantitative question has its origin in a preceding qualitative consideration, even if this was not always the direct result of a recent piece of research.

5. Where a new qualitative model has to start at

To explore "deeper" than the others do has become trendy again, but too often this becomes combined with a claim for absoluteness and too simple explanations. How dangerous this can be has already been stated by George Gallup: *“There isn't any method that will cover the waterfront. This is the mistake that all schools of thought make. They believe, that if they find a cure for headache it will cure flat feet, but one must know of the limitations of each method.”*

Therefore a new qualitative approach should be less tunnel-viewed than existing approaches but at the same time consider fundamental findings which are shared as common knowledge across the different theories. Consequently we want to base our new model on the following three fundaments:

1. The common assumptions of existing approaches
2. The well balanced consideration of both the consumer and the stimulus
3. A theory of action integrating cognitions as well as emotions.

B. The need for a new qualitative approach

6. Existing approaches - sometimes deep, often rough and always tunnel-viewed

Social judgement in daily life is characterized by the reduction of complex issues to easy-to-handle explanatory patterns, often even to one single cause. This has led to ethnical idealization (the “happy South Sea Islander“, the "hot-blooded Hispanic") but also to persecution and organized mass extermination of minorities. Recent work in cognitive psychology dealing with human information processing in complex environments (e. g. Dörner, 1989) proves that such simplification also prevents us from understanding and solving complex problems.

Undoubtedly, consumer behaviour is one of the most complex phenomena applied psychology has to deal with. But which are the underlying "true" causes of behaviour? Consumer-answers usually express that a product is “tasty”, a package is "liked", and an advertising spot is "entertaining". Here too, the qualitative analyst first runs into strongly simplified explanations and at times into misunderstandings and circular arguments when explored any further ("I think, the ad is entertaining because it is funny").

That is why many qualitative research techniques have been developed to overcome the monosyllabism of the respondents and to figure out the large amount of behaviour-driving cognitions and emotions underneath the "surface" of the first answer. But unfortunately, the tendency to complexity reduction and the monocausal explanation model does not stay away from the qualitative researchers either, especially if they are part of a "theoretical school". Often, complex scientific models of human behaviour are intentionally simplified and customized by researchers to the scope of understanding which can be realistically expected from non-experts, i.e. the marketing managers who are buying qualitative research. Therefore some models spread over years among marketers do not longer correspond with today’s level of scientific findings. But their rather generic explanations of human behaviour correlate to the level of understanding of clients. They postulate final behavioural causes with a high face validity ("Yes, I had always felt that the use of our brand is nothing but a substitution for sex") that at times can not be questioned.

Some of the first qualitative analysts in the US had started off their careers as clinical psychologists. Researchers such as **Ernest Dichter** consequently utilized Freud's ideas, and since then the "unconscious motives" of behaviour have a firm spot in qualitative research.

The psychoanalytic view of consumer behaviour among the numerous schools is not at all homogeneous, its usefulness and its scientific fundament have been heavily doubted for a very long time. In an exciting 1986-essay on the status of qualitative market research, Gerald de Groot expressed his criticism on this matter. 15 years later, there is not much to add to his analysis:

„The theoretical shortcomings are so many and have been so well documented that it is almost embarrassing to have to repeat them in 1986 ... The very way in which the hypothesis deriving from psychoanalysis are formulated means that they are untestable ... There are by now many schools of depth psychology, each with its own way of interpreting human behaviour. By definition, they cannot all be right. Most probably, none of them are. If by chance, one of them happens to be, there is unfortunately no way of our knowing which ... it is a feature of this type of approach that plausible interpretations can often be mutually contradictory."

According to models based on **A. Adler's** work (e. g. Callebaut et al., 1998) man tries compensating all his life for an inferiority experienced as a child (organ inferiority). The child spends its youth feeling the pain of being inferior to its parents in almost every aspect of daily life which triggers an unconscious desire to be perfect. All behaviour is directed energy with the target of reducing the tension that results from this feeling of inferiority and a generalized existence fear. Energetic tensions can be either expressively shown or repressively hidden. The social embedment of our being - which is introduced as a second level of behavioural analysis - drives a need for affiliation (identification, being like others, sharing equal values), and a demand for affirmation of one's own particularities. Products are not being rated as good in a practical or functional sense, but for always having a social relevance (e.g.: bragging). Using the same *psycho-analytical libido concepts,* **Heylen** (**Heylen** et al. 1995) develops a widely identical bio-energetic behavioural model. Dealing with this energy may as well be either repressive or expressive, and on the other hand either active and "ego-assertive" or passive and "socio-affiliative".

The most recent **brain-physiological findings**, which are complex and highly relevant for cognitive research, have been oversimplified for the market research clientele: behaviour is being linked to *brain structures*. Therefore, our *cerebellum* corresponds with a (more female) need for affiliation. The corresponding type ("Harmonizer") is characterized by a need for security and a yearning for harmony. The *interbrain* on the other hand correlates to a (more male) need for self-assertion (need for status), which leads to sensation-seeking ("Thriller") and the wish to be respected or even admired. *Cerebrum* types on the other hand seek the integration of ratio and emotion, their behaviour is mainly information-driven ("Rationalizer") and they crave strongly for independence of their mind and actions from external influences. **Anthropological** and **semiotic** approaches have expanded of the perspective of qualitative market research. They stand out positively from most other schools as they are less rigid, but they also present a limited point of view. The emphasis is being put on the cultural embedment and lingual encoding of behaviour („Consumers are (culturally) made not born"), which makes their explanation models specifically interesting for intercultural and communication-related questions.

While classical psychoanalytical approaches stick to complexity-reduction by examining unconscious drives which cause behaviour, **morphologists** simplify the analysis of complex phenomena by replacing the “internal” perspective by the “external” one. Personal cult is now being replaced by a similarly dubious, one-sided “product-cult”. The fact that there can be no “psychology of a brand” without a perceptive judge whose perception is being driven individually by his own personality and life history is not being considered.

So it is finally not surprising that “Depth“ and the analysis of the „real motives“ shall come out differently, depending on the school of thought. So what theoretical direction should be trusted? Should this remain a matter of personal taste? Management by intuition in the era of controlling?

7. All approaches sharing common assumptions

There has to be a better solution, and we see a way. Even though there are all the discussed controversies, the approaches still do have a number of issues in common, which are worth some consideration:

– The social and cultural embedment of our behaviour with the basic options of *separation* and *integration*.,
– The differentiation between emotional and rational processes,
– The *determination of energetic processes*, that form the basis of consumer behaviour and which represent the “fuel” to the „behaviour-motor“ (instincts, needs, and motives). Here, the three fundamental dimensions of motivation, “activation” (tension and relaxation as a homeostatic principle), “valence”, and finally “potency”, meaning the subjectively experienced control or ability for control, look like a distillate. The same dimensions were already recognized by Osgood and his colleagues as the basic and common connotative components of the (affective) meaning of words in the most differing cultures and languages in 1957, a proof for being transculturally encoded by languages.
– The fundamental possibilities express this energy: either *repressively internal or expressively external.* Analogous concepts (introversion vs. extraversion) have been part of personality-psychology for a long time.

Taking the change of the research perspective initiated by the morphologists into consideration (but not acknowledging its extreme consequences), there are enough modules for a **modern approach** to the consumer behaviour: not too tunnel-viewed, but rather realistic and related to a behavioural **theory of action**. We want to develop this approach and back it up by applying systemic psychology, a theory of behavioural systems integrating emotions and cognitions.

8. A new model, based on common assumptions and more open to empirical validation

In the early 80’s already, the scientific controversy about the relation of cognition and emotion showed to its fullest, and now, nearly 20 years later, any serious theory of human behaviour is a **dual theory**, postulating cognitive as well as affective mechanisms of behavioural regulation, an integrative co-operation between emotions and cognition. Both are supposed to complete one another, which guarantees under normal circumstances an organism’s optimal adjustment to its environment. Emotions, moods and affections are relevant pieces of information for a behavioural analysis. Unconscious motivational processes and habits matter, however not so exclusively as psycho-dynamic schools usually pretend. Cognitive and affective processes, also called pre- and

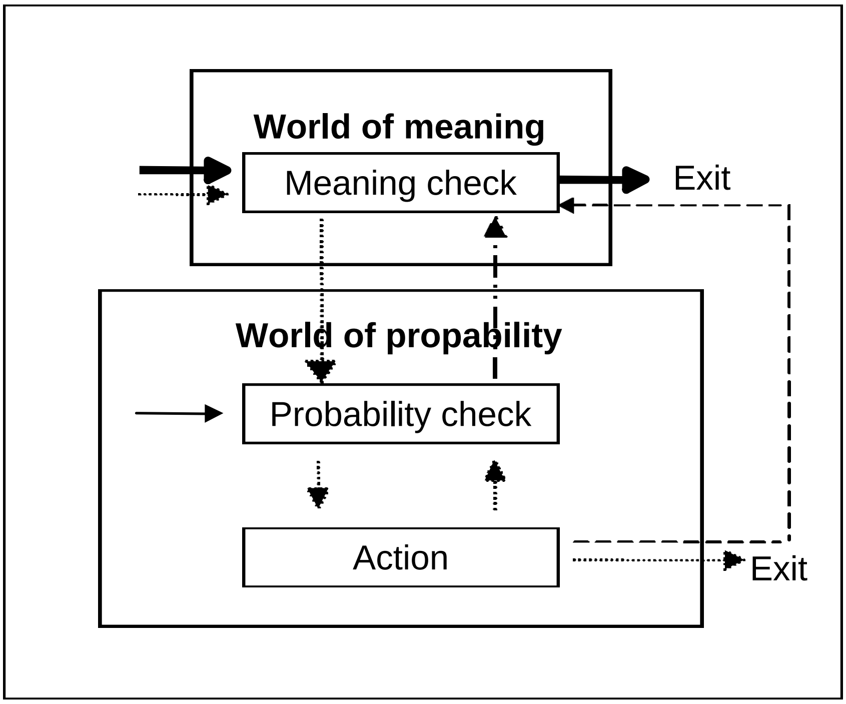
unconscious, can be described most appropriate by a **cybernetic, systemic model** addressing the **regulation and control of actions**[1]. Thereby, there are two evaluation processes that are relevant for the consumer's buying-decision making: a rather rationally oriented "test" that lets him check whether the expected product performance is in line with the requirements, at what cost it shall be acquired, and what advantages and disadvantages should be expected from its use. This examination process takes place in a **world of probability**, which corresponds with spatial and temporal conditions of science. In this world the phenomena are evaluated via conscious "tests" using so-called *cold cognitions*. For several years, these probabilistic tests ("what are the positive and the negative consequences of a purchasing decision?") had been part of many computer based "decision-models". They meant to explore the importance of *cognitive information processing* to our behaviour neglecting the affective "soft factors" of human behaviour (e.g. TOTE-Model, Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960).
Meanwhile, psychological research reinvented the almost forgotten terminology of emotion and added the (affective) **world of meaning** to it. The complement that is necessary for the cognitive test-stage is "hot cognition", the subjective examination of meaning that helps the consumer realize whether the product's affective meaning, corresponds with his emotional needs, whether it appeals to his imagination, and whether it is suited to support the self-image of the consumer. This test answers the most important question:
"Do I really feel good using this product?"
Consumers cannot always provide valid answers to this question spontaneously, and the first answers (yes, because it tastes good, cleans, cures, etc.) are often fairly superficial in their explanatory power of the different brand and product characteristics. In this case, it would be most useful to tear down the wall of rationalizations and to glance "behind the stage". However, especially the qualitative market research should beware of forcing "depth-psychological" explanations to any and all type of consumer behaviour: there are still quite a few consumers who use light bulbs to lighten up dark rooms and not the dark parts of their souls. *The question whether the psychological meaning of a product or a brand mainly depends on its use and function, or rather on the emotional sense has to be answered precisely. It is relevant for more than solely the credibility of an advertising campaign.*
Buying decisions always depend on the outcome of the meaning and probability checks. As one can imagine the relationship between both tests is quite different for low interest products than for prestigious luxury goods and brands. Both tests supplement one another complementarily for the sake of an optimized functioning of the organism: the probability test identifies the non-redundant structures in the "world of products" and aims at expanding the own knowledge of the world which is the source of exploratory behaviour and curiosity in daily life but also in scientific endeavours.
The meaning test on the other hand searches for redundancies and emotionally rewarding repetitiveness ("Feeling good again and again"). Good food and drinks, sexual relations, relaxation on vacation and leisure time, self-realization at work - these are examples where meaning tests show their great relevance for behavioural regulation.
Generally, **probability checks** are nested under the meaning checks: The knowledge of a product being comparatively cheap does not affect any purchasing decision until there is a subjective, motivating emotional meaning.

On the other hand, a rational product comparison resulting in the recognition of the high price might still lead to a purchasing decision if the emotional character and the product-promise are “right” and present a satisfaction of a certain need to the consumer. Depending on the product category and type of buyer, the relationship between the meaning check and the probability check can be determined empirically and can be turned into a direct input for marketing and advertising strategies.
The thing still missing for a practical use is a straightforward model that allows two issues:

1. The empirical determination of the interrelation of meaning and probability checks for certain products and types of buyers.
2. Deriving a forecast for concrete patterns of consumer behaviour.

Our model postulates that if a product or brand fails its meaning check (as the refrigerator for the Eskimo, the Spice-Girls for an opera fan, or Marlboro for a non smoker), no purchasing action will take place even if there are no rational doubts about the basic functionality of the product (bold arrows in the graph). If the meaning component is missing, there is no further need for any more “probability checks” (such as comparing the efficiencies of different refrigerators) either.
Reasons for a failed meaning check are by far not always as trivial as in the Eskimo-refrigerator case. “Failure“ of a product, brand or service can be caused by meaninglessness (non-relevance) of the product, as well as by ***negative meaning*** such as aversion, antipathy or feelings of shame or danger. At best, the consumer may simply ignore the uninteresting products without any further action (-> Exit). Or it leads to intended actions resulting from aversions, such as for example the avoidance of a smoking wagon on a train by a non-smoker.
If a product in fact passes the meaning check, there usually are more “cognitive tests” to follow that determine the purchasing action. If these tests also come out positively, they are being followed by an action (dotted arrows). It should be emphasized, that cognitive steps to follow the meaning check do not have to be absolutely rational or "objective"! More *superior* moods, desires, and wishes can strongly affect the processing of information, in a way that makes people buy too expensive of cars, too big hi-fi systems, and too many new dresses. The model shows that our decisions are embedded in an affective frame of reference that creates the final action. Therefore, out of two brands with an objectively equal use for the consumer, the one with the more relevant meaning - such as the public prestige of the brand – is picked out.
There is a continuous ***interaction*** between the world of meaning and the world of probability and it is a matter of empirical market research to explore how the one world influences the other and vice versa. For example the emotional desire for original, “real” goods beyond mass production - seen on the success of the German mail order store “Manufactum” - stimulates the purchasing of manually produced goods (world of meaning). If these fit the expectations regarding the use, functionality, durability, and design (world of probability), this leads to an even more increased affective meaning of these products (feedback loop indicated by the arrow with the dash-dot-dot-pattern) (see Graph 3).

Graph 3



Deciding to buy or not to buy a certain product depends on the **tests** of the consumer which however in certain cases do not have to be intentional. In contrast, psychological research indicates that the meaning tests are performed automatized, very fast and more holistic than cognitive information processing: There are several purchasing decisions that are being made automatically or apparently thoughtlessly. In such cases the purchasing decision has either been made at an earlier time (and is now repeated habitually), or the consumer has not consciously noticed his affective process of decision making. However, the described testing steps have also taken place before this type of decision making and "automated" purchasing decisions can also be brought into the conscience.

The development of a *purchasing decision*, the purchasing action resulting from it, and the final use of the product are psychologically structured actions. Whether a purchasing decision is going to be made and its result depends on which **Mean-Ends-Chains** have been activated by the consumer. They point out how product features – clearly realizable as well as abstractly imaginable, such as the Image – associate with the consequences of product use and personal values. Different consumers can have different individual mean-ends-chains when confronted with one and the same product. They express his or her subjective assumptions on whether the product is able to fulfil personal needs and how the needs are related to fundamental motives and values of the self. By exploring mean-ends-chains concrete and abstract features of the product - as perceived by the consumer - are related to fundamental purchasing motives.

These **connections** and interactions between the *inner* world of the consumer personality and the *outer* world of products are the central objects of the analysis of action-oriented qualitative market research avoiding a-priori assumptions about the dominance of either the influence of products and brands or the consumer personality on behaviour. The model presented here *avoids too early answers* to the "real" and "final" behavioural causes.

9. Methodological implications

The actual analysis refers to the **uncovering** of the **hierarchically-ordered test steps** of our model. A (partial) goal (end) on one level of the decision making process can at the same time be a means to achieve a psychologically even more meaningful and relevant goal. That is how, when shipping documents, a punctual delivery is a *functional end* which can be achieved by working with a “reliable delivery service” (*functional means)*. At the same time, a "punctual delivery" is also a means to achieve self-related ends, such as “feeling of control”, “reduction of insecurity”, and finally “calming and security”.
To work out individual mean-ends chains in exploratory interviews, we utilize a few variations of the Laddering technique. What distinguishes it from other explorative techniques is a straightforward goal that matches our model: Revealing the motivational reasons for a specific choice of a product or brand and establishing the relations between the motives and certain products attributes. The following modules of Laddering are particularly suited to this aim: (see Graph 4)

Graph 4

- Top-of-mind imaging (spontaneous associations)
- Grouping of similar brands
- Analysis of the physical (when, where, how) and motivational (why) purchasing and using context
- Projections on future brand use
- Exploration of possible brand-substitutions.

For the grouping of similar brands GLOBAL DYNAMICS Japan has developed a method which provides in a tricky way a new kind of information which so far could only be obtained via the personal interpretation of the researcher. This method has been named UNCL, which means “Unconscious Clustering Method”. It is basically a brand mapping method which can be used separately as well as included in an in-depth interview or in a focus group discussion. Firstly, it combines quantitative techniques and qualitative "small sample research" in an ideal manner making the generation of qualitative findings and interpretations more transparent and understandable for clients. The main benefit is, that it allows consumers a brand mapping based on their own *thoughts* and *feelings*. This is possibly the best way to produce a brand mapping – how it really exists in consumers’ minds. That it starts with the observation of behaviour shown by the respondent (sorting) followed by an exploration of psychological reasons is a sequence which is very much in line with our action-orientated model.

Respondents' task is easy. They position the brands under investigation on a white panel according to their spontaneous feelings: the more similar two brands are in the respondent's mind, the nearer they are placed to each other; the more different they are considered by the respondent, the more distant they are placed (see Graph 5).

Graph 5

Placing

When this positioning has been done respondents are asked to divide the products (brands) into groups. They do this by drawing circles around those brands they want to allocate to one group (see Graph 6).

Graph 6

Grouping

Respondents are then asked to assign attributes to each group concerning their meaning: why are those brands in the same group and what are the differences compared to other groups?
After the respondents' exercise the statistical analysis can start, which is done in four steps (see Graph 7)

Graph 7

1. Assigning group membership values to every brand
2. Preparing a simulation matrix
3. Conducting brand mapping by MDS
4. Clustering brands

The definition of the membership value which can vary between 0, 0.5 and 1.0 is based on "fuzzy" theory. By using fuzzy-logic clustering UNCL is closer to human thinking and feeling than traditional methods, which only allow for "yes" or "no" and not for "more or less" or "partly".
Using the membership values the brands are mapped by MDS which leads to a new brand positioning. This positioning now allows to form clusters of brands, which we compare with the groups concerning their similarity. The cluster-group-relationship then allows to characterise the clusters.
The last step of the analysis is the segmentation of respondents according to their brands' similarity perception. The full definition of the market structure can then be reached by combining the brand clusters with the consumer segmentation. This way UNCL not only provides a superior brand mapping, but also reveals the affinity of consumer segments to particular brands. In the meantime we have started combining UNCL with brand preference information. This provides a deeper and more valid analysis of brand preferences.
Our model has also consequences for the course of *single explorations* and *group discussions* and *the sizes of groups.*
Every exploration starts with an "actualization" of psychological context in which a purchase action takes place, typically a brand affinity assessment like the

action of choosing an item from a simulated supermarket-shelf is followed by a sorting exercise as used with UNCL. The *purchasing action* that has now been set off leads to a very strong actualization of cognitions and emotions of all participants related to the purchase and usage situation and allows a larger intensity of exploration with an often surprisingly broad variety of findings.
The action-oriented examination requires an *especially intense dealing with an individual consumer*, even when discussing in groups. That is why the common size of 8 to 10 participants per discussion group is too large. The optimum number of participants is 6. 6 participants can "open up" much more than 8 or 10, and the reconstruction of the mean-ends-chains comes out much more complete. By the way we have found that groups of 6 lead to much deeper discussions and provide more information than larger ones anyway.
To summarise our model's methodological implications:

1. More factual actions and less simple question-answer patterns.
2. Actualization of the purchase situation at least to the level of a factual brand choice.
3. A number of laddering techniques.
4. A new kind of (brand) mapping via UNCL (the Unconscious Clustering method).
5. Focus group discussion with 6 instead of 8 or 10 participants.

10 Conclusions

1. Different findings from different researchers belong to the character of qualitative research and are no problem in itself. The problem is that qualitative findings too often are misperceived, by the user as well as the researcher: namely as the only possible outcome. Both users' and researchers' perspective is too narrow in this case: they see just one part of the whole reality and avoid the more complex look to the remaining part. Who expects the one firm and final result has not understood the character of qualitative research.
2. To make better us of qualitative research both researchers and users need a wider perspective which welcomes "different" findings as the better description of reality. Thinking in terms of consumer types and the modern consumer model based on the theory of action help adopting this wider perspective.
3. The new model avoids pre-determinations to a priori claimed drivers (such as basic motive, cultural myths or product effects). There is not the one and only motivating force in human behaviour, which is general enough to explain every and any action. The explanation power of these postulated "drivers of behaviour" varies significantly according to the object of examination.
4. These are the benefits of the new model:
   – The actual genesis of consumer behaviour during the exploration stage and the accurate reconstruction of mean-ends-chains avoids the frequent case of only finding the Easter eggs the researcher has hidden himself.
   – The model explains the interaction of emotional and cognitive processes and their influence on consumer behaviour, avoiding oversimplifications but remaining practicable.
   – The new model with its methodological proposals will lead qualitative research one step forward in limiting the range of risky speculation without giving up the necessary depth of analysis.

Footnotes:

1. In psychological literature, there are several “dual cognition-theories“ (Lantermann, Kuhl, Gehm). We refer to E. Schwanenberg’s theoretical approach (1994, World of probability and world of meaning), that we are, - after many discussions with the author -, very familiar with and which we have adapted for market research.

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