

Wulf Schlund

The character of qualitative research



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Up till now, no agreement has been reached among qualitative and quantitative researchers about the definition, meaning and value of qualitative research. Many quantitative researchers define qualitative research simply as open-ended questions asked of a too small sample of respondents – and are less than convinced about the purpose of this exercise.

Among qualitative researchers it's different. There are mainly two groups of practitioners: The blunt questioners and the followers of a theory. The first group – mainly among test studio owners, sometimes also economists – has no problem with the definition and

execution of qualitative research. They use the marketing briefing as discussion guide and deliver focus group results within 24 hours at latest. There is no doubt that for these people qualitative research has a high value – for their business.

It's the theoreticians who as the real qualitative researchers have led the discussion with the quantitative researchers and been responsible for the ups and downs in the appreciation of qualitative research among marketing people.

The old misunderstanding: Two researchers – two results

A weighty argument against qualitative research has always been that two different researchers arrive at two different results. This argument is impressive and 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.

The real reproach behind this argument is that qualitative research is never "objective" but is 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. Naturally there are good and less good qualitative researchers and clients could take into account their reputations. But what is behind the classification of good and less good? Is it experience, is it education, is it verbal dexterity, the power of conviction, empathy with other people?

Theory yes – but which one?

Among qualitative professionals there is widespread agreement that qualitative research is only valid when derived from theory. Theory-free qualitative research remains superficial and is at best just false quantitative research. But which theory is best and which methods and techniques are the right ones? And how can a client who has neither studied psychology or sociology come to a decision? Although the old consumer model of the "homo economicus" is out and the importance of the emotional factors for purchase decisions has been acknowledged, there are still a number of different theoretical approaches and the representatives of these "schools" work side by side or against each other. The range is wide – from behaviouristic to psychoanalytical approaches.

Two "schools" as an example

We needn't list all these "schools", but just consider two approaches which at least in Germany are "in" at the moment, to explain why qualitative research repeatedly provides different 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 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. On 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.

It is this approach which tolerates no other theory: Traditional psychology and all its personality theories are viewed as too superficial and the whole of market research – except this approach – considers human beings as consumer animals and can observe changes but never explain them.

All this sounds very self-confident – too self-confident. It's true that it is products which provide specific possibilities of satisfaction, but this is not new. Deriving 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 even as far as unique kinds of satisfaction. But all this does not mean that they are able to incorporate the human mind. Furthermore 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.

Two approaches with opposite starting points, and interpretation patterns which have to be doubted: The more fanatically they are used, the more doubts are allowed. What is to be done? Which side is right, if any?

The pragmatic way out: The wider perspective

As brief and rough the description of these two qualitative approaches has been, it nevertheless demonstrates the following: The problem with these two approaches is that they tolerate no other approach. Without this kind of intolerance it would be easier to consider both of them as interesting ways of thinking. Perhaps one could even make use of them, from case to case.

A specific example

Let's consider as an example, something unusual, a passion among some people: collecting coins. Let's assume the first qualitative approach has found out the following basic motivation for collecting coins: save and store things of personal importance to have them always there, so they can be touched and grasped and provide the feeling of security. Let's further assume 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:

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.

The knowledge of these motives and collector type allows us to locate the product effects of individual coin series more precisely. In fact, it becomes very easy to match specific coin programs with the motive categories and consumer types. For example Diana, German presidents and chancellors, the German re-unification, the great Hollywood stars.

Consumer types as an alternative

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.

3. The benefits: room for “contradictory” results

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

Motivational collector types

- **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, 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 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.

information and one should use this information. If different approaches lead to similar or identical results there is also no problem but greater reassurance.

Objectifiable qualitative research

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 the qualitative research 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