

Narrative: An Alternative Way to Gain Consumer Insights

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores 'narrative' as a qualitative research method to gain consumer insights. Fundamentally, narrative is a story of one's experiences, feelings and beliefs. It illustrates how one acts and interacts with others as well as how one makes sense of one's world. First the paper sketches out the definition and the underlying philosophy of narrative interview and narrative analysis. Then the paper discusses how to conduct and interpret the narrative interview lucratively. Later the paper assesses the limitations of the narrative method, and proposes how we can justify and enhance the trustworthiness of narrative interviews.

INTRODUCTION

'Narrative' is a term being used broadly, and being applied in many different ways. In qualitative research, narrative has become a vital research strategy to grasp the insightful data which can barely be attained by any other methods (e.g., Bonsu and Belk 2003, Joy and Sherry 2003, Muniz and O'Quinn 2001, Penaloza 2001, Price et al. 2000, Thompson and Haytko 1997). Fundamentally, narrative is a story of one's experiences, feelings and beliefs (Langellier 1989, Mishler 1986, Polkinghorne 1995). It illustrates how one acts and interacts with others as well as how one makes sense of one's world (Ricoeur 1981, Smith 1981, White 1981). Thus, narrative inquiry is the superlative way to explore phenomenologically one's experience of particular events. Although narratives can be conveyed in various means, marketing researchers usually elicit one's narrative through interview.

In this paper I address narrative interview as a qualitative method for consumer research. First I sketch out the definition and the underlying philosophy of narrative interview and narrative analysis. Then I discuss how to conduct and interpret the narrative interview lucratively. Later I assess the limitations of the narrative method, and propose how we can justify and enhance the trustworthiness of narrative interviews. Finally I examine the particularities of marketing research for which the narrative interview is appropriate and explore a few eminent examples of marketing research having employed narrative interviews.

NARRATIVE: DEFINITION AND PHILOSOPHY

Narrative interview is a data collecting method by which we enquire a research respondent to tell us a story of what we want to study. It is the way we try to understand the point of view and experience from the perspective of those (e.g., research respondents) who live it (Polkinghorne 1988, Ricoeur 1981). Narrative interview allows research respondents to unfold the way they view themselves and their world. Manifestly the stories being told reveal the research respondents' personal meanings of a particular event and the complex motives that drive their behaviour. Through narrative interview researchers have a better opportunity to deal with the complexity of human reality, particularly the multifaceted nature of the self.

As social saturation in postmodernity has decentred human experience into pieces (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), we are striving to bring together diverse elements into an integrated whole in order to live meaningfully (Gergen 1991). We try to re-organise and unify our saturated self into the narrative self (Giddens 1991; McAdams 1997). We make an effort to coordinate the multiple and conflicting facets of our lives within a narrative framework which connects past, present, and an anticipated future and confers upon our lives a sense of sameness and continuity (McAdams 1988). Ricoeur (1984, 1992) also supports that we require a narrative identity for our self, that is, we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can (or cannot) tell. Presumably, we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves temporally and spatially. Coyle (1992) elaborates that a person creates a life story, a biography or a personal narrative in an attempt to impart meaning and coherence to his/her disparate life experiences by forging connections, imposing causality, and making it appear as if his/her life has unfolded or is unfolding in a purposeful way.

The life stories we create are not only a way of telling others or ourselves about our lives but also the means by which our identities are fashioned (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). We may not only tell the chronicle of who we are (or have been) but also an imagination of what we wish to become (or to have become). Gabriel and Lang (1995) observe that identity is not only an embellished account of our adventures, accomplishments and