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Theoretical Foundations of Contemporary Qualitative Market Research—An Overview and an Integrative Perspective

Dirk Frank & Peter Riedl

Abstract: The economic importance of qualitative research has been growing consistently during the last decades. Being one of the major streams in the "research industry" it provides not only a valuable tool box for generating basic consumer insights, but it is also an essential part of the annual revenue of most research companies.

As a consequence it is of utmost importance for providers of qualitative research to differentiate their own services from those of their competitors. While theoretical thinking is often not a beloved daily business, the importance of a theory-driven thinking and acting—as a potential commercial and intellectual (USP) ("unique selling proposition")—has been discovered by many of the leading players in qualitative market research.

A neutral observer might come to the conclusion that many claims of "unique approaches" are part of the usual public relation battles between institutes; nevertheless it is a worthwhile enterprise to work out basic common ground, but also the fundamental differences of the various "schools of thinking". It seems to be a matter of intellectual honesty and clarity to provide buyers of qualitative research, who are often trained in marketing but not in social sciences, with a clear cut picture of what they can expect or not expect from a specific theoretical approach.

The current paper aims to give a synopsis on different psychological and ethnological theories which are currently used to support practical research, their explanation patterns for understanding consumer behaviour and their shared, but also their unique assumptions. The authors will also 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 which is integrating some of the basic assumptions made by other schools of thought. Finally, the paper points to a number of methodological implications of the model including the "unconscious clustering" method.

Key words: *qualitative market research, models of consumer behaviour, world of meaning, world of probability, unconscious clustering method, cybernetics*

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1. Qualitative Research as a Business

Figures reported by ESOMAR (2002) estimate the total worldwide share of market research at EUR 17,756 million in 2001 comprising of 60% ad hoc (e.g. single tactical research like packaging or concept tests) and 40% continuous research (e.g. continuously conducted customer satisfaction monitoring or brand tracking studies). The breakdown regarding research methodologies within the ad hoc part is reported to be 80% quantitative and 20% qualitative research as a rule of thumb across all countries. Within qualitative research group discussions (75%) are more prevalent than individual in-depth interviews (25%). Thus qualitative research is a EUR 2,130 million "industry" and turnover generated by qualitative projects contributes significantly to the economic success of most research companies. But due to several reasons the competition within the qualitative sector of research seems to be especially severe, let's consider just two of them in some more detail: [1]

Firstly, while many quantitative research techniques require large financial investments prior to their utilisation, qualitative research seems to promise an easy and comparably cheap start of business: some verbal skills, some empathy, an academic degree in one of the appropriate social or human sciences, a roof above one's head and a table to sit at. Secondly, this tempting—naturally misleading—view of qualitative research as an easy source of income is supported by a positivistic research philosophy originating from the United States which has been spreading in Europe during the last decades. This "American Style" approach to qualitative research focuses on a "prima facie"-evidence of results. Empirical findings are "demonstrated" during a focus group, a procedure which is often supported by some votes to check "majority opinions". Consumer insights are not generated via a thorough analysis afterwards, instead the factual output can be "observed" by clients and the immediate debrief after the group discussion is regarded to be a full substitute for a written reporting including interpretations and recommendations. An observer is tempted to conclude that this approach to explore the consumers' mind needs much less psychological professionalism and skills than the European analytical "humanist school of conative research" (GOODYEAR, 1998). [2]

As a consequence it seems difficult to get an overview of the heterogeneous provider scene of qualitative research and to judge the quality of the offers: a client scanning through the different research directories of national and international

market research associations will find owners of central locations, classical full-service agencies, institutes specialising in qualitative research and numerous "One-(wo)man-shows", all pretending to offer the same basic service. [3]

It is of utmost importance for providers of qualitative research to differentiate their own services from those of their competitors. While theoretical thinking is often not a beloved daily business, the importance of a theory-driven thinking and acting—as a potential commercial and intellectual USP ("unique selling proposition")—has been discovered by many of the leading players in qualitative market research. [4]

A neutral observer might come to the conclusion that many claims of "unique approaches" are part of the usual public relation battles between institutes. We believe that it is a worthwhile enterprise to work out the basic common ground shared by the various "schools of thinking", but also the areas where fundamental differences exist. It seems to be a matter of intellectual honesty and clarity to provide buyers of qualitative research, who are often trained in marketing but not in social sciences, with a clear cut picture what they can expect or not expect from a specific theoretical approach. [5]

Mary GOODYEAR (1998) compared qualitative research with holistic "alternative medicine" (while quantitative research plays the role of scientifically-proven allopathic medicine). Just like alternative medicine qualitative research consists of many different approaches: using different disciplines, philosophies and techniques. While a few research institutes clearly state the assumptions of their approach—to mention as an example Censydiam (Adlerian psychology) and the Ernest Dichter institutes (Freudian psychology)—the majority still operates with vague claims and promises. The intellectual level of the arguments used is often restricted to the "deeper depth" of the exploration which will inevitably lead to the "true motives" of consumer behaviour. Exploring "deeper" than others has thus become trendy, but too often this is 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." [6]

Therefore any *integrative* perspective should be less tunnel-viewed, more sensitive and flexible than existing approaches but at the same time consider fundamental findings which are shared as common knowledge across the different theories. So let us first examine the major schools of thought within qualitative research, their merits and their shortcomings. [7]

Some readers may miss a discussion of phenomenology or a discussion of theory-building approaches like "grounded theory" (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; GLASER, 1992; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998). The reasons are straightforward: despite its name, "grounded theory" is not a "classical" theory derived by deductive methods, but a methodology comprising a number of single techniques to develop inductively a theory step by step from existing data. [8]

The main reason for its development was to bring up an alternative to highly abstract sociological theories which had already lost their empirical ground and to bridge the gap between theoretically "uninformed" empirical research and empirically "uninformed" theory (cf. GOULDING, 1999). Emphasizing new discovery grounded theory is often used in areas where "little is known" or to put existing knowledge into

a new perspective. Thus the authors think that grounded theory based techniques are fruitful for qualitative research, to challenge presumably sound knowledge, to avoid a tunnel-viewed perspective on a particular phenomenon and to develop and fine-tune theories of consumer behaviour. Our firm belief is that strong theories stem from a continuous interplay of "inductive" and "deductive" processes, thus utilizing the philosophy of "open-minded" grounded theory is not a contradiction to our own attempt to learn from existing psychological theories of human behaviour. [9]

2. Theoretical Foundations of Contemporary Qualitative Research

2.1 The pros and cons of theorizing

At first glance it might be surprising for practitioners that inductive or deductive theorizing helps to get practical work done better. But keep in mind Kurt LEWIN's famous dictum that there is "nothing more practical than a good theory". But to be precise: LEWIN was well aware that only good theories are helpful. If theories lead to a tunnel-viewed perception of our world, if they restrict our thinking to narrow tracks they might as well become blinders rather than illuminators. [10]

"Bad" theories are affected by the same mistakes of thought which restrict our own social judgement in ordinary life: Our daily judgements are 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 effectively from understanding and solving complex problems. [11]

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"). [12]

That is why many qualitative research techniques have been developed to overcome the mono-syllabism 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 mono-causal 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. [13]

This finally leads us back to LEWIN: Good theories are always subject to empirical

validation, they can be falsified and they get increasingly robust over time the more empirical findings are in line with their predictions and assumptions. [14]

2.2 The psychoanalytical perspective

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 place in qualitative research despite the numerous problems associated with psychoanalytical theories. [15]

After so many years of existence it seems virtually impossible to forecast the future of psychoanalysis in scientific and practical research. Often claimed dead, psychoanalysis seems to be at least alive, but is certainly not healthy. Its history has been a history of segregation—ADLER, RANK, JUNG, REICH, LACAN, BOWLBY, SULLIVAN, FROMM, and HORNEY were all condemned as heretics—and nowadays the number of different, competing schools is so numerous that a common scientific ground can hardly be detected: Freudians, Jungians, Adlerians, Lacanians, Freudian Kleinians, Neo-Kleinians, Post-Kleinians, contemporary Kleinians, Ego-Psychology, Self-Psychology, Inter-Subjectivism, Inter-Personalism, psychoanalytical Post-modernism with its relational, social-constructivistic and systemic approaches¹⁾—the polyphonic nature of psychoanalysis is a serious internal communication barrier, but also hindering the exchange with neighbour sciences like psychology, medicine or pedagogy and with applied sciences like market research. As long as psychoanalytical schools operate like priest seminars, in which canonical teaching and "Bible reading" is seen as a substitute for intellectual exchange (KERNBERG, cited according to ALTMAYER, 2004) it seems difficult to practically apply psychoanalytical techniques and findings as their scientific foundation is questionable and foggy. It seems however that some leading contemporary psychoanalysts are trying to overcome their isolation within the "scientific community" by acknowledging and using empirical research methods to test their theoretical assumptions. [16]

Thus it is not surprising that the psychoanalytic view of (consumer) behaviour among the numerous schools is not at all homogeneous. In an excellent essay on the status of qualitative market research, in 1986 Gerald DE GROOT expressed his criticism on this matter:

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." (DE GROOT, 1986, p.137) [17]

But undoubtedly it is one of the lasting merits of psychoanalytic theorizing that it put the attention of researchers to the driving forces of human behaviour thus setting an early counterpoint to the behaviouristic black box models of that time. As it is impossible to discuss psychoanalytical drives, instinct and need theories within the scope of this article only two examples will be given. [18]

According to models based on A. ADLER's work (e.g. CALLEBAUT et al., 1998) one tries compensating all his or her life for 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 result from this feeling of inferiority and a generalised 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 peculiarities. Products are not being rated as good in a practical or functional sense, but for always having a social relevance (e.g.: bragging). [19]

Using the same *psycho-analytical libido concepts*, HEYLEN (HEYLEN, DAWSON & SAMPSON, 1995) develops a widely identical bio-energetic behavioural model. The model distinguishes between a biodynamic inner world and the external socio-cultural world. Our bio-dynamic drives can basically be actively expressed (externalised) or we can try to negate and repress them (internalise). HEYLEN postulates two modes in which tension or energy can be handled: either actively (ego-assertive mode) or in a passive, receptive way (socio-affiliative mode). The HEYLEN model results in a two-dimensional scheme claiming that all expressions of human behaviour can be located therein. For example, a cool, calculative behaviour showing dominance is positioned in the "ego-assertive" and "repressive" quadrant of HEYLENS model, while a warm, harmonious and enthusiastic behaviour is located in the "socio-affiliative"- "expressive" quadrant. [20]

2.3 The neuro-physiological approach

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. [21]

2.4 Other major approaches

Anthropological and *semiotic* approaches have expanded 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, which makes their explanation models specifically interesting for intercultural and communication-related questions. From an *anthropological* viewpoint consumer behaviour can be linked to very basic patterns of human behaviour, deeply embedded in human culture, often shared among all men. Some typical patterns of explanations show best the orientation of this approach: The current boom of cross-country vehicles is explained by a deeply-encoded male behaviour: Male road users are modern club swingers, the male driver becomes a stone-age hunter in a street cruiser. The current demand for superior mobility including off-road areas is explained by the fundamental biological needs of our ancestors leading to the conclusion that only the mobiles survived successfully (ATZWANGER, 2001). And finally Irenäus EIBL-EIBESFELDT concludes that politics and high-ways are fields of operation for a stone-age mentality (EIBL-EIBESFELDT, 1991). [22]

The specific approach of *semiotics* can be best described by looking at things "through the other end of the marketing telescope—the cultural end" (Monty ALEXANDER, Semiotic Solutions, quoted from GOODYEAR, 1998, p.218). The basic claim thus is that consumers are (culturally) made, not born. The semiotic

approach does not start with explorations of consumers feeling and thinking but as a kind of focused desk research describing the cultural framework behind the research questions. This covers the analysis of market communications like packaging and TV spots, the popular culture around the product category like life styles and trends and finally the brand communication—in every aspect coming from a historical up to the current perspective. When it comes to primary research the individual responses of consumers are compared to the previously assessed cultural beliefs and attitudes using linguistic and semiotic theories to explain how language works. [23]

2.5 Morphological approaches

Another psychological school of thought was developed by SALBER (1965, 1989) in Germany at the beginning of the sixties. Borrowing a term from GOETHE ("Morphologie") he named it *morphological psychology*—to indicate his conceptualization of the human psyche as a continuous gestalt formation and transformation (cf. SALBER, 1986). SALBER incorporated other approaches like phenomenology, Gestalt psychology and Freudian ideas. While his theory remained in an outsider position within contemporary scientific psychology his thinking has found a quite broad entrance in German qualitative research: several of his former students have founded own institutes promoting a morphological perspective on consumer behaviour. Generally morphologists stand in clear opposition to quantitative approaches in research, e.g. denying a need to validate qualitative findings in subsequent steps: since only morphological analysis is able to open the way to the reality behind the figures, it is claimed that psychological representativity needs not to be supported by statistical representation (data). [24]

Secondly, *morphological market research* criticizes attempts to explain markets using psychological personality concepts like traits, values, attitudes or habits. Instead it is claimed that consumer behaviour is determined by impact units formed by psyche and product ("Produktwirkungseinheiten"). Since consequence behaviour is seen as much less internally driven and less stable as for example is stated by psychological trait theory, morphologists claim that consumers are contradictory: they are driven by contrary motives. Thus products and brands serve varying psychic states ("Verfassungen") and marketing has to offer orientation, patterns and markings which support consumers wishes for transformation ("Verfassungsmarketing"). [25]

Morphological thinking can be summarized as follows:

- Every market has its own logic and meaning. The impact fields which are specific for a given market have a stronger impact on consumers than other psychological forces, e.g. belonging to a specific social or peer group.
- (Only) morphological market research reveals the impact forces, mechanisms and functional principles which determine consumer behaviour in a given market.
- It discloses the "stealth logic", the meaning and the function of markets, market developments, market personalities and communication means.
- Thus not motives drive consumers. They are primarily responsible for the direction of movement and the way they develop.
- It postulates six fundamental directions of development, which form a mutual relationship of complement and tension. The psychic types of activities need to

spread out, to strive for order and inherent laws, they want to adopt, change and influence reality. Eventually, the psychic types of activity strive for rearrangement and preparation for things to come. [26]

So while classical psychoanalytical approaches focuses on examining unconscious drives which cause behaviour, morphological market research risks to simplify the analysis of complex phenomena by replacing the "internal" perspective by the "external" one. The heavily criticized "personal cult" of classical psychology seems to be replaced by a similarly questionable, one-sided "product-cult". The fact that there can be no "psychology of a brand or product" without a perceptive judge whose perception is being driven individually not only by external impact forces but also by his or her own personality (e.g. traits, values, attitudes) is not considered by morphologists. [27]

3. Commonly Shared Assumptions as a Base for a Wider Perspective

So it is finally not too surprising that "depth" and the analysis of the "real consumer motives" come out differently, depending on the school of thought. So what theoretical direction should a client of research trust? Should this remain a matter of personal taste or the vividness of results? Is it finally a fairy-tales contest and the best story teller gets the job? [28]

Even though there are all the discussed controversies, the approaches still do have a number of issues in common, which deserve 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 an essence from the various driving forces postulated by the different schools. The same dimensions were already recognized by Charles 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 trans-culturally encoded by languages (OSGOOD, SUCI & TANNENBAUM, 1957).
- 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.
- Finally we take the change of the research perspective initiated by morphological psychology into consideration—which does not necessarily mean to acknowledge its extreme consequences, but leads to the well-known psychological paradigm of person-situation-interactionism. [29]

When taking all these fundamental insights into consideration there are enough modules for a modern approach to the consumer behaviour: not too tunnel-viewed

and "orthodox", but rather subject to empirical testing and related to a behavioural *theory of action*. We have further developed this approach and backed it up by applying *systemic psychology*, a theory of behavioural systems integrating emotions and cognitions. Those theories ("Handlungstheorien") are well-established in psychological research but still wait for practical applications in market research. [30]

4. An Integrative Perspective

Consequently we tried to base our model on the following fundamentals:

1. The above listed common assumptions of major theories of human behaviour,
2. a well balanced consideration of both the inner (consumer) and outer world (stimuli),
3. a theory of action integrating cognitions as well as emotions. [31]

So let us examine the core element of our approach, a theory focussing on the complex interplay of emotions and cognitions. Already in the 1980s, the scientific controversy about the relation of cognition and emotion reached its full potential, and now, nearly 20 years later, any serious theory of human behaviour is a *dual theory*²⁾, 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 guarantee 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. [32]

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*. [33]

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* for the control of behavioural processes but ended up completely neglecting the affective "soft factors" of human behaviour (e.g. TOTE-Model, MILLER, GALANTER & PRIBRAM, 1960). Compared to the so-far established stimulus-response ("black-box")-theories the "subjective behaviourism" approach of MILLER and colleagues was a milestone in psychological theory building. It was perfectly suited to explain robot (=rational, planned) behaviour but it felt short in providing any insights regarding the "whys" and "wherefores" of human behaviour. [34]

Meanwhile, psychological research reinvented the almost forgotten terminology of emotion and added the (affective) *world of meaning* to their basic model (e.g. SCHWANENBERG, 1990). 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?" [35]

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.* [36]

Buying decisions always depend on the outcome of the meaning and probability checks. As one can imagine the relationship between both checks and "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. [37]

The *meaning test*³⁾ of consumers 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. [38]

Generally, *probability tests* 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. [39]

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. [40]

The 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 "probability checks" (such as comparing the efficiencies of different refrigerators) either. [41]

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. 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. [42]

If a product in fact passes the meaning check, then usually there are more "cognitive tests" to follow determining the purchasing action. If these tests also come out positively, then they are 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. [43]

There is a continuous interaction between the world of meaning and the world of probability and it is a matter for 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 catalogue "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 Figure 1).

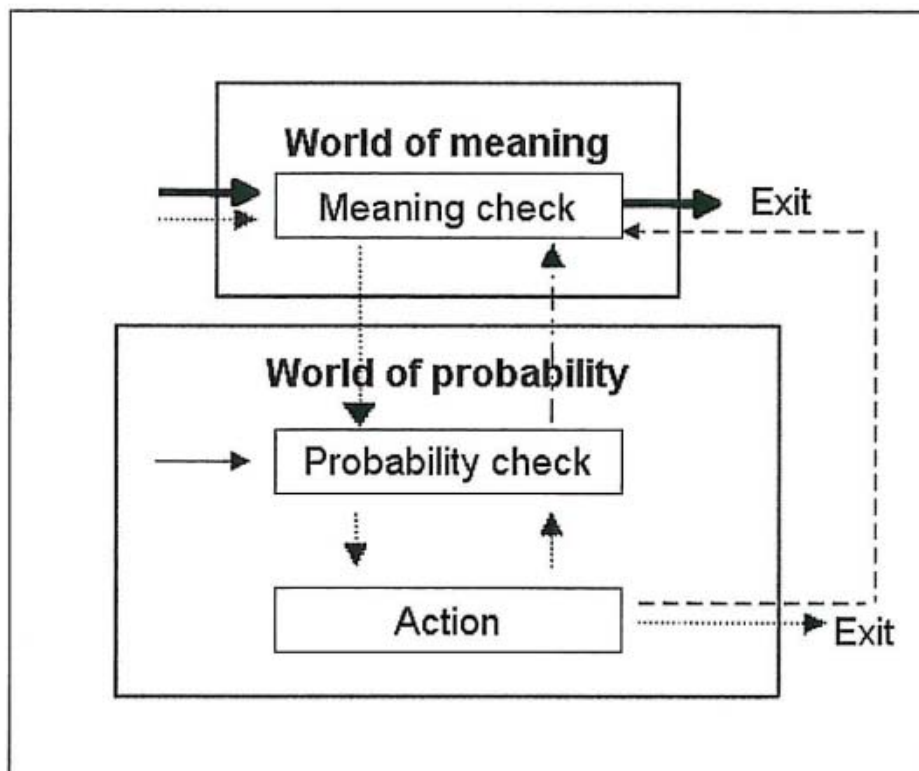


Figure 1: Extended cybernetic model of behaviour [44]

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 and automatised very fast and are 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. [45]

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 an identical 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. [46]

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 premature answers* to

the "real" and "final" behavioural causes. [47]

5. Some Methodological Implications

5.1 Matching theory and methods

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". [48]

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 driving motives for a specific choice of a product or brand and establishing the relations between the motives and certain products attributes. The following modules are also particularly suited to this aim:

- Top-of-mind imaging (spontaneous associations)
- Grouping of similar brands (e.g. unconscious clustering)
- Analysis of the physical (when, where, how) and motivational (why) purchasing and using context
- Projections on future brand use
- Exploration of possible brand-substitutions. [49]

5.2 Unconscious clustering

For the grouping of similar brands GLOBAL DYNAMICS Japan has developed a method which provides in a smart 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. [50]

Respondents' task is easy. They position the brands under investigation on a white board 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 Figure 2).



Figure 2: Placing [51]

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 Figure 3).

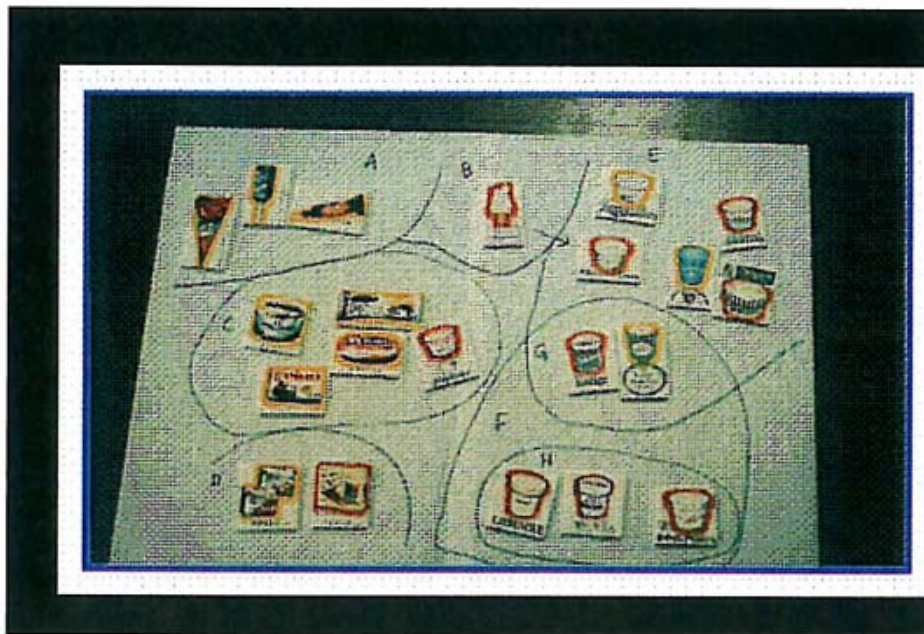


Figure 3: Grouping [52]

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? [53]

After the respondents' exercise the statistical analysis can start, which is done in four steps using a combination of brand mapping and fuzzy-set clustering to map brands and consumer segments in a joint space. The definition of the membership

value of a brand can vary between 0, 0.5 and 1.0 and is methodologically 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 multidimensional scaling (MDS) which leads to a new brand positioning. This positioning now allows the forming of clusters of brands, which we compare with the groups concerning their similarity. The cluster-group-relationship then allows for cluster characterisation. 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. [54]

5.3 Implications for classical qualitative "tools"

Our model has also consequences for the course of *single explorations* and *group discussions* and *the sizes of groups*. [55]

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. This allows a larger intensity of exploration with an often surprisingly broad variety of findings. [56]

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. This allows the six participants to "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. [57]

To summarise the 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. [58]

6. Outlook

The reader might miss a *cook-book* approach giving clear hints which theory to use for which kind of research question. Other authors have tried to offer this, and we would also end up with a crude rule of thumb without any practical use. And their practical usefulness seems to be at least questionable:

"Anthropology is useful for exploring the relationship between mankind, goods and culture, semiotics for understanding culture and communication. Psychology is used for understanding motivation and for exploring consumer relationships with brands and how the latter should be positioned. Implicit models based on universal psychodynamics have been developed to help position brands across cultural boundaries" (GOODYEAR, 1998, p.218). [59]

But what are the practical implications of such a recommendation? [60]

The first, purely technical barrier is that only a very few qualitative researchers will be trained and educated as experts in several theories. Even if they were firm in theories no one could really expect them to be trained in the various practical research techniques which are typical for the different schools (e.g. psychodrama, transactional analysis, play oneiric tests, semiotics and so on). So switching between theories depending on the research question is virtually impossible on an individual level, but requires interdisciplinary teams within an institute to always present the "right" person to a client. From a client perspective this barrier seems irrelevant as he could choose an appropriate research agency as soon as he had the impression that their theoretical orientation fits his specific research question. [61]

But as outlined above each of the "schools" risks missing one or more important aspects and only a few clients have the time and the budget to engage several agencies to get a "full" picture. Moreover it would demand too much from most clients to do the synthesis of the each findings on their own. The authors see an alternative in using an *integrative theoretical framework* which preserves basic insights of the major theories and is grounded on psychology as a cognitive-behavioural science. We see the resulting practical benefits in a broader, less tunnel-viewed perspective. It seems promising that our "philosophy" is supported by parallel developments in other fields of research: MIGONE and LIOTTI (1997) have published an attempt to combine psychoanalysis and cognitive-evolutionary psychology. The authors integrate the classic "Plans and Structure of Behaviour" by MILLER, GALANTER and PRIBRAM (1960), a neurobiological theory of EDELMANs and BOWLBYs attachment theory for a clearer conceptualisation of clinical theory. [62]

The integration of theories is "work in progress" in basic and applied sciences and we believe that it will also be the future of theorizing in market research. First steps have been taken, but there remains a lot to do. But for the time being it should also be clear that using any theory of human behaviour in qualitative market research is much more beneficial to our profession than relying on the "common sense" of laymen researchers only. [63]

Notes

1) As listed by ALTMAYER (2004), even this extended enumeration does not claim to be an exhaustive overview of psychoanalytical groupings and sub-groupings. [<back>](#)

2) In psychological literature, there are several "dual cognition-theories". We refer to Enno SCHWANENBERG's theoretical approach (1990, 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. [<back>](#)

3) Nota bene: Those "tests" are cognitive and affective evaluations done by the

individuals to cope with their outer and inner world. It is the task of *qualitative researchers* to explore which tests are actually used by individuals to assign meanings, to probe their assumptions and to adopt with new cognitive and emotional patterns to changing situations. Suited methodologies to explore the "probability" and "meaning" checks of individuals (e.g. laddering techniques) are described in Chapter 5 in some more detail. [<back>](#)

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Authors

Prof. Dirk FRANK is shareholder and director of ISM GLOBAL DYNAMICS (Kronberg, Germany) and managing director of the international GLOBAL DYNAMICS Group. Dirk Frank is also a visiting professor at the University for Applied Sciences in Pforzheim where he primarily teaches methods of marketing research and international market research.

Contact:

Prof. Dirk Frank

ISM GLOBAL DYNAMICS
Frankfurter Strasse 23
61476 Kronberg/Germany

E-mail: dfrank@globdyn.com

Peter RIEDL is operations group manager for Qualitative Research at ISM GLOBAL DYNAMICS.

Contact:

Peter Riedl

E-mail: priedl@globdyn.com

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