Researcher Reflexivity: a Personal Journey

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The notion of researcher reflexivity, of presenting honest and self-searching accounts of the research process, is increasingly being seen as integral to qualitative research (e.g. Sherry and Schouten, 2002, Kleinsasser, 2000). According to Gergen and Gergen (2000), reflexive researchers seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical situatedness, their personal investments in the research, acknowledging various biases they may bring, revealing “their surprises and ‘undoings’ in the process of the research endeavour.” This paper explores these ideas and illustrates how I shape the research and, to a certain extent, how doing the research shapes me as a researcher.

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The notion of researcher reflexivity, of presenting honest and self-searching accounts of the research process, is increasingly being seen as an important and integral part of qualitative research (e.g. Sherry and Schouten, 2002, Kleinweisser, 2000). According to Gergen and Gergen (2000), reflexive researchers seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical situatedness, their personal investments in the research, acknowledging various biases they may bring, revealing “their surprises and ‘undoings’ in the process of the research endeavour.” (p.1027) As Mauthner and Doucet (1998) describe the role of reflexivity in data analysis:

“the best we can do then is to trace and document our data analysis processes, and the decisions we make, so that other researchers and interested parties can see for themselves some of what has been lost and what has been gained...we need to document these reflexive processes” (p.138)

The notion of the researcher as “bricoleur” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) is also important here, incorporating the idea that research is a process shaped by the individual history of the researcher and the individual characteristics of all the people in the research setting. The qualitative researcher “refuses to be limited” (Janiesick, 2000, p.381), rather, the “researcher-as-bricoleur” uses the tools of his or her methodological trade to provide solutions to problems (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998); “the choice of which tools to use, which research practices to employ, is not set in advance.” (p.3). According to Denzin and Lincoln, the ‘bricoleur’ develops diverse skills from interviewing to observing and interpreting, engages in intensive self-reflection and also explores the many interpretive paradigms that can be brought to any particular problem. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.8) note: “Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.”

In my research, I studied compensatory consumption in relation to shopping behaviour—retail therapy”—(see. e.g. Woodruffe 1997, Woodruffe-Burton, 2004) and I very quickly found from the 27 people (males and females) with whom I engaged (through interviews and other types of personal contact) during the research that this was frequently a highly personal and emotive subject. I tried to draw from a number of areas to develop a methodological approach which could best capture the individual’s point of view and secure rich descriptions whilst also showing empathy and, indeed, concern for them and their feelings and working from a position as researcher of not being ‘in control’ or holding ‘power’ over them. These ideas are explored here and a reflexive account of the research process and the design decisions which take place during the course of the research (how the research is done) is presented. This paper is not positioned as offering an alternate approach; nor is it suggested that new paradigm researchers lack reflexivity. On the contrary, it assumes that many (if not most) new paradigm researchers in consumer behaviour are engaging with reflexivity at various levels and it attempts to document some aspects of what being a reflexive researcher actually means in practice, from a personal perspective.

There is little point repeating here the criticisms of traditional research methodologies discussed and documented extensively over the past fifteen years or so, especially given the now well established position of ‘new paradigm’ researchers within the academy as reflected in contemporary literature. However it is worth pointing out that positivistic approaches still form the basis of much teaching of consumer behaviour (especially in the USA) and marketing research today and represent the dominant paradigm in mainstream textbooks; thus, there exists still the ‘scientific’ voice in marketing which attests to the superiority of scientific method in marketing research (Gibson, 2000): “The descriptive survey has become the dominant technique of quantitative research...the controlled experiment is avoided, depriving marketing and marketing research of what is elsewhere regarded as the most valid, the highest form of scientific evidence”. (p.39)

Further criticism attaches to such experimental practices and procedures from feminist writers (e.g. Oleson, 2000, Hirschman, 1993) who contend that such a scientific approach places all the power in the researcher’s domain, with the research subjects in a subordinate role to be controlled and manipulated. As Hirschman’s (1993) revealing de-construction of published studies which utilised detached, distanced, objective methods reveals: “In virtually all of the laboratory experiments conducted, human subjects were characterised as entities to be ‘run’ or ‘processed’ through the various manipulations designed by the researcher. In doing so, persons became effectively reduced to objects that the experimenter uses to further his/her own purposes and are not recognized as equal, sentient human beings.” (Hirschman, 1993, p.546)

Additionally, due to individual factors such as the researcher’s (my) personality (Punch, 1998), (my) personal history (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), (my) personal interest (Morse, 1998) and (my) personal desire to examine consumption independently of marketing management implications (Holbrook, 1987) from the consumer’s perspective (Hirschman, 1991), methodology has been of primary concern to me in my personal development as a researcher and has also, at times, proved a constant struggle; to undertake and (re)present interpretive research which stands up to evaluation (e.g. Spiggle, 1994, Arnold and Fischer, 1994) and is well supported (by reference to existing literature etc.) but which also confronts and examines issues and challenges relating to the role of the researcher and the nature of the research along the way.

Questions and challenges which I have confronted have been explicitly incorporated into the research process (e.g. Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) and subjected to critical reflection in line with the twin aims I have in my research; to develop understanding of the concept of this specific aspect of consumer behaviour but also to extend the discourse on methodology and the role of the researcher in a way which will further understanding and be useful to others. Hence I saw myself (and, indeed, still do see myself) clearly as a qualitative researcher (albeit a fledgling one!) and I tried my best to adhere to the best tenets of interpretive research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) adopting the existential phenomenological interview as the main tool for engaging with lived experience (Thomson et al., 1989). However, from a personal experience perspective, I soon found myself confronting certain challenges arising from the interview process. Instead of ignoring these difficulties or ‘brushing them under the carpet’ in the writing up process, I undertook self-reflexive reporting of the interview process (Reinharz, 1992) to present a critical assessment, from my perspective, of the design decisions and changes which took place.

One of these challenges was the sense of difficulty in the ‘bracketing’ which Thompson et al (1989) hold is necessary for attaining an understanding of respondents’ lived experiences (p.140).
Hudson and Ozanne (1988) recognise this difficulty as a criticism of interpretivist approaches; “it is questionable whether researchers can really bracket their biases and socio-cultural backgrounds”. (p.516) Thompson, Locander and Pollio do make the assertion, however, that bracketing is not intended to imply a neutral view as researchers must always see and interpret the world from some perspective. Hirschman (1992) did not feel that the issue of bracketing was a problem in her study of drug addicts, even though she admitted at the time to being a recovering drug addict (p.161). However, her description of what bracketing consists of is perhaps slightly more straightforward: “phenomenology brackets the external world to include only those aspects that are present in the consumers’ consciousness” (p.161). Certainly, within her description of the research methodology, Hirschman made no secret of her personal status; she identified herself as a recovering addict as well as researcher and noted that she believed some of the participants’ “willingness to serve as informants was based largely on their knowledge of my own addictive history” (p.161). However, I sensed a real problem in this regard which stemmed from direct experience of, and involvement with, the subject of the study, unlike, for example, Eccles (2000) who notes that during her study of addicted shoppers, “the fact that the researcher had experience as a woman and as a researcher, but none as an addicted consumer prevented the imposition of preconceived notions”. (p.143, emphasis added) While Sue Eccles is not, by her own admission, addicted to shopping, I have a feeling that there is no-one in the world better qualified than me to undertake research into the particular area of consumer behaviour which has been the subject of my research for many years—frankly, what I don’t know about compensatory consumption and retail therapy in particular from personal history and experience isn’t worth knowing. It would be hard to state for certain, therefore, that bracketing was successful, especially when Arnould and Fischer’s (1994) definition of the sort of knowledge which would be classed as “[pre]-understanding or pre-judgement” (and thus which should be bracketed) is considered: “The [pre]-understanding of consumer researchers is found in two inter-related traditions—experience as a consumer and experience as a researcher”. (p.57)

Some writers have criticised the lack of reflexivity in interpretivist approaches; “common platitudes proclaim that the data speak for themselves, that the researcher is neutral, unbiased, invisible” (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p.661) and this view negates the value of the researcher and the “strong arguments for strongly reflexive accounts” (Oleson, 2000, p.229) about the researcher’s own part in the research. Indeed, as Fontana and Frey (2000) note, while traditional interview techniques have determinedly aimed to maintain neutrality and achieve objectivity, feminists are rebelling against this stance and seeking to use the interview in a more participatory way. Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) suggest that in humanistic enquiry researcher understanding arises from direct personal experience and the researcher serves as measuring instrument; there is no possibility of objective truth; “the researcher must place faith instead in his or her own sensitivity and empathic insightfulness when exposed to the thoughts, beliefs, values and realities constructed by others”. (p.242)

For me, the interview experience raised issues which led to further reflection and critical review, especially concerning the role of the researcher (i.e. my own role) in the research process and issues such as self-disclosure, where the interviewer offers their own personal experiences, feelings or views where appropriate (Reinarz, 1992). At this stage, these questions can probably be best described as reflecting conflict between, on the one hand, my desire to maintain rigour by adhering to a prescribed methodological protocol (i.e. existential phenomenology at this point) yet simultaneously, on the other hand, to start to be more critical; to engage in critical analysis of alternative approaches and to examine issues relating to my role in the research, particularly as a woman and as a feminist. This reflected my growing awareness of, and engagement with, the critical debate surrounding marketing and consumer research discussed previously as well as an increasing sense of the role of self as a researcher, as a woman and as a feminist. It is a dilemma recognised and questioned by feminist researchers who identify problems with “how we shift across the edges of our own personal lived experiences, our research explorations of others’ private lives and our transformation of these into the format of public knowledge.” (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998, p.203)

As stated, it was principally the notion of ‘bracketing’ which started to give rise to doubts in my mind as to the use of the existential phenomenological interview approach. As Schwandt (1998) states: “Whereas the individual-as-citizen legitimately has a practical (in a classic sense), pragmatic, interested attitude, the individual-turned-social-scientist brackets out that attitude and adopts the posture of objective, disinterested, empirical theorist.” (p.248) Because of this distancing of oneself as inquirer, Schwandt argues that interpretivists cannot engage in critical evaluation of the social reality they want to portray. Contrast this with feminist scholarship which emphasises identification, trust and empathy, which brings out a relationship between researcher and researched based on cooperation and collaboration (Punch, 1998). This describes much more aptly the situation I found was arising in the interviews and which, I felt, made a positive contribution to the successful outcome of those interviews in terms of generating rich, deeply personal accounts of the consumption experience. Acknowledging this was probably the starting point for my engagement with feminist research praxis.

My research can be termed ‘feminist’ from my self-identification as a feminist and from the inclusion (but not exclusivity) of methods drawn from feminist scholarship. It embodies feminism as a perspective (Reinarz, 1992) and embraces many of the issues raised by a number of writers (e.g. Bristor and Fischer, 1993) concerning consumer research in terms of acknowledging individual differences, for example, and opting for research which is not explicitly aligned to marketer interests (e.g. Olander, 1993). However, the literature does not offer a particular framework to show what feminist research should be like (Maynard, 1994), rather feminist researchers (e.g. Fonow and Cook, 1991, Skeggs, 1994) examine the research process from a viewpoint of the different elements feminist scholarship has to offer. A great deal is written, however, on the nature of the interview in feminist research (e.g. Reinarz, 1992), largely stemming from Oakley’s seminal 1981 paper “Interviewing women; a contradiction in terms” in which she challenges the traditional conventions of interviewing and the role of the interviewer, especially the characteristics of “proper” (p.38) interviews, such as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and science and where she asserts that personal involvement is “the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.” (p.58)

Oakley advocated a new model of feminist interviewing that strove for intimacy and included self disclosure. Other key aspects of feminist interviewing relate to the issue of hierarchy and equality between the researcher and the researched (Oakley, 1981, Oleson, 2000); the notion of the interviewee being actively involved in constructing data about their lives, rather than passively manipulated (Graham, 1983); interviewee-guided interviews (Sandelowski and Pollock, 1986) where the interview becomes an interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience that asks almost no prepared questions; self disclosure where interviews are modelled on a ‘true dialogue’ rather than an ‘interrogation’, where participants become ‘co-researchers’ (Bristow and Esper, 1988). Another important issue in feminist scholarship is that of ‘voice’; of allowing the different and
multiple voices within the research (including the researcher’s) to be heard and displayed equally, rather than subordinated or manipulated by the ‘scientific’ researcher, of trying to understand and interpret the participants’ stories without imposing meanings (DeVault, 1990).

Thus, interviews were conducted in ways which embraced the above issues wherever appropriate. This does not mean, however, that the existential phenomenological approach was rejected completely; the thinking behind this approach remained influential throughout, particularly at the hermeneutic level within the interpretative process to identify the interpretive themes (Thompson et al., 1990). I no longer tried to be as invisible as possible (Fontana and Frey, 2000) and made no attempt to retain a quasi-objective role through detachment, bracketing or any alternative techniques; instead emphasis was placed in the interview on exploring the participant’s experience of the specific aspect of consumer behaviour under study through the medium of shared knowledge; a dialogue which acknowledged my own personal experience of the phenomenon and which attempted, as far as possible, to build empathy and trust between the researcher and the researched.

Similarly, my stance did not allow for objective or neutral interpretation. Indeed, to attempt to do this would appear to negate the importance of gaining understanding through direct personal experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1986) and the value of the researcher (Oleson, 2000). Rather, the personal characteristics of the researcher, the “cultural self” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) that every researcher brings to his or her work should “no longer be seen as a troublesome element to be eradicated or controlled, but rather a set of resources” (Oleson, 2000, p.229). Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) emphasise the importance of becoming “as personally involved with the phenomenon as humanly possible” (p.238) in order to investigate and comprehend experiential consumption and they suggest this can be achieved through a two-level process of role taking and personal immersion. In role taking, Hirschman and Holbrook suggest, the researcher conducts science by means of personal, emotional involvement with other humans, typically via case study or participatory observation methods. This needs support from the immersion of the investigator into the phenomenon under study. Empathy and intuition are suggested as a means to interpret the results.

Reflexivity, “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (Lincoln and Guba, 2000), the “human instrument” (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) is seen as important within the interpretive paradigm as well as by feminists. Lincoln and Guba (2000) make the case for self interrogation regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the complex circumstances of the researcher’s own life and they point out that the process of research itself leads to the researcher gaining self knowledge, furthermore, “each inquiry, each inquirer brings a unique perspective to our understanding.” (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p.185) As Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) state: “Feminists have had to accept that there is no technique of analysis or methodological logic that can neutralize the social nature of interpretation... feminist researchers can only try to explain the grounds on which selective interpretations have been made by making explicit the process of decision-making which produces the interpretation, and the logic of method on which these decisions are made.” (p.133)

Acknowledging the significance of the role of the (reflexive) researcher in the creation of the research, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) see the analysis and interpretation stage as being a point where “the voices and perspectives of the respondents are particularly vulnerable.” (p.138) They criticise writers such Reinharz (1992) who, they suggest, over-simplify the complex processes of representing the ‘voices’ of research respondents as though these voices speak on their own rather than acknowledging that their stories are communicated, in fact, through the researcher who has already made choices about how to interpret them and which quotes and interpretations to present as evidence. This is an issue I grappled with as I found that the process itself led me to examine my role in the gathering and reporting of data and this reflexivity (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) has, to some extent, led me to challenge my own right, as a researcher, to impose my interpretation (or analysis, or pseudo-analysis) on the stories told to me by the people (consumers) I engage with during the course of my research.

However, Reinharz’ view may not actually be over-simplification; she touches on the importance of including quotations from interviews in the “research product” so that the interviewees “speak for themselves” (p.267) and the reader is better able to understand. Nevertheless, the issue of which quotes to include and how to demonstrate an understanding of different concepts in consumer research through the (re)-presentation of what may be only tiny parts of lengthy transcripts has been a source of frustration for me in the past and it still often is a thorny topic; Marsden and Littler (1998, p.19) set down the basic principles of an holistic approach to consumer research, the first of which is: no part of consumer experience can be fully or meaningfully understood apart from its whole. However, due to various factors including, principally (in my experience), constraints on the length of published papers, articles and so on, this editing process means that we are only telling (or being told) half a story-in fact, a minute portion of the story in all probability. This is a key part of the “crisis in representation” discussed by Brown (1998), and Sherry and Schouten (2002) amongst others, I feel. It is accepted, however, that in order to present findings from our research the sifting and interpreting process will lead to the inclusion of selected quotations, as opposed to entire transcripts, due to the sheer scale of the transcripted materials gathered during the course of our studies. This issue is also discussed by Lincoln and Guba (2000) who see the ‘crisis in representation’, as being that which “serves to silence those whose lives we appropriate for our social sciences” alongside the ‘crisis in authority’ which “tells us the world is this way when perhaps it is some other way” (p.184).

Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) response to these challenges is to: “think of the research process as involving a balancing act between three different and conflicting standpoints: (1) the multiple and varying voices and stories of each of the individuals we interview; (2) the voice(s) of the researcher(s); and (3) the voices and perspectives represented both within existing theories or frameworks in our research areas and which researchers bring to their studies” (p.140) This is the approach, which underpins my research and which I always attempt to integrate into the whole research design. Further issues central to feminist thinking are gender and gender-related language. Brisior and Fischer (1993) contend that consumption activities can be said to be fundamentally gendered because gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world. My research was originally conceived of as being a study of female consumers as the initial research question focused solely on women’s experience. However, this was more from a desire to engage in a women-centred approach (e.g., Eccles, 2000)–where issues of oppression and gender-based power should not form an overriding focus for the research—rather than a standpoint feminist approach (Harding, 1987) which takes up the feminist criticism of the absence of women from academic research (and thus, what constitutes knowledge).

Men have also been included in the research, however, for the simple reason that some men approached me and expressed a wish to be interviewed in response to appeals for volunteers. I had not explored the idea that men engaged in this particular aspect of consumer behaviour prior to this point (yet another surprise!) but the inclusion of male participants in the research produced some interest-
ing findings. So, again, this was not something which was pre-
planned, which came about through a prescribed objective of exam-
inig gender for example, or from a liberal feminist perspective
(Bristor and Fischer, 1993) of investigating sex difference empiri-
cally–rather it came about serendipitously, in response to the ‘situa-
tion at hand’ (Fonow and Cooke, 1994). However, my research still
retains as its core focus individual experience of this aspect of con-
sumption behaviour; that is to say, it does not attempt to make
gendered comparisons, nor is the analysis predicated on assumptions
concerning sex or gender.

As far as gender-related language goes, I attempt at all times
consciously to avoid gendered language and to use language which
is inclusive. Bristor and Fischer (1993) set out some guidelines for
achieving heightened sensitivity in consumer research and particu-
larly note the importance of avoiding gendered or otherwise biased
language in research instruments. As my research does not employ
instruments such as questionnaires, this difficulty has largely been
avoided (as far as designing the research goes) but awareness of the
nature of language in shaping what is viewed as knowledge, particu-
larly in marketing where there are many instances of gendered
language is of concern to me. Certainly, the importance of using
unbiased language is not limited to the design of research instru-
ments and, in my research, is extended, as far as possible, throughout-for
example in not referring to the individuals with whom the researcher
engaged during the research as ‘subjects’. One day, on setting out to
write an article, I found myself writing the usual opening piece which
went something like this:

“Emily, upon whom this article is based, is one of the subjects
of the author’s current research. She has participated in an
extensive and ongoing study into aspects of compensatory
consumption behaviour currently being undertaken by the
author.”

I found that I experienced a sudden jolt as I realised that even
writing that down goes against the grain for me. Firstly, one of my
personal objectives in undertaking research is to escape from the
confines of the subject and object, the researcher and the re-
searched. I found that this was one of the issues to which I had given
little thought, following the language and convention I found
generally in the discourse of my chosen (and beloved) discipline.
However, on reflection, I found that what I really wanted to say
was something more like this: “Emily is one of the people with whom I
have interacted during the course of my research. Far from being
merely a participant, engaging with Emily and others has helped
me to shape both the research process and my own understanding.”

Using unconventional terms in place of traditional terms such as
‘subject’ is seen by some feminists as a signal that the researcher is
operating within a feminist framework that includes the power
to name or re-name (Eichler, 1980). A view which neatly encapsulates
much of what has been discussed in this chapter is put forward by
Reinharz (1992), who avers that ‘eschewing standardization in
format allows the research question, not the method, to drive the
project forward’. (p.22)

Whilst the foregoing sections already show the extent to which
I was engaged in the research as the ‘human instrument’ (Guba and
Lincoln, 1981), I had become personally immersed in the research
and I had drawn widely on feminist scholarship to find ways of doing
the research which allowed greater freedom to explore individual
experience through empathy and intuition (Hirschman and Holbrook,
1986), a further step was taken in actively sharing my own experi-
ences. This differed from the previous stage, where I did not attempt
to hide behind a position of neutrality and acknowledged my own
experience of the aspect of consumer behaviour under investigation,
to a point where I actively shared my own story during the interview
process, when it felt appropriate to do so. Arguably, this was not a
great leap from the previous step but it did bring into the research
aspects of what Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) term ‘interactive
introspection’ in that I have shared my own experiences with others
during the interview process with the aim of getting deeper insights
from them.

This works well, I find, as I am encouraging people to speak
freely about issues which are frequently emotive, embarrassing
and/or confidential. Knowing that I understand how they feel or, at
least, have shared similar experiences seems to enable people to
‘open up’ more. Some people have even told me things they say they
wouldn’t admit to their partners. Feminist writers (Stanley, 1992,
Birch, 1998) have talked about this idea in terms of ‘auto/biogra-
phy’, not as narcissistic self exploration but, rather the ‘telling
about yourself and your experiences’ (Birch, 1998, p.178) as a tool
in understanding and relating to others. As noted earlier, this may
not seem very different from the nature of the feminist interviewing
process described in the preceding section but inclusion of this
discussion of my role as an extension of the research approach is
really to highlight the fact that this was something which was given
due consideration in the research process; it was something which
occurred naturally, for me while in the interview situation, but,
subsequently, in the reflexive process, I have attempted to situate
this within the context of feminist and social sciences thinking.

In a sense, this paper represents my own ‘auto/biography’ of
the research process which provides a “practical tool to bring the
process of constructing research to the surface.” (Birch, 1998,
p.174) This also responds to Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) call for
acknowledgement of the three ‘voices’ within research; the
researcher’s ‘voice’, the ‘voices’ of the individuals interviewed and
the ‘voices’ represented in existing theories or frameworks, which
should be incorporated into the structure of the research.

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