
29 Capturing time

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Imagine if researchers interested in studying consumption- and marketing-related phenomena could do so at only one point in time. Certainly our understanding of concepts such as brand loyalty, consumer socialization, consumers' relationships with brands and the effects of advertising and marketing on brand image would be minimal – if we recognized they existed at all. Simply put, marketing researchers must be able to study phenomena both *over* time (during extended, continuous periods so the lifeworlds of consumers, practitioners and/or marketing organizations can be understood) and *across* time (at different points in time, even those occurring before a study begins). Focusing on the temporal aspects of consumption and marketing enables researchers to make inductively-based inferences about the ways people begin, maintain and end relationships with goods, services, retailers, service providers and other foci of interest – and importantly, how these relationships change over time. Furthermore methods that enable researchers to 'go back in time' and make inferences about the past and the present can help them understand whether and how the psychological, sociological and cultural entities that shape informants' lives have influenced, or continue to influence, interactions with marketplace-related phenomena.

In this chapter we examine the longitudinal and retrospective qualitative techniques that marketing researchers can use when they wish to generate thick descriptions of human behavior. We begin by defining and comparing these research approaches, and describe their potential contributions and limitations. We then examine how studies of marketing-related phenomena have incorporated components of longitudinal qualitative research, and how they have used (or can use) retrospective marketing techniques.

Longitudinal versus retrospective approaches

Definition(s) of longitudinal research

Achieving consensus with regard to what longitudinal qualitative research truly entails is probably elusive, because even in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and education, where it is a mainstay, the criteria as to what makes a research project longitudinal are often vague. Although all disciplines imply that longitudinal research occurs over a span of time, Saldaña (2003) notes that he could find no agreement as to the minimum span required for a field immersion to be considered longitudinal. Indeed he locates recommended spans of one year, 12 to 18 months and even “a substantial calendar time – months or years” (Kelly and McGrath, 1998, quoted in Saldaña, 2003, p. 3). Yet he also documents immersions ranging from 50 years to informants' entire life spans. One reason for such a disparate range is that some ethnographers advocate allowing the research design to evolve to meet the demands of the research questions and context being explored. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 225) observe:

Timing cannot be predicted for the naturalistic inquiry as it can for the conventional. Events that cannot be described because they have yet to emerge certainly cannot be tied to a particular date. Further, one cannot tell what it is to be 'on track'; the concept of 'milestone events' has no prior meaning . . . the naturalist can be sure [only] that there will be slippage in whatever plans are made; the corollary to Murphy's Law that asserts that 'things always take longer than they do' will never be better exemplified.

Given such conditions, Kottak's (2005, p. 9) definition of longitudinal research as a 'long-term study of a community, region, society, culture, or other unit, usually based on repeated visits', is not as vague as it first seems.

In contrast, a general definition of retrospective research is less problematic, because this method does not require debate over a criterion of prolonged field immersion. Specifically, retrospective research is that which enables the researcher to capture time-infused primary data, by allowing and encouraging participants to tap into one or multiple earlier time periods in their lives post hoc. Because scholars do not want to be limited to the retrospective perspectives available only through secondary data sources such as oral histories, diaries, transaction histories, company data or web-logs, they use a variety of creative retrospective techniques that involve informants (some of which are detailed later in this chapter). Consequently, they can acquire and interpret primary recollections and opinions about past events, to secure perspectives of how these informants believe key events shaped their lives – or, conversely, how these informants believed they or others shaped key events.

Comparison of longitudinal and retrospective methods

Whether one adopts a longitudinal or retrospective approach, both hold the belief that time is ontologically relevant and epistemologically accessible. But thereafter, these two approaches substantively diverge, especially with regard to the conceptualizations of time they embrace and explore. Kant, Husserl and, more recently, Ricoeur elaborate on the distinctions between the two essential notions of time (see Ricoeur, 1985, for a comprehensive discussion). Put simply, cosmological time posits that time is linear and can be measured in terms of minutes and hours. Further, the relative positions of events in cosmological time never change. In contrast, phenomenological time is conceptualized as being composed of the past, present and future. An episode under consideration becomes the present, irrespective of its currency in a cosmological sense. Therefore the status of events as occurring in an individual's past, present or future is not chronologically absolute.

Analysis of data gathered longitudinally often includes assumptions as to the relevance of cosmological time (e.g., minutes, hours, days) through either the specification of a priori relationships between increments of time or the emergent realization that focusing on these increments can provide meaningful insights into the phenomena of interest. For example, prior to entering the field, researchers interested in consumer gift-shopping strategies might assume that givers who spend more minutes or hours shopping for a recipient might be more intimately connected to that recipient, compared to others. Careful recording of increments of time would enable researchers to support or dispute this hypothesis.

Furthermore, since cosmological time progresses linearly, during field immersion scholars who employ longitudinal research typically can specify and gather data on the antecedents of an event before it actually occurs. This fact makes qualitative longitudinal

studies ideally suitable for assessing change (e.g., whether consumption increases or decreases over time) and delineating patterns of behavior across similar (or seemingly different) events separated in time. However scholars engaged in longitudinal work must be careful to avoid an overreliance on a priori theorization. As is true with other qualitative techniques, findings based on long-term immersions face a skeptical audience when they purport to establish cause and effect since, in positivistic language, concomitant forces could also contribute to causality. Nevertheless longitudinal qualitative research does offer researchers a panoramic perspective of events unfolding over time, and may enable them to put events into proper perspective that might have been overemphasized during a single or short-term immersion.

Researchers engaged in retrospective investigations use as their starting point present time (which does not necessarily equate to 'current' time in a phenomenological sense). The past is contextually identified with an active emphasis on its relationship to the present. Accordingly, unlike longitudinal studies, retrospective investigations are ideal tools for researching causes of events that have already occurred, because recollections of the past are based on their relevance to the present. Wall and Williams (1970, p. 4) observe that carefully executed qualitative retrospective studies have historically provided such 'detail and precision of information' that 'many, if not most of the hypotheses about the causation of human behavior . . . are based upon . . . retrospective individual studies'. Thus reliable and engaged informants may be able to reflect accurately upon how prior events and people may have shaped and shifted previous events.

However, because the past is identified in the context of the present, retrospective research is often criticized as being subjective, or relying too heavily upon informants' memories as a basis for interpretation. In short, retrospective researchers are often confronted with the criticism that 'human memory is fallible, and events which subsequently prove to be critical in their long-term effects may, at the time of occurrence, appear trivial, and be quickly forgotten' (*ibid.*, p. 8). Also retrospective research is often criticized for what makes it unique: its reliance on idiographic data, or those focusing on discrete facts or events. Thus, in contrast to longitudinal approaches, each participant in a retrospective study may choose to immerse him- or herself in an idiosyncratic, idiographic orientation of the present. Such an approach might hinder researchers from generating nomothetic findings, or those related to the discovery of general patterns or laws, across subjects.

In summary, longitudinal researchers capture time by immersing themselves in a temporal stream that is cosmological, while retrospective qualitative research focuses on capturing and understanding the relative occurrence of events in the past vis-à-vis the present. Furthermore longitudinal researchers are interested more in understanding the emergent relationships between events, rather than establishing how events in the past caused those in the present, as is the case with retrospectively oriented scholars. We now turn to reviewing how these methods have been used in studies of marketing-related phenomena.

Longitudinal research in marketing

Historically most marketing researchers are employed in departments where they are not necessarily encouraged to conduct long-term, longitudinally oriented field immersions. How have they adapted qualitative longitudinal methods to their purposes? To answer this question, we review studies in marketing that feature long-term or multiple ethnographic

immersions, to understand how scholars have maintained or modified the aspects of traditional longitudinal research. The purpose of such scrutiny is not to criticize these studies for their lack of adherence to the standards of longitudinal qualitative research established in other disciplines. Rather we are simply interested in understanding how these longitudinal characteristics are represented in the marketing canon, to acquire a sense of how research that employs longitudinal characteristics is 'done' in marketing.

Table 29.1 summarizes 22 articles or book chapters that explore topics pertaining to marketing (but primarily consumer behavior) and that incorporate one or more elements of traditional longitudinal research in their designs. Although they are not exhaustive of such efforts in marketing, we believe they constitute the majority. We review the following characteristics: total time span of the study, total number of hours in the field, nature of immersion and what type of change (if any) is explored in the study. We also include other key characteristics not considered integral to longitudinal research, but which help contextualize the studies and that we believed would be of interest to readers. These include description of the research site, types of research techniques used, the number of researchers involved and the doctoral degree fields of the author(s).

Time span/total time in the field

The time spans of the immersions recorded in these studies range from one month to 12 years. Eleven of the 22 studies feature immersions of two years or less, with the remainder extending to three years or more. Thus, while field studies that span multiple years have historically not been the norm for marketing researchers, prolonged immersions do exist. Furthermore it is not the case that only the researchers whose doctoral degrees are in anthropology conducted the longer-term field immersions. Another temporal characteristic that is useful to compare is the total time actually spent in the field over the duration of the study, which ranged from 12 hours to over two years. Comparing this range to the total time span of these studies reveals that the field immersions of some scholars may span many years, but in actuality the time they devote to any particular immersion is likely to be relatively brief.

Nature of immersion

Another characteristic of traditional longitudinal qualitative research is that it often requires researchers to relocate to a site that is initially 'foreign' to them (that is, one that is either foreign or domestic, but initially unfamiliar) and therefore requires them to immerse themselves totally in their research context. About half the studies featured such complete immersions, with the rest featuring partial ones, or those where researchers engaged in prolonged or repeat immersions in the sites of interest, but did not actually immerse themselves by living day by day in the research context.

Focus on change

One area of agreement among scholars across social science disciplines is that, regardless of the length of a longitudinal qualitative study, it should satisfy the criterion of focusing on some type of change that occurs within a specified unit of analysis under study (e.g. venues, people, groups; see Saldaña, 2003, pp. 8–9 for a review of how social scientists define change). A little less than half of the studies in Table 29.1 focus on some sort of change, while the others do not. Moreover, as the table reveals, the focus of change is

typically on how consumers change, on changes in a particular marketing-related site, or on a more general topic. Yet, clearly, while not all marketing researchers have incorporated the characteristic of exploring change in their longitudinal studies, we believe that revisiting their voluminous data sets would certainly enable them to offer meaningful, grounded interpretations of the way the observed phenomena changed, if they chose to do so.

In summary, our analysis reveals that marketing scholars who conduct qualitative research that integrates longitudinal components do not feel compelled to enter and remain in the field in the same way as anthropologists such as Mead ([1928] 2001) or Malinowski ([1922] 1984). Rather, they are more likely to design research studies that share characteristics of both cross-sectional and longitudinal research. That is, they collect data and generate text over a period of time (a longitudinal trait), but typically do so with the intent of comparing the experiences of different informants in one or more stages of the life cycle (a hallmark of cross-sectional research; see Baltes, Reese and Nesselroade, 1977). Yet sometimes a study that begins as cross-sectional can evolve into a longitudinal one. For example, after one season of fieldwork, Otnes, Lowrey and Kim (1993) explore which social roles consumers express through Christmas shopping, by conducting interviews and shopping trips with informants in their 20s and 30s. However they became intrigued by the notion that, as these givers and their recipients (who ranged from infants to the elderly) moved through different stages in their life cycles, their gift-giving behavior would undoubtedly adapt to accommodate the changes accompanying this process. As a result, Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth (2004) examine the shopping behavior of five of the original 15 informants during five different Christmas seasons over a 12-year period.

Recommendations for longitudinal marketing research

Earlier we stated that it was not our intention to criticize the studies in Table 29.1 in terms of whether they met certain standards for longitudinal research. Nevertheless we believe it is useful for researchers in marketing to provide clarity on three issues when articulating aspects of their longitudinal designs. First, as Saldaña (2003) recommends, they should specify their stance regarding time. Given that time is a cultural construct, researchers should explicate how and why they understand time, compare their understanding to the ways their informants understand time, and then explain why they believe it is important to record the time devoted to particular activities in the field (if indeed they do so). Second, researchers conducting longitudinal research should address issues pertaining to change in their studies, by (a) focusing on change in some form in their study, (b) articulating the definition of change to which they adhere, (c) providing theoretically sound reasons for focusing on such change, and (d) clearly explicating how changes emerge, and the factors influencing change in the field, by using words and examples that convey the dynamics of the phenomena under study.

Finally Saldaña argues that, in order to truly leverage a long-term study, three sets of questions should be developed, that focus on change. These include *framing* questions (e.g., what is different from one pond or pool of data to the next?), *descriptive* questions (what increases or decreases through time?) and *analytic and interpretive* questions (what changes interrelate through time?). Interested readers should consult Saldaña (2003) for a comprehensive discussion of these types of questions pertinent to longitudinal qualitative research.

Table 29.1 Summary of longitudinal consumer behavior studies

Topic	Author	Total time span	Total time in field	Nature of immersion	Nature of site	Research techniques used	No. of rschers	Focus of change studied (consumers, sites, general topic)	Doctoral fields of authors
	Arnould (1989)	9 yrs	Unspecified	Full	Villages in Zinder Province	Interviews (Int.), Observation (Obs.), & Surveys (Surv.)	1 + native speakers	Topic	Anthro
	Arnould & Price (1993)	2 yrs	Unspecified	Full	Recreational area	Focus Groups (FG), Obs. & Surv.	2	None	Anthro, Mktng
	Belk & Costa (1998)	4 yrs	130 days	Partial	Festivals & retail	Int. & Obs.	2	None	Mktng, Anthro
	Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, Jr. (1989)	2 yrs	90 days	Full	Multiple	Int. & Obs.	3, but 20+ others in Odyssey	None	Mktng, Mktng, Mktng
	Commuri & Gentry (2005)	2 yrs	Unspecified	Partial	Homes	Int. & Obs.	2	None	Mktng, Mktng
	Coupland, 2005	16 mos	48 hrs	Partial	Homes & retail	Obs., Projectives	1	Cons	Mktng
	Fournier (1998)	3 mos	75 hrs	Partial	Homes	Int.	1	Cons	Mktng
	Fournier & Mick (1999)	8 mos	180 hrs	Partial	Homes & retail	Int. & FG	2	Cons	Mktng
	Kozinets (2001)	2 yrs	20 mos	Partial	Conventions & e-sites	Int. & Obs.	1	None	Anthro
	Kozinets (2002)	4 yrs	2 yrs	Full	Festivals & e-sites	Int. & FG	1	None	Anthro
	Kozinets et al. (2004)	14 mos	14 mos	Partial	Retail & off-site	Int. & FG	5	None	Anthro or Mktng

Lowrey, Otnes & Ruth (2004)	12 yrs	100 hrs	Partial	Homes & retail	Int., Obs. (shopping w/consumers: SWC)	3	Cons	Comm, Comm, Mktng
Mick & Buhl (1992)	3 mos	12 hrs	Partial	Homes	Int.	2	None	Mktng, Mktng
Mick & Fournier (1998)	1 yr	150 hrs	Partial	Homes & retail	Int., FG & Surv.	2	None	Mktng, Mktng
Otnes, Lowrey & Shrum (1997)	4 yrs	60 hrs	Partial	Homes, retail & off-site	Int., Obs., FG & SWC	3	None	Comm, Comm, Comm
Oswald (1999)	1 yr	3 mos	Partial	Multiple	Int., Obs. & Surv.	1	None	Anthro
Peñaloza (1994)	2 yrs	2 yrs	Full	Multiple	Int. & Obs.	1	Topic	Mktng
Peñaloza (2001)	7 yrs	14 wks	Partial	Events	Int. & Obs.	1	Topic	Mktng
Price & Arnould (1999)	1 mo.	24 days	Partial	Retail	Int. & Surv.	2	None	Mktng, Anthro
Schouten & McAlexander (1995)	3 yrs	Unspecified	Full	Festivals	Int. & Obs.	2	Cons	Mktng, Mktng
Sherry (1990)	5 yrs	2.5 yrs	Full	Retail/event	Int. & Obs.	1	Site	Anthro
Sherry & McGrath (1989)	3 yrs	3 mos	Partial	Retail	Int. & Obs.	2	Site	Anthro, Mktng

Note: Many of the immersions included in the studies above generated numerous journal articles, presentations and book chapters. Due to space limitations, we attempted to include the paper that represented the most 'quintessential' of the authors' longitudinal qualitative endeavors from a particular data set.

Retrospective investigations of time

For several reasons, researchers cannot always implement a longitudinal design to capture primary data, nor is it always appropriate to do so. First, unfolding events often trigger a research interest in the causes of such events. Second, some research opportunities unfold without a forewarning, or so rapidly that current events turn into past ones before a meaningful longitudinal project can be designed and implemented. Third, even with foresight about research-worthy topics, it may not be appropriate or possible to conduct research as events are unfolding, possibly owing to sensitivity of such issues. For example, investigating how children's consumption changes in light of their parents' divorce might be too traumatic for them, and may also be considered unethical. Fourth, research questions sometimes require tapping into reflections upon the way events and phenomena have changed over time. Thus researchers must be able to acquire narratives that recapture time.

Narrative reasoning in retrospective investigations

Narratives are 'how people articulate how the past is related to the present' (Richardson, 1990, p. 125). Such chronology, with an emphasis on sequence, is what distinguishes narratives from other types of data (Cortazzi, 1993). When creating narratives, informants refamiliarize themselves with their past in the context of their present. Such an approach is consistent with the perspective of phenomenological time, and is particularly significant when examining questions of consumer behavior, since the purpose of such research typically is to understand the attributions of the past that consumers ascribe to a focal present state.

Because it subscribes to notions of phenomenological time as understood by past, present and future, narrative reasoning becomes a viable mode of investigation and interpretation in retrospective research. Time-oriented thinking centered on narrative reasoning is a universal mode of cognition that contextually embeds connections between events. Because the participant's voice is central to the quality of the research effort, narratives – and autobiographical narratives in particular – are ideally suited to retrospective investigations. Narratives elicit history and relate and reveal the significance of historical events to the development of a present state of affairs. Organization of experiences into temporally meaningful episodes is at the heart of narratives, as 'narrative meaning is created by noting that something is a "part" of a whole and that something is a "cause" of something else' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6).

Methods facilitating retrospective narratives

Retrospective investigations may be used to investigate three different time frames: (a) a certain time in the past ('How was it to live through the Depression?'); (b) how certain events in the past contribute to an outcome ('How did you come to place such an emphasis on saving?'); and (c) how certain outcomes pertain to an event in the past ('What was the result of losing all your savings?'). Furthermore a single project may integrate one or multiple frames. For example, Ruth (2005) investigates the lived experience of consumers who experienced apartheid in South Africa, as well as changes in their lives since apartheid ended. Table 29.2 summarizes the research approaches available when the researcher wishes to approach the relationship of the past and the present from the perspective of each frame. Each approach – storytelling, retrospective anchoring and profusion, and autobiographies – is summarized below.

Table 29.2 Retrospective approaches to gathering time data

	Storytelling	RAP	Autobiographies
Key purpose	To elicit outcomes in chronological order following a key event or phenomenon	To go back in time and be able to talk about the past	To elicit events in chronological order leading to a key event or phenomenon
Sample research question	How has your life changed since buying a red Mustang convertible?	What car did you aspire to own while in high school?	How did you come to buy a red Mustang convertible?
Key risks	Wishful consequences of a key event may be reported	Heavy reliance on correct and swift identification of an appropriate anchor	Informants may not maintain a first-person perspective throughout the narrative
Suitable format of data	Written or oral	Oral; researcher-assisted data gathering is preferred	Written; informant-driven data gathering
Overarching framework	Chronological and thematic	Thematic	Chronological

Storytelling

Consumer researchers successfully tap into chronological episodes and narrative reasoning by inviting consumers to tell stories of specific consumption-related experiences. The critical incident technique, used to elicit consumer narratives in a number of consumer studies of services (Bitner, Booms and Tetrault, 1990; Iacobucci, Ostrom and Grayson, 1995) and gift giving (Mick and DeMoss, 1990; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel, 1999; Wooten, 2000), has proved to be a successful means of engaging participants in storytelling (see the chapter on storytelling in this book for a complete explication of the method). This technique prompts participants to recall a particular episode that fits certain criteria. Researchers often employ grand-tour prompts (McCracken, 1988) to set the stage for generating these incidents. For example, when investigating the effect of gift receipt on perceptions of giver/recipient relationship quality, Ruth et al. (1999) use a grand-tour prompt that elicits recollections of a past gift-receipt experience involving a ‘target’ emotion assigned by the researcher (e.g. ‘Tell me about a gift receipt when you experienced joy.’).

Although a grand-tour prompt can elicit recollection of key episodes fitting the criteria for inclusion in a study, it is not necessarily sufficient for capturing facets of time. Two specific interventions are required: contextual information to situate that event, and insight into how the episode unfolded over time. Regarding this last intervention, time-oriented prompts may facilitate chronological recollection. For example, although a researcher interested in understanding thematic structure may prompt, ‘How did that make you feel?’, such prompts do not naturally facilitate chronological thinking. In contrast, prompts such as ‘What happened next?’ will do so. It is important to note that many research methods are not structured by default to facilitate chronological accounts. Thus

researchers must be acutely aware that they might have to facilitate the elicitation of chronological structure where needed.

Retrospective anchoring and profusion

Eliciting narratives via the critical incident technique is appropriate when informants can easily recall salient incidents that have taken place in the past. Some research, however, might seek to tap into past behavior that is not necessarily incident-specific. Ruth and Commuri (1998) describe a technique that they call 'retrospective anchoring and profusion' (RAP) that may be useful to researchers under these conditions. Using RAP, the researcher attempts to (re-)situate the participant into a past time period by tapping into a vivid and deeply embedded contextual cue from that period. For example, Ruth and Commuri describe a study of Western influence on spousal decision making in India over an eight-year period. In order to situate husbands and wives in the past, participants were asked where they lived or worked eight years prior to the time the study began. The researchers then used prompts to guide the interviews toward issues of participants' life situations eight years earlier, until the researchers felt confident that participants were sufficiently anchored in that time period. Interviewers then guided participants toward discussing aspects of decision making for product categories in question during that time period. Such retrospective anchoring allowed participants to become resituated in the past so that a profusion of perceptions from that time period were available for recollection. Later in the interview, participants were prompted to describe decision making in the present for similar product categories. Comparing the present to the past allowed for nomothetic research insights grounded in idiographic experiences and recollection.

Retrospective anchoring can also be situated around a specific incident that would be well known to all informants. For example, in the US, many carry vivid memories of what they were doing at the time they heard of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, or of the incidents now known as '9/11'. Ruth (2005) used this type of culturally vivid anchor to study consumption in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, by prompting informants to recall and describe their activities at the time that they heard the news that Nelson Mandela was to be released from prison. Because Mandela's plight was well known to South Africans, and his release marked a change in government posture, the Mandela anchor situated all participants in a vivid time that could then elicit a profusion of relevant recollections where events anchored in the past could be contrasted with the present.

Obviously, in both the India and South Africa studies above (or in any studies, for that matter), it was not possible for researchers to go back in time. Furthermore, it may have been difficult to foresee that Western influences would markedly affect spousal decision making among Indians. Moreover, in the case of South Africa during the apartheid era, there was no assurance that the apartheid system of government would ever be dismantled, making a longitudinal investigation one that might never have had a post-apartheid present to contrast to the past. As a result, in both cases, the research teams had to devise a means for participants to go back in time perceptually, by anchoring them to contextually vivid life circumstances or incidents. Once so anchored, consumers were then able to respond (profusely) to prompts about consumption and other aspects of their lives during the time period in question, providing insights into causes and effects of change from past to present.

Autobiographies

An autobiography is a detailed description of a course of events narrated by an informant–protagonist. While such narratives do include other actors or enunciators, it is necessary that all parts maintain the informants' point of view. Further, unlike the narrative forms discussed above, the informant tells the story *of* a life rather than 'merely reporting what went on *in* a life' (Harré and Langenhove, 1999, p. 65, emphasis added). In other words, rather than offer events that are subsequently interpreted by the researcher, the informant is able to bring closure to the autobiography. As indicated in Table 29.2, autobiographies are well suited for investigating causes of past events: because informants are expected to reveal the nature *of* events the method naturally grants informants control over capturing and assessing these events.

When employing autobiography as a retrospective method, the researcher identifies a key event or phenomenon of interest, and then recruits informants for the study for whom that phenomenon bears personal meaning. In such a project, the researcher will be interested primarily in unfolding the histories; that is, in how events were interwoven with one another over the course of time. Thus autobiographies are well suited to investigate how consumers come to develop certain values or behaviors. Here discrete events are of lesser consequence than the themes and processes the informant weaves together into a story of how such values or behaviors emerged.

Because researchers identify the event of interest *a priori*, they ask the informant to write the story of how he or she came to be interested in the event or in the outcomes pertaining to it. Three important components of this seemingly simple instruction distinguish autobiographies from other approaches. First, in requesting the story of a key outcome, the researcher grants the informant complete control, not only with regard to selecting the antecedents described, but also in the way the author presents the assortment of such antecedents to the researcher/reader. This procedure stands in sharp contrast to a depth-interview scenario, where a researcher may prompt and probe the informant to ensure that all possible causes are unearthed. It also stands in contrast to a social or cultural psychological interpretation that researchers often impose in order to bring closure to a narration of causes of an event. Thus, in an autobiography, the focus is on the salience of events to the informant's personal identity, rather than interpretation based on sociology or cultural psychology.

Second, in declaring that the lead actor in the story is the informant, any uncertainty about the lens through which the story is being recalled is minimized. This is a critical component in using this method and the issue has been discussed in detail by Peirce (1955) and adopted for autobiographies by Urban (1989) and Harré and Langenhove (1999; also see Nunberg, 1993).

Third, it is important that the key outcome or state be clearly specified so that events and processes leading up to a well-defined, externally valid episode are considered in the autobiography. In other words, the external validity of the statement of an episode is what enables researchers to compare multiple antecedents and events in autobiographies, to arrive at nomothetic inferences.

Conclusion

Our discussion of longitudinal and retrospective qualitative research techniques reveals that researchers in marketing have many short-term and long-term tools at their disposal

when they wish to incorporate temporal aspects in their studies. Furthermore it does appear that researchers interested in longitudinal qualitative studies have made progress in moving away from what Sherry (1987, p. 371) described as 'blitzkrieg ethnography', or studies that 'provide just enough field exposure to tantalize and to aid hypothesizing, but not enough for comprehensive understanding' (ibid.). Moreover the use of retrospective techniques such as RAP, critical incidents and storytelling is increasing, while autobiography, although seemingly underutilized by marketing researchers, affords great promise for the discipline. As a summary reminder of the benefits of these methods, qualitative longitudinal research seems especially apt when researchers are interested in change, although, clearly, consumer researchers could leverage their data sets more effectively and explore this important issue of how consumers, marketing-related sites or topics in general (e.g. the 'standard package' for consumers) change over time. Furthermore, retrospective techniques offer researchers the opportunity to explore key moments or periods in participants' lives that pertain to their immersion and experience with marketing-related phenomena.

We hope this chapter proves enlightening and encouraging to those scholars interested in capturing and incorporating temporally related phenomena in their research designs.

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