ABSTRACT - As qualitative methods are experiencing increasing popularity in consumer research, methods are being introduced from other disciplines, particularly anthropology and sociology. Ethnography has received attention as a promising consumer research method, although it has yet to achieve mainstream status within the discipline. This paper discusses the compatibility of ethnography with the grounded theory method of theory induction as employed in sociology. Combined, it is proposed that these two methods have the potential to offer a detailed understanding of consumption as experienced by consumers.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND GROUNDED THEORY: A HAPPY MARRIAGE?

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INTRODUCTION

The emerging interpretation of consumption as an integral component of human life has lead to the study of very different research topics with the application of very different methods (Holbrook 1995). The consumption of an ever-increasing range of experiences is now classified as consumer research, an example being Belk’s (1996) recent study of consumption experiences in Las Vegas. Belk advocates greater attention to the entire consumption process, including post-purchase behaviour, an approach that he calls macro consumer research (see Blk 1987). This has been prompted by a concern that the managerial orientation to consumer research lacks the ability to provide an adequate comprehension of consumers and their behaviours (Hill 1992a). In particular, the information processing approach has been recognised as inadequate in respect to understanding many forms of consumption, resulting in a search for alternative approaches (Clarke, Kel, Schmidt, and Vignali 1998; Holbrook 1995; Mick 1986). This represents a clear move away from the dominant micro approach of traditional consumer research that is characterised by an exclusive focus on the process of acquisition. Several writers have noted, however, that the move towards a macro perspective is gradual, and has yet to achieve mainstream status in consumer behaviour (Kleine, Schultz-Kleine, and Kernan 1992; Belk 1988; Firt 1987a and 1987b).

A macro perspective on consumption expands the range of research methods that are considered appropriate and productive. Calls are being heard for research that concentrates more on “the messy contextual details of consumer life” (Holt 1997, p. 344). As a result, some are now advocating a more pluralistic approach to methodology (Holbrook 1995). This includes the wider usage of methods borrowed from other disciplines, such as the anthropological method of ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Also, there has been an increased focus on theory generation to offset the preoccupation with theory validation, opening up opportunities for alternative forms of research such as grounded methods (see for example Mick and Fournier 1998; Holt 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Although naturalistic research methods such as ethnography and grounded theory are not new, their application to the field of consumer behaviour is much more recent (Hill 1991; Thompson 1990; Atkinson 1988). The formal use of the grounded theory method is particularly rare, as its use remains largely confined to the discipline of sociology (Wells 1995).

ETHNOGRAPHY

As a macro analysis of consumption is concerned with the role of consumption in human life (Belk 1987), naturalistic methods have become popular among those studying consumption from a macro perspective (Sheeh and Gross 1988). The reflexive nature of these methods means that researchers can nominate areas of research interest that remain undefined by an hypothesis throughout the course of the study (e.g., Annels 1996). Ethnography is a form of naturalistic inquiry that has a specific interest in culture (Sarantakos 1993). The word “ethnography” literally means the writing of culture (Atkinson 1992). The aim of this type of research is to see the world through the eyes of the members of the culture being examined (Barnes 1996), and to document the social interactions among these members (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994).
Another aim of ethnography is to explicate those activities that engage cultural members for significant amounts of time (Triandis 1980). As such, consumption represents a phenomenon that can be effectively addressed with the use of ethnographic techniques. Ethnographic consumer research is based on the assumption that the social meanings found in material possessions can be analysed for their employment as cultural communicators (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). For this reason, ethnography is being employed in consumer research to explicate various forms of consumer behaviour, without necessarily explicitly referring to the cultural aspects of this behaviour (see Arnold and Wallendorf 1994).

Despite being suggested more than 30 years ago as a viable consumer research method (Belk et al. 1988), ethnography has only recently become popular in the discipline (Hill 1991 and 1992b). Originating in anthropology where it was primarily used to study small indigenous groups (Sarantakos 1993; Marcus 1986), ethnography has now been advocated as an effective research tool to be used in the marketing discipline, and in consumer behaviour in particular (Johnson 1990). Arnold and Wallendorf (1994, p.485) list the features of market-oriented ethnography as: (1) the collection of data in natural settings; (2) the use of participant observation, involving immersion over long periods; (3) the generation of an interpretation considered credible by informants; and (4) the use of multiple data sources. The output is a thick description of consumer behaviour that gives insight into the symbolic meanings that are so important to consumption (Mick 1986; Clarke et al. 1988).

As ethnographic research is emic in design (i.e., it attempts to describe occurrences as they are experienced by the subject [Arnold and Wallendorf 1994]), there is an acknowledged lack of objectivity in most ethnographic research (Atkinson 1992; Holt 1991; Johnson 1990; Spradley and McCurdy 1972). By acknowledging the subjective, partial, and local nature of the analysis, ethnography claims only to provide one interpretation of the phenomenon of interest; potentially one of many.

**GROUNDED THEORY**

At some stage of a research project, the researcher(s) must choose between: (a) initially adopting or generating a theoretical framework with which to analyse and interpret a specific phenomenon; and (b) allowing an understanding of the phenomenon to emerge through data analysis. Both methods are legitimate approaches to the qualitative objective of explicating relationships (Huberman and Miles 1994). The first option represents logical deduction theory building (Annells 1996), and is apparently the alternative more commonly employed in consumer studies, as indicated by the methodology sections of most consumer behaviour journal articles. The second option, the inductive method of theory building, appears to be less frequently adopted despite being recommended for consumption studies by Calder (1977) over 20 years ago.

The grounded theory method was initially developed as a response to the perceived lack of new theories being generated in sociology (Locke 1992). Firmly believing in the importance of logical deduction as applied in sociology, Glaser and Strauss (1967) sought to redress the emphasis on the verification of existing theories by constructing a methodology that could guide qualitative researchers through the theory development process. By doing so, they bridged the gap between empirical data and theory generation (Hammersley 1989). They proposed formalised procedures, such as theoretical sampling and coding, to provide structure to theory generation (Barnes 1996). Grounded theory has its emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality (Goulding 1998), and the aim is to produce interpretations that can explain social phenomena and provide information of value to those engaged in the behaviour under study (Annells 1996; Glaser and Strauss 1967). In particular, grounded theory aims to identify the main concern of social actors, along with the various strategies that can be employed in the resolution of this concern (Glaser 1992). In the process, grounded theory can be viewed as a potential instigator for change as it explains their own behaviours to social actors, giving them a degree of control that they did not possess previously (Wuest 1995; Hammersley 1989).

Thus, one of the major strengths of grounded theory is that it recognises the complexity of the social world, and works to make sense of it to both analysts and lay-people (Glaser 1992; Wells 1995).

Grounded theory was originally based on the proposition that data generated in a social environment can be used to construct social theories (Robrecht 1995), which was in turn founded on the contention that constancies exist in the social world (Huberman and Miles 1994). The method also operates according to the assumption that it is essential for the researcher to gain familiarity with the specific setting(s) in which behaviour occurs in order to generate useful concepts and theories for social actors and theorists alike (Huberman and Miles 1994). As a naturalistic research method, grounded theory commences with no precise research question (Melia 1996). Instead, the question is allowed to gradually emerge from the broad research area through on-going immersion in data relevant to the chosen social phenomenon (Wuest 1995; Glaser 1992).

Grounded theory relies on the close examination of empirical data prior to focused reading in the literature (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goulding 1998; Locke 1996). By reversing the usual order of literature review and data collection, grounded theory seeks to adapt previous findings to the specific characteristics of the phenomena under study (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). The objective is to prevent contamination of the analysis with preconceived theories, aiming instead for a fresh perspective on the phenomenon that is tainted as little as possible by previous research (Locke 1996; Goulding 1998). Goulding (1998) suggests that the literature be treated as another informant, rather than a dominant contributor to the emerging interpretations. The extent to which researchers should avoid all relevant material prior to the analysis is a point of contention among grounded theorists, particularly the two founding fathers. While Strauss and Corbin (1990) permit some depth of reading in the early stages, Glaser (1992) is adamant that depth of reading in the early stage is critical in such contamination until the core category(ies) has been identified from the data. Given that many researchers focus their attentions in areas in which they have already accumulated some expertise, it is unrealistic to assume that they approach the phenomenon of interest as a clean slate (Kools, McCarthy, Durham, and Robrecht 1996). Instead, it is more appropriate to recognise the prior knowledge of researchers, while employing an iterative process of literature review and data collection and analysis (Goulding 1998; Hirschman and Thompson 1997).

The use of grounded theory has been complicated by heated disagreement between its two originators (Goulding 1998; Melia 1996). Barrie Glaser and Anselm Strauss were the founders of the grounded theory method. Subsequent to the publication of their first book on the subject in 1967 (The Discovery of Grounded Theory) they adopted different applications of the grounded theory method. Glaser remains committed to an approach focusing on total emergence (see Glaser 1992), while Strauss came to favour a dimensional approach that pre-suggests possible influences on behaviour (see Strauss and Corbin 1990). Glaser sees the primary purpose of grounded theory as exploration, to be followed later with verificational studies. By comparison, Strauss and Corbin view grounded theory as a combination of hypothesis generation and verification. Strauss and Corbin allow for variations in interpretations according to the characteristics of the researcher, while Glaser seeks a correct interpretation that exists independent of the researcher.

Other users of the grounded theory method are divided in their preferences for the varying approaches proffered by its originators. Some favour the traditional approach advocated by Glaser, while others embrace the version proposed by Strauss and Corbin. To date there is no consensus among grounded theorists as to which yields the superior interpretation of social phenomena (Kools et al. 1996). This conflict between proponents, however, need not preclude the use of grounded theory as a viable research methodology. In fact, the conflict reflects the diversity of potential applications of the general concept of grounded theory. This has resulted in the application of adapted versions of
grounded theory, not all of which are entirely congruent with the method as it was originally presented by Glaser and Strauss (Goulding 1998). The divergence in approaches between proponents offers consumer researchers a greater range of specific research and analysis techniques that can be employed to meet the requirements of different research tasks and the skills of different researchers. In its current form, grounded theory is thus very flexible in application. While this can be attributed to a lack of maturity, as apparent in the continuing disagreement among users of the method, this flexibility remains a distinct advantage to its users in their efforts to explicate a broad range of behaviours and their determinants.

Theoretical Outputs

Grounded theory focuses on the identification of conceptual categories that are derived from the data via the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Hammersley 1989). The constant comparative method requires the constant comparison between incidents found in the data and the emerging theoretical concepts (Barnes 1996). The analyst compares the contents of one interview or observation episode with another in an effort to identify underlying themes. These themes can include both commonalities and contradictions (Wells 1995). The objective is to explicitly note similarities and differences in the data, which are then used to derive theoretical categories that are congruent with the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1998). The analysis process continues throughout data collection, as the analyst determines the next appropriate interviewee or location on the basis of the theoretical understandings emerging from prior interviews and observations (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Locke 1996).

According to its instigators, the core or primary category of a grounded theory should possess explanatory power and account for the major concern of the social actors engaged in the activity under study (Glaser 1992). Once categories have been established, the next task is to identify the properties of these categories until saturation is achieved. These categories and properties represent the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, conveying the basic social processes at work behind the observed behaviours (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This understanding is then often communicated by a discussion of the dimensions that represent the properties under specific conditions (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Dimensions or conditions reflect the extremes of what is being communicated by the data, such as the relevance of the masculinity or femininity of the social actors to the nature of the phenomenon (see for example Kimle and Danhorst 1997).

The ways in which grounded theory has been employed in consumer research have not corresponded entirely with the procedures outlined above. In fact, rather than explicitly deriving categories, properties, and dimensions, Mick and Fournier (1998), Hirschman and Thompson (1997), and Kimle and Danhorst (1997) have produced accounts of the strategies employed by consumers to cope with the social processes under examination. By doing so, these researchers have addressed the information needs of social actors while explicating the phenomenon of interest, thus meeting the major objectives of the grounded theory method.

Applications of the Grounded Theory Method

Rather than being limited to a particular discipline or form of data collection, grounded theory has been found useful across multiple research areas (Wells 1995). Grounded theory relates specifically to the analysis phase of research, although it can refer to data collection as well (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In fact, Glaser (1992) has argued that the grounded theory method of analysis can be applied to any data, not just that which has been collected qualitatively. Grounded theory has been effectively and widely employed in the social sciences since its inception in the mid-1960s (Wells 1995), and to a lesser extent has been found suitable for consumption studies. For example, areas of application of relevance to consumer behaviour include the analysis of women's clothing in the workplace (Kimle and Danhorst 1997), the consumption of technological products (Mick and Fournier 1998), and the symbolic meaning found in advertisements (Phillips 1997; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). These, however, are only studies that explicitly acknowledge the use of the grounded theory method. It is likely that many consumer research studies have employed grounded theory methods without recognising or acknowledging them as such (e.g., Belk 1996; Schouton and McAlexander 1995).

When borrowing methods from other disciplines, Strauss (1995) argues that theorists do not need to justify the assumptions inherent in the borrowed procedures. Instead, the researcher can employ the methods where they are relevant to the research problem at hand. Consumer researchers using the grounded theory method can thus progress the application of the method, rather than addressing the unresolved aspects of its design (Hammersley 1989). The method has three primary advantages to consumer researchers: (1) it was designed for use in the discipline of sociology, and is therefore suited to the analysis of macro influences on human behaviour; (2) it is appropriate for the in situ analysis of behaviours, a form of analysis that has been found to be important in consumer research (Belk et al. 1988); and (3) grounded theory has the capacity to generate theories of behaviour, rather than ceasing at the point of description (Barnes 1996; Kools et al. 1996; Wuest 1995).

COMBINING ETHNOGRAPHY AND GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory and ethnography are suggested here to be highly compatible, as ethnographic studies can provide the thick description that is very useful data for grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Part of this compatibility derives from the similarities in the characteristics between the two approaches. As a naturalistic form of inquiry, ethnography entails observing and analysing behaviour in naturally occurring contexts (Belk et al. 1988; Longabaugh 1980). Grounded theory similarly performs best with data generated in natural settings (Robrecht 1995). Both have been derived from the symbolic interactionist perspective (Goulding 1998, Annelis 1996; Robrecht 1995), and both often rely on participant observations (Wells 1995; Arnold and Wallendorf 1994). Sample selection is emergent in both ethnography and grounded theory (Wells 1995; Belk et al. 1988), and both attempts obtain emic descriptions of behaviour (Barnes 1996).

While ethnography in consumer behaviour is typically associated with the generation of information of relevance to marketers, product ethnographies performed for their own sake rather than in the interests of marketers have the potential to illuminate the meanings of products in consumers' lives (Arnold and Wallendorf 1994). Ethnography thus has potential as a mechanism to increase consumers' awareness of their own consumption behaviours and motivations. Similarly, grounded theory with its emphasis on providing information to social actors has the capacity to generate findings of interest to consumers, not just marketers. These similarities indicate that ethnography offers a method of data collection that is conducive to inductive theory building (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A useful way of conceptualising the relationship between ethnography and grounded theory is that grounded theory can formalise and extend the limited theoretical component of ethnography.

The compatibility of grounded theory and ethnography, however, is not complete. While ethnography often focuses on the relevance of culture to a specific behaviour or outcome, grounded theory (in theory) holds no such preconceptions (Barnes 1996). In recent years, however, users of grounded theory have argued that it remains a useful and relevant method for analysing data that have been collected with the importance of specific variables in mind. Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer specifically to the suitability of a grounded theory method to studies where the primary variables have already been identified. Similarly, De Vauj (1995) has pointed to the importance of actively searching for the effects of such factors as gender and ethnicity, due to the tendency for the socialisation process to teach people to play down the affects of these variables. While such applications of the grounded theory method would not be considered appropriate by Glaser (1991), Strauss and Corbin (1990) and other grounded theorists would agree with such an application (e.g., Wuest 1995).

One of the key dilemmas surrounding both grounded theory and ethnography is that of generalisability (Goulding 1998; Johnson 1990). The ability to draw etic conclusions from data generated via ethnographic and grounded theory methods has long been contentious. Etic refers to...
a cultural description taken from the perspective of the researcher, where the aim is to identify universal phenomena (Triandis 1980). In terms of the generalisability of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss once again part ways. Glaser (1992) appears to favour the more confined treatment of results, while Strauss and Corbin (1990) seem more amenable to the transfer of interpretations from one context to another. Others are undecided, as is made evident by some grounded theorists noting that localised interpretations are inappropriate for employment in other settings unless further research validates the extension, while simultaneously assuming that their findings are relevant in other contexts (see for example Hammersley 1989; Annells 1996). A way of overcoming this dilemma is to focus on the generalisation of the social relationships underlying the behaviours observed, rather than attempting to transfer the particular social experiences involved (De Vault 1995).

Similarly, the use of ethnographic methods in consumer research has been characterised by the co-existence of declarations of the location-specific nature of the interpretation and the inclination to assume that results are generalisable across contexts. According to Arnould and Wallendorf (1994, p. 485),

Ethnography not only establishes the context and subject significance (emic) of experience for particular groups of persons, but also seeks to convey the comparative and interpreted (etic) cultural significance of this experience.

This refers to the ability of ethnographic techniques to generate data that explicate the localised phenomenon of interest while providing possible insights into broader theoretical frameworks. Others point to the specificity of the data generated via ethnographic techniques, and caution against assuming that this data may be representative of broader behaviours (Johnson 1990). The reconciliation reached by some ethnographers is similar to that of some grounded theorists. Instead of generalising the specifics of the behaviours studied, they point to the basic human qualities demonstrated and apply these to other groups that have not been directly represented in the research (e.g., Brady 1992). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) expound the benefits of ethnography for revealing general consumption motivations, discussing how ethnography provides access to the symbolic meaning embedded in products. This is a valuable attribute considering the often subconscious usage of these meanings by consumers. While such an interpretation would result from the investigation of certain groups of informants, it becomes useful in understanding broader consumption behaviours.

The Marriage in Practice

An examination of published consumer research literature yields little in the way of studies acknowledging the combined use of ethnography and grounded theory. While some researchers cite the use of a “grounded” approach to data collection and analysis (Holt 1997) and others have employed a version of the grounded theory method combined with qualitative data collection methods (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Phillips 1997; Rust 1993), the grounded theory method as described by Glaser and Strauss does not appear to have been used in conjunction with ethnography in published consumer research.

One example of this combination of methods can be found in the unpublished literature. Ethnography and grounded theory were used in a study of beer consumption in Australia (Pettigrew 1999). In this study, ethnographic methods were employed in the data collection phase in the form of interviews, observations, and participant observations conducted in drinking situations. The data obtained were then analysed according to the principles of the grounded theory method. The results were two-fold. In the first instance, a thick description of beer consumption in Australian culture was produced. This represented the ethnographic component of the study, and was presented in terms of five myths that were found to accompany beer consumption in Australia. A theoretical account of this form of consumption was then generated in the form of the primary category and properties that were found to apply to beer consumption. By producing these two outcomes, the study provided both a description of the ways in which beer is consumed in the lives of everyday Australians and a contribution to consumer behaviour theory.

CONCLUSIONS

Separately, ethnography and grounded theory have the potential to facilitate a closer understanding of consumers and their highly diverse consumption behaviours. Ethnography can provide in-depth understandings of the ways in which consumers buy and use specific items, while also providing insights into consumption in general. The grounded theory method can generate substantive theories of behaviour, thus supplying a means of extending or validating existing consumer behaviour theories. It is suggested here that these two methods combined may produce a level of detail and interpretation that is unavailable from other methodologies. Further applications of the combination of ethnography and grounded theory, beyond the limited forays outlined here, are required to further explore the compatibility of these methods and to assess the potential of the combined approach.

REFERENCES


Clarke, I., I. Kell, R. Schmidt, and C. Vignali (1998). "Thinking the Thoughts They Do: Symbolism and Meaning in the Consumer Experience of


The study utilized constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1995, 2001) to analyse the narratives of semi-structured interviews and field notes of participant observation generated through fieldworks conducted in three phases at a rural and an urban area of Kachchh (with about one year of gap between the two consecutive phases), each of the duration of about one to two months. An example of the use of constructionist grounded theory analysis in the ethnographic study conducted by KRP to understand the suffering and healing processes after Kachchh earthquake is provided next (Priya 2005). Example of Analysis through Constructionist Grounded Theory Approach.

@inproceedings{Goulding2003GroundedT, title={Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology: A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research}, author={Christina Goulding}, year={2003} }. Christina Goulding. Published 2003. Purpose – The paper aims to look at some of the problems commonly associated with qualitative methodologies, suggesting that there is a need for a more rigorous application in order to develop theory and aid effective decision making. Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines three qualitative methodologies: grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. It compares and contrasts their approaches to data collection and interpretation and highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each one.