Behind Closed Doors: a Reflection on the Emotional Challenge of Doing Consumer Research on Painful Topics
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Consumer researchers are increasingly studying demanding populations such as breast cancer patients, drug addicts, and AIDS victims. Developing interactions with these highly vulnerable and often distressed, seriously ill, or traumatized populations is likely to significantly affect the researcher. Moreover, methods that increase the empathetic and experiential understanding of another’s painful reality are likely to be more emotionally demanding. This presentation conceptually and empirically explores the impact of the researchers’ emotions on the research, the researcher, and the researched. It suggests that considering, exploring, and disclosing these emotions can improve the overall research process.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Workbench Issues in Transformative Consumer Research

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SESSION SUMMARY

The 19th century roots of the social sciences in the United States arose from the twin desires to solve social problems and guide public policies. Thus, the romantic call for transformative consumer research (Mick 2005) is neither new nor revolutionary but is a return to our origins. While the early days of the social sciences had social reformers and academic analysts working side by side, reformers were quickly expelled from the academy as the academic social scientists consolidated their power in professional associations (Greenwood 2004; Krause 1996). For example, Ross (1991) documents a long and troubling history of the social sciences removing theorists who are social critics, which significantly predates the well-publicized McCarthy purges. Thus, a pressing issue facing would-be transformative consumer researchers is whether our academy can absorb the potentially destabilizing and critical nature of transformative consumer research. Unlike traditional positivistic research that claims an apolitical (despite the philosophical problem of a “neutral” vantage point), transformative consumer research explicitly affirms the goal of changing and improving society. Such an approach is likely to challenge our traditional notions of research product and process.

The purpose of this special session is to explore the practical and demanding workbench issues of doing research aimed at social change. Three papers are presented that explore challenges from the perspective of the researcher, the local community, and the broader academic community. First, Jonathan Deschenes examines the often invisible and rarely discussed problem of the emotional and personal demands of studying raw and poignant social problems such as AIDS, poverty, or domestic violence. In our hurried rush to meet the call for transformative research, Jonathan raises a caution flag suggesting that as researchers we will likely face personal transformations and he explores some practical approaches that we might take. Second, Jean-Sebastien Marcoux offers reflections from his fieldwork on the 9/11 attack and the construction of memory at Ground Zero. He explores the transformative consumer researcher as located at the nexus of competing and often contradictory interest groups within the local community and discusses the accompanying moral and ethical dilemmas faced. Finally, Julie Ozanne, Bige Saatcioglu, and Canan Corus suggest that the paradigm of participatory action research (PAR) offers valuable lessons that can be applied to research aimed at social change. However, PAR advocates a radical rethinking of the role of researcher, the research process, and the knowledge output that is generated.

This session is a multi-paradigmatic approach to issues facing researchers who seek to do research for social change. The domain of transformative research provides a context in which we can break down paradigmatic barriers and engage in constructive debate and the exchange of ideas unified by our shared interest in social problems. This session is relevant to researchers who are interested in transformative consumer research in general and those researchers who are struggling with the specific challenges of researching difficult social problems.

Connie Pechmann is an ideal discussant because her research exemplifies how consumer theory can be fused with social practice. In her work on adolescents and cigarette smoking, she engages in theoretically-driven programs of behavioral change. She is also active in disseminating her work to stakeholders who can benefit from her research and can offer important reflections on the research issues arising in this session.

“Behind Closed Doors: Reflecting on the Emotional Challenges of Doing Consumer Research on Painful Topics”

Jonathan Deschenes

Consumer researchers are exploring highly sensitive population segments, such as AIDS victims (Kates 2001), breast cancer patients (Pavia and Mason 2004), juvenile delinquents (Ozanne, Hill and Wright 1998), drug addicts (Hirschman 1992; Hirschman and McGriff 1995), compulsive buyers (O’Guinn and Faber 1989), and homeless women (Hill 1991). Increasingly, consumer researchers are urged to develop “consumer research for consumers” (Bazerman 2001) and to create programs that will help communities in return for their generous contributions to science (Moorman 2002; Murray and Ozanne 1991). Recently, the Association for Consumer Research led by his President and by a special task force, coined the expression Transformative Consumer Research (TCR), which essentially insists on developing research programs to improve the quality of life of consumers (Mick 2005, Mick 2006).

However, this call for “consumer-centered” research, which mainly focuses on problems experienced by consumers individually or collectively, ignores the emotional impact felt by researchers when performing research on emotionally-demanding population segments. Interacting with despairing, distressed, seriously ill, traumatized, or abused consumers is likely to affect the researcher deeply. During research on rape victims, Campbell (2002) noted that research team members began to feel unsafe after dusk, resented being alone in unknown places, and locked themselves in at home. In a study with battered women, Dunn (1991) reported frequent insomnia, gastrointestinal problems and headaches. Similarly, investigators studying dying people reported experiencing strong emotional turmoil as they reflected on their own mortality (Owens and Payne 1999).

These powerful reactions often arise when the researcher deeply identifies with participants (Alder and Alder 1987; Kleiman and Copp 1993) or when the trauma is overwhelming, which can cause vicarious traumatization (Hesse 2002). Moreover, the use of interpretive methodologies likely exacerbates this effect. Indeed, by creating contextualized, intimate, humanized relationships, this approach collapses the distance between the researcher and the researched (Hirschman 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Methods that increase the empathetic and experiential understanding of another person’s vivid and painful reality are likely to be more emotionally demanding (Margulies 1989).

Notwithstanding their importance, these emotions and other responses are often neglected or even negated in the research process. Despite the postmodern turn in research, which allegedly reintroduced the subjective accounts of researcher into the research process, a strong socially constructed attraction towards “objectivity” still exists in doing and reporting research (Campbell 2002; Pratt 1986; Rothman 1986). Qualitative researchers often deliberately try to compartmentalize this information to avoid the inclusion of emotions in their analysis (Kleiman and Copp 1993). However, recent theories of emotions (e.g. Damasio 1994) and reflections on fieldwork (e.g. Kleiman and Copp 1993) suggest that this compartmentalization process is hardly possible if not illusory.
Following Kleinman and Copp (1993) and Campbell (2002), I argue that exploring and disclosing these emotions can improve the overall research process at three intermingled levels: the research, the researcher, and the researched. Exploring is the reflexive stance put forth by anthropologists such as Fabian (1983) and Marcus and Fischer (1999). Disclosing is the confessional stance (Van Maanen 1988). Being aware of one’s emotions can help identifying the emotionally-induced prejudices or biases that affect data collection and analysis (Kleinman and Copp 1993; Agar 1982). This level of awareness can also help pinpoint self-induced constraints or negative consequences that should be managed during research (e.g., systematic avoidance of highly stressful situations). Discussing one’s emotions with informants can sometimes lead to unexpected novel information and better mutual understanding as in the case of “empathic disagreement” (Gordon 1987). Moreover, a transparent attitude is an important step in the development of “collaborative research”, a subject-centered approach that is important in the context of research with children and at-risk population segments (Curtis, Bryce, and Treloar 1999; Eiser and Twamley 1999). Also, disclosing emotions in publications can potentially have cathartic properties for other researchers by offering benchmark examples concerning painful experiences and their remedies. Finally, the analysis of one’s emotions can lead to significant contributions to science. For example, Campbell’s (2002) investigation of researchers’ emotions allowed her to consider the global effect of rape by documenting the ripple effect of this trauma on secondary victims.

“Consumer Research in the Shadow of the Towers”
Jean-Sebastien Marcoux

As individuals, we do not typically plan for medical emergencies, accidents, illnesses (Mason and Pavia 1998), disasters (Ikeuchi, Fujihara and Dohi 1999), or other potentially disruptive events that strike us or the members of our family (Turley 1999). We do not cease to be consumers when we face difficult, not to say tragic, situations. As such, in recent years, the scope of consumer research has broadened so as to include crisis situations. Consumer research now better accounts for the disruptive character of consumption, not to say the construction of consumption via disruption.

Despite these recent advances, consumer researchers’ understanding of sensitive issues remains limited, however. More work is needed on the ethical dimensions of consumer research dealing with these issues. From a transformative research perspective (Ozanne 2005), additional research on the impact of consumer research per se is also needed. This presentation explores some of the questions that arise when dealing with socially important and emotionally challenging research. It is grounded in a reflexive account of an ethnographic analysis conducted since March 2003 in New York City, on the construction and the commodification of memory in the aftermath of the 9/11.

This presentation aims to reflect on some of the emotional struggles experienced in the field. It discusses the difficulties inherent to the study of an event such as the 9/11 attack that has deeply, sometimes tragically, affected the life of informants. As such, it explores the researcher’s stance when dealing with people who had different relation with the tragedy such as the tourists visiting Ground Zero, the New Yorkers who experienced the attack, and the members of the victims’ families associations who directly suffered the loss of loved ones and who are particularly concerned by the issue of remembrance.

In attempting to avoid the “diary disease” problem described by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), this presentation discusses some of the commitments of the researcher, as well as the moral and ethical obligations that the researcher faces towards informants. It considers the positioning of the researcher in a field of multiple voices; a field where multiple voices are also competing ones. Indeed, the construction of memory in the aftermath of 9/11 is an ongoing process that is politically and ideologically charged. In the particular context of the construction of memory, a context where having a voice in the public sphere, asserting a presence in institutions such as the media and the museums may be determinant, consumer researchers like other social researchers become agents in the production of memory as far as they help giving legitimacy and a certain permanence to the view of people they work with. In contrast to other social researchers however, they are in a particular position. As far as they are associated with a marketplace that is at the same time (at least here) a primary resource and a part of the problem, consumer researchers face particular ethical questions. As such, this presentation will try to consider some of problems and contradictions of consumer research itself when it is conducted in a context such as post 9/11, where marketing, the commodification of the tragedy, and the aestheticization of consumption have been highly criticized.

This presentation can be situated along the line of a transformative research perspective as it was first sketched at ACR in San Antonio (Mick 2005; Ozanne 2005); a perspective that is concerned with the social implications of the research itself. It also draws on CCT research’s interest in collective memory (Marcus 2005). But it also attempts to reappropriate some of the reflections of anthropologists and ethnographers who have been confronted with sensitive issues. A reflexive analysis of the struggle experienced on the field of Ground Zero does not only promise to fill in an important gap in consumer research, but may also help push transformative research in important directions.

“Participatory Action Research as Engaged Practice: Implications for Transformative Consumer Research”
Julie Ozanne, Bige Saatcioglu, and Canan Corus

Participatory action research (PAR) is a paradigm that evolved out of the experiences of social scientists working in developing countries in the 1970s. While engaged in field work, these researchers discovered that the positivistic methods that arose on university campuses of developed nations had little to do with the realities of working among the poor and disenfranchised (Hall 1997). What emerged independently yet concurrently was a form of engaged research practice in which the members of local communities became co-participants in doing research aimed at solving their social problems (Freire 1970, 1986).

PAR involves a diverse range of theories and methods. In this presentation, the original conceptualization of this approach is delineated (Gaventa and Horton 1981; Hall 1981; Tandon 1981). This approach arose in reaction to the class struggles in developing countries and involves studying research problems that arise in the local community and are identified by those people who are most disenfranchised. Like transformative consumer research, the goal of this research is to promote social change that will directly improve the lives of the people studied. The problems selected are often complex and thus are not as well structured as in conventional research (Small 1995). The researcher is conceived as a partner or facilitator who offers research help, but the research methods involve full participation by locals (Greenwood 2004). The local knowledge and folk theories of the participants are valued and believed to yield authentic and accurate social accounts. Moreover, it is assumed that when people are given ownership of the research they will be more invested in its use and implementation. Thus, the emancipatory potential of PAR arises in part from the ability of
participants to define their own social problems, to develop knowledge to address this problem (a process usually restricted to an elite few), and the subsequent raising of their consciousness and potential for agency (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993; Small 1995). The dichotomy between research and application is blurred when the research process itself becomes an empowering act.

The idealistic beginnings of PAR research met with the challenge of actually doing social change research, which spawned many new permutations. While different, these approaches still bear a family resemblance to the original formation. In this presentation, we will also delineate more contemporary versions of PAR research. For example, the desire for locals to have full participation in research projects met with the reality that people desire different levels of participation. This has lead to the evolution of different models of the research relationship from a more researcher-led to a more collaboratively-managed model (Chisholm and Elden 1993). Similarly, different research models have emerged due to differences in the organizational settings examined and openness of the research process. Tightly organized settings often involve more shared values, clearer roles and goals, and formal procedures and a different research model emerges than the model that arises when studying more loosely organized groups that exhibit more diverse values, ambiguous roles and unclear goals, and fewer formal procedures. Feminist-informed PAR research has turned attention to social inequities based on gender that were unexplored in earlier versions (Macguire 1987, 2004).

The practical problems faced by PAR offer potential lessons to consumer researchers who seek to do transformative consumer research. For instance, a reoccurring theme in PAR research is the difficulty in managing the tensions between researcher roles as academic scholars and social activists (Cancian 1996; Crisp 2004). Consumer research that examines powerless groups and pressing social problems will undoubtedly unearth social injustices. Will we be content merely to document these inequities for other academicians to read? Will we erect ivory-tower barriers to engaging in action in a self-serving attempt to avoid these challenges as we cowardly reap the research wealth harvested from those people most in need of our help? If so, transformative research contexts will be reduced to fertile ground upon which academic researchers can build their publishing careers.

Or will we be brave enough to engage in social change and fight to defend a place in the academy for a scholar/activist as envisioned by PAR? This approach suggests some potential solutions. Such an approach offers a way to move beyond the tired dichotomies of basic research verses applied research and explore the potential of theoretically-informed programs that incorporate local knowledge. Moreover, the inclusion of the local participant helps to minimize the inherently exploitative relationship that exists among researchers and subjects whose human suffering may end up being commodified for the career profiteering of the academic (Brydon-Miller 2004). If we move beyond being only a ventriloquist for those we study, then new forms of knowledge might be envisioned to help the disenfranchised reclaim their own voice. If we embrace the assumption of PAR that the primary beneficiaries of our research should first and foremost be the people we research, then we are challenged to think beyond the traditional journal article to develop more democratic and accessible modes of knowledge dissemination and use.

REFERENCES

Available upon request