

Analysis and Interpretation of Qualitative Data in Consumer Research

SUSAN SPIGGLE*

This article presents a framework for thinking about the fundamental activities of inference—data analysis and interpretation—by researchers using qualitative data. I contrast these two activities. For analysis I describe seven operations: categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation. For interpretation I suggest metaphor and other literary devices as models for understanding the meanings of others, identifying patterns in these meanings, and representing how systems of meanings reproduce culture. The purpose of these descriptions is to suggest a vocabulary for and stimulate discussion about how researchers using qualitative analytical techniques arrive at conclusions and make sense of data.

Challenges to dominant paradigms currently pervade the human sciences (humanities and social and natural sciences), resulting in “crises of representation.” Debate centers on the questions of how can we know and represent what we know about reality. As a result of these debates, scholarly communities fragment as experimental, reflective perspectives flourish (Marcus and Fisher 1986). Accordingly, Sherry (1991) has described the “interpretive turn” in consumer research as part of this more general turn to interpretive inquiry in the social sciences.

Taking the interpretive turn, a number of consumer researchers have produced empirical studies—variously labeled “naturalistic” (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), “interpretive” (Hirschman 1989), “humanistic” (Hirschman 1986), “phenomenological” (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990), and “semiotic” (Holbrook and Grayson 1986)—intellectual justification (Holbrook 1987; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Sherry 1991; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), and some practical guidelines for conducting research (Belk et al. 1988; McCracken 1988; Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Much of the controversy in consumer research over these new perspectives takes place at the level of epistemology—particularly the issue of how knowledge products can and should be evaluated. At the heart of this debate is how readers can have faith in conclusions, inferences, and results, what controls are employed over them, and how researchers can adequately represent them to others. In answer to these questions consumer

researchers have generally focused most explicitly on data collection procedures and postinferential processes (e.g., audits) to establish trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). The purpose of this article is to raise some issues and invite debate in thinking about inference by consumer researchers who work with qualitative data. I suggest a vocabulary for describing the analytical operations that undergird inference and a framework for thinking about how researchers construct interpretations as they link empirical and conceptual domains.

BACKGROUND

Several consumer researchers have contrasted the philosophical foundations—the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and paradigmatic—of the alternative perspectives versus positivist perspectives¹ (Anderson 1989; Calder and Tybout 1987, 1989; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Hunt 1989; Lutz 1989; Thompson et al. 1989). In general, we distinguish these alternative perspectives from positivist perspectives in (1) the attempt to understand meaning of texts through interpretive procedures, (2) the focus on context, (3) the use of qualitative data and qualitative analysis, and (4) the frequent use of emergent research designs and inference processes. Even within these alternative ways of knowing, we find distinct research agendas.

One agenda includes semiotic, structural, hermeneutic, and literary analyses of cultural products (Hirsch-

*Susan Spiggle is associate professor of marketing in the Department of Marketing at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-2041. The author thanks Kent Monroe and the three reviewers for their patient guidance and constructive comments.

¹Terminology assumes a rather important position in the epistemological debates. Consistent with Hudson and Ozanne (1987), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Lutz (1989), I use positivistic to refer to what Hunt (1989) calls contemporary social science and Calder and Tybout (1989) refer to as traditional scientific empirical. I acknowledge differences in research so identified and claim no pejorative intent (cf. Hunt 1989).

man 1988; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Stern 1989). Here investigators identify issues, symbolic markers, themes, or mythemes as latent indicators or signifiers of human meanings in films, magazines, television programs, or other cultural forms. These researchers study surface phenomena that represent and are capable of expressing an underlying reality of social life, not necessarily apprehended by the creators or viewers of these cultural forms.

A different agenda includes interpretive, empirical research that studies consumer experience and behavior through participant observation (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Belk et al. 1988; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Hill 1991; Hill and Stamey 1990; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Sherry 1990) and from data gathered in depth interviews (Bergadaà 1990; Heisley and Levy 1991; Hirschman 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992; Mick and DeMoss 1990; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Schouten 1991; Thompson et al. 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), historical documents (Belk 1992), and self-reflection (Gould 1991). Generally, these researchers are interested in understanding and interpreting the meanings and experiences of their informants. Some also decode cultural meanings in interpreting how the display of symbolic codes and performance of cultural rituals affirm and reproduce cultural themes and motifs. They do so by constructing *thick description*—in the original Geertzian (1973) sense that Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) clarify, noting that it relies upon understanding informants' points of view (emic) to portray broader cultural meanings (etic point of view).

This article targets this latter agenda—researchers using ethnographic and interview data. It includes researchers that vary widely in their aims and approaches to inference. I exclude traditional content analyses (e.g., Belk 1987; Belk and Pollay 1985; Spiggle 1986) and template-based approaches to analysis (Crabtree and Miller 1992, pp. 93–109) in which investigators analyze texts by a predefined scheme, or template, that they identify prior to the in-depth analysis, even when the scheme is generated inductively from the data (e.g., Rook 1987).

This article focuses on the inferential processes that connect the end product of research to its data. Inferences result from the processes of analysis and interpretation that investigators use to generate conclusions, insights, meanings, patterns, themes, connections, conceptual frameworks, and theories—their representations of the reality described by the data.

Investigators use both analysis and interpretation, employing them in a linear or circular way, discretely or in tandem, in a more or less systematic fashion, with more or less conscious deliberation, and with more emphasis on one than the other. Many different combinations of integrating these processes have resulted in high-quality and innovative work in these variously conducted studies.

We have no conventionally recognized vocabulary for describing these inferential procedures. Nor do we generally make conceptual distinctions between analysis and interpretation, frequently using them interchangeably. Further, both terms refer to the *process* of arriving at conclusions, as well as the final *product*—the output of these conclusions. Thus, researchers use the terms loosely and synonymously. This article defines, clarifies, and describes these two processes of inference.

Analysis breaks down or divides some complex whole into its constituent parts (i.e., from the Greek, *analyein*, to break up). Through analytical operations researchers dissect, reduce, sort, and reconstitute data. Researchers use analysis to manipulate data. In *interpretation* one makes a construal—asks what something means, or grasps the sense of it. In research, interpretation has two meanings. It can refer to the higher-order, more abstract conceptual layers of meaning constructed from or imposed on data. Data may reflect (1) the aims, designs, and perspectives of human actors, (2) aggregations of human activity such as economic indicators, or (3) nonhuman phenomena (e.g., the behavior of subatomic particles).

Interpretation can also refer to assessing the intentions and inferences of those one is studying (see Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988), making sense of experience and behavior, and seeing or understanding some phenomenon in its own terms, grasping its essence (e.g., interpreting a cultural form). Inferential processes in research require some combination of analysis and interpretation to create representations of data.

Two Activities of Inference

Sherry (1991) argues that the future of postmodern inquiry—his term for interpretive research—rests upon developing the researcher-as-instrument, not upon techniques. The researcher, responding as a whole person, serves as an instrument in observation, selection, coordination, and interpretation of data (Sanday 1979). The development of analytic and interpretive skills for making inferences from qualitative data can be enhanced by establishing a vocabulary that researchers can use to think about inference and communicate to others how they proceeded. The following discussion is designed to promote reflection and communication, not to specify technique.

ANALYSIS

Many consumer researchers describe how they tackled the data by stating that subcategories, perspectives, themes, or the interpretation that emerged were revealed by the data, were evident, or were identified. Some have provided limited descriptions of their procedures, enumerating the set of operations whereby they proceeded through the data (see Belk et al. 1988, 1989; Hirschman 1992; Schouten 1991).

The following presents a classification and description of qualitative data manipulation operations. These operations include categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation. Neither are they discrete activities, nor do they occur in an ordered, sequential fashion. Further, they are not stages in the research process but are operations that researchers use in the various stages of analysis (cf. McCracken's description [1988] of analysis—described as a set of sequential stages). Through these operations researchers organize data, extract meaning, arrive at conclusions, and generate or confirm conceptual schemes and theories that describe the data.

Categorization

Categorization is the process of classifying or labeling units of data. Qualitative researchers categorize data during the process of coding. Coding has been described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Miles and Huberman (1984). Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) have provided more detailed and useful descriptions of coding, although their work is infrequently cited or used by consumer researchers. They distinguish different types of coding operations and describe a procedure for generating rich theoretical categories that enables researchers to move beyond identification of themes and unrelated constructs.

The essence of categorization is identifying a chunk or unit of data (e.g., a passage of text of any length) as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon. Categorization involves naming, or giving labels to, instances of the phenomenon found in the data (cf. McCracken's term, observation [1988], pp. 43–44). A passage categorized with a specific label may be a few words, or many pages long. A passage may exemplify different categories of interest to the analyst and thus have multiple labels. Further, some parts of the text will contain no meaningful information to the analyst and remain uncategorized or unlabeled.

Miles and Huberman (1984, pp. 56, 60) note that coding drives the retrieval and organization of data. Some investigators prefer to code electronic copies of texts, enabling easy retrieval of all passages defined as belonging to the same category (see McCracken 1988, p. 47). If so, the computer is used to store and retrieve labels and their accompanying passages, not to code or categorize data.

Qualitative researchers do not generally prespecify the unit of analysis, as Bergadaà (1990) did in the initial stage of her analysis, defining each sentence as a unit of analysis and categorizing it into one or more predefined categories. Rather, they categorize a chunk of data on the basis of its coherent meaning—its standing on its own—not by an arbitrary designation of grammar. McCracken (1988) appears to refer to units of analysis as utterances. Miles and Huberman (1984) dis-

cuss this issue under the heading of "unitizing" (pp. 344–347).

The investigator categorizes in the initial stages of analysis and continues throughout. The other operations depend on some initial identification of categories. However, investigators consider initial categories as provisional, permitting the flexible use of subsequent interpretation. Categorization may proceed deductively (e.g., locating passages that represent a priori constructs, themes, or ideas) or inductively (e.g., identifying emergent categories from the data).

Abstraction

Abstraction builds on categorization. It surpasses categorization in that it collapses more empirically grounded categories into higher-order conceptual constructs. Abstraction goes beyond the identification of patterns in the data. It groups previously identified categories into more general, conceptual classes. Abstraction includes both incorporating more concrete categories into fewer more general ones (cf. Miles and Huberman [1984], pp. 67–69, on pattern coding) and recognizing that a unit of data is an empirical indicator of a more general construct of interest. This construct may result from a priori themes—Mick and Buhl's (1992) life project or Schouten's symbolic self-completion (1991). Or, the construct may emerge from the analysis itself, unanticipated, but recognized as theoretically relevant—Belk et al.'s (1988) boundaries versus transitions.

Abstract constructs encompass a number of more concrete instances found in the data that share certain common features. The theoretical significance of a construct springs from its relationship to other constructs or its connection to a broader gestalt of an individual's experiences. Other operations—comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation—provide a basis for exploring its theoretical significance.

Comparison

Comparison explores differences and similarities across incidents within the data currently collected and provides guidelines for collecting additional data. Systematic comparisons employ the principles of logic in making inferences from data.

Data Currently Collected. Comparison begins in the initial stages of analysis as one categorizes and abstracts the data. While categorizing, the investigator notes general similarities in the specific empirical instances in the data and labels them as representing the same category. Initially, this process occurs somewhat implicitly and unsystematically, while one explores the data. As analysis proceeds, the investigator may conduct comparisons in a systematic and methodical way. Glaser and Strauss (1967) pioneered the constant comparative

method as an analytical procedure in which the analyst explicitly compares each incident in the data with other incidents appearing to belong to the same category, exploring their similarities and differences. As analysis proceeds and the categories develop, the investigator compares incidents in the data with the appropriate emerging category, not with other incidents.

Throughout their discussions of coding, Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to comparison. McCracken (1988) provides very cursory guidelines in his description of the stages of analysis, implying that comparison should be used to relate "observations" (categories) to one another in the development of "metaobservations" (abstract constructs). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) description of data analysis is directly modeled after Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method. Miles and Huberman (1984) do not discuss comparison explicitly. But, many of their templates for creating data displays encourage the investigator to engage in comparisons and contrasts by aligning categories and constructs in matrices.

Data Collection. Comparison processes also guide subsequent data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1985), using the term "purposive sampling," and Glaser and Strauss (1967), using "theoretical sampling," have described how comparison processes are used to select whom to interview or observe. As investigators identify categories, constructs, and preliminary propositions and conceptual linkages from initial analysis, they define subsequent individuals or groups to sample that maximize or minimize differences between them on variables of interest. This procedure allows them to control for, or manipulate, similarities and differences in conditions, outcomes, or informant characteristics in a way that is analogous to that in experimental and survey designs.

Dimensionalization

Dimensionalization involves identifying properties of categories and constructs (see Strauss 1987, pp. 14-16; Strauss and Corbin 1990, pp. 69-72). Once a category has been defined, the analyst may explore its attributes or characteristics along continua or dimensions. The properties represent conceptual dimensions that vary empirically in the data across the incidents depicting the construct. Wiseman (1987) describes how she developed "generic concepts" by examining the increasing dimensions of a concept as she explored it across many different research contexts.

To clarify, following a Strauss and Corbin graphic representation (1990, p. 72), an example of properties and their dimensions adapted from some constructs in consumer research follows. In their discussion of sacralization as a process, Belk et al. (1989) note a number of empirical variations in the process whereby individuals attach sacredness to an object. One can represent these as such:

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Properties</u>
Sacralization	Actor's intent Nature Setting

Dimensional Range

purposeful	not purposeful
collective	individual
public	private

Similarly, from Thompson et al.'s idiographic account (1990) of one informant, we illustrate:

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Properties</u>
Experience	Issues

Dimensional Range

complete	incomplete
perfect	imperfect
organized	disorganized

and from their nomothetic gestalt portrayal:

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Properties</u>
Life-world	Themes

Dimensional Range

being in control	being out of control
being deliberate	being captivated
being restricted	being free from restrictions

Dimensionalization aids in theory construction in two ways. By systematically exploring empirical variations across incidents representing a construct, the researcher clarifies and enriches its conceptual meaning (cf. Bagozzi 1984, p. 20). Further, the identification of properties and their dimensions permits the researcher to explore and define relationships across categories and constructs (Strauss and Corbin 1990, pp. 69-70).

Integration

The goal of the analytical techniques suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) is to *build theory* that is grounded in data. The construction of theory takes the analyst beyond the identification of themes, or even of propositions, to "producing complex, conceptually woven, integrated theory; theory which is discovered and formulated developmentally in close conjunction with intensive analysis of data" (Strauss 1987, p. 23).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) present two operations—axial coding and selective coding—that aid in integrating the categories and constructs that the analyst has defined. In axial coding the analyst develops a category or construct, using a "paradigm model," by specifying "the *conditions* giving rise to it; the *context* . . . in which it is embedded; the *action/interactional strategies* by which it is handled, managed, and carried out; and

the *outcome* of those strategies" (p. 97). The analyst begins integrating the theory by noting in the data that certain conditions, contexts, strategies, and outcomes tend to cluster together. The components of the paradigm model—conditions, context, strategies, and outcomes are readily adaptable to a consumer behavior context.

Selective coding involves moving to a higher level of abstraction with the developed paradigmatic constructs, specifying relationships, and delineating a core category or construct around which the other categories and constructs revolve and that relates them to one another.

Integration requires the mapping of relationships between conceptual elements. The map may take the form of gestalt connections (Thompson et al. 1990), causal linkages (Bergadaà 1990), circular connections (Mick and Buhl 1992), or other explicit associations. These connections may be hierarchical or ungraded, linear or recursive.

Qualitative consumer researchers have sometimes stopped short of making conceptual leaps that result in an integrated structure, settling for identifying patterns, themes, or a few unrelated propositions. Qualitative researchers do not typically think in causal terms. Thus, other models for illustrating connections may prove useful. Imagining various kinds of architecture, or structures from other fields (e.g., chemistry or topology) may aid in promoting integration of constructs. The deliberate use of metaphors, as presented subsequently, may enhance this process.

Categorization, abstraction, comparison, and integration are the fundamental, basic analytical operations. They enable the construction of a coherent conceptual framework or explanation. Dimensionalization aids in abstraction and comparison, stimulating the development of concepts and the specification of their relationships. Two other operations, iteration and refutation, are operational tactics that promote epistemic warrant (Hunt 1989) by engaging the processes of induction, deduction, and verification.

Iteration

Iteration involves moving through data collection and analysis in such a way that preceding operations shape subsequent ones. Iteration implies that investigators do not perform specific research stages in a sequential manner but move back and forth between stages. Consumer researchers make frequent references to analysis as an iterative process (e.g., Hill and Stamey 1990; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Schouten 1991), although they do not explain how or what form iteration takes. Iteration can occur between data collection and data inference phases of research and within the inference phase.

What Data Are Collected? With structured, semi-structured, even unstructured data collection instruments, analysis of initial interviews may suggest additional information that the analyst wishes to collect in

subsequent observation or interviewing (see Schouten 1991, p. 415). Consumer researchers using interpretive approaches have used instruments that cover the entire continuum of structure from Bergadaà's (1990) 16 questions to Hirschman's (1992) "grand tour" question and Thompson et al.'s (1990) emergent dialogue. Regardless of the degree of structure, the analysts can modify what questions are asked, or what domains are investigated, on the basis of analysis of preceding interviews.

From Whom Are Data Collected? As described previously, in purposive and theoretical sampling, analysis of initial interviews indicates the types of individuals chosen for succeeding ones. For example, a researcher extending the work of Thompson et al. (1990) might choose to interview working married women to compare their experiences to those of Thompson et al.'s nonworking wives. Both of these forms of iteration, what data and from whom, involve moving back and forth between data collection and analysis.

Inferences Based on Data Record. Thompson et al. (1990) clearly describe their analytic procedure as an "iterative back-and-forth process of relating a part of a text to the whole. . . . Interpretations are continuously revised as more of the text is grasped by the interpreter" (p. 347; see also Thompson et al. 1989, p. 141; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988, pp. 400-401). In this form of iteration, the investigator reserves the final interpretation of a particular passage of an interview or text after having considered the entire interview or text.

Inferences Based on Entire Data Set. Thompson et al. (1989, 1990), Bergadaà (1990), and Hirschman (1992) point out that their analyses used another form of iteration—reviewing each interview after they developed global themes from analyzing the interviews separately. Here the back-and-forth procedure is between each interview (which is the part) and the entire set of interviews (which is the whole). In the analysis of a single interview, the back and forth is between passages in the interview (the part) and the entire interview (the whole). These latter two forms of iteration occur within the data inference phase and necessitate reading and rereading the interviews (see Bergadaà 1990; Hirschman 1992; and Thompson et al. 1990).

Iteration allows the investigator several advantages. It permits the development of provisional categories, constructs, and conceptual connections for subsequent exploration. Thus, it aids in induction—developing concepts and constructs from the data. It allows a more unified interpretation of data by encouraging the hermeneutical back and forth between part and whole, thus assisting deduction—refining concepts and drawing out their theoretical implications. And iteration promotes verification as the investigator seeks deliberate refutation of the emerging conceptual scheme from the data, as described below (see Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy's discussion [1988] of interpretation and falsification).

Refutation

Refutation involves deliberately subjecting one's emerging inferences—categories, constructs, propositions, or conceptual framework—to empirical scrutiny. Three different specific techniques of refutation have been used in consumer research—negative case analysis, purposive sampling, and testing by context.

A number of consumer researchers report using negative case analysis (e.g., Hill 1991), the intentional seeking out of specific cases that disconfirm one's emerging analysis. We can distinguish negative cases from negative incidents—specific passages within a text that do not fit the emerging conceptual scheme, even if the case does overall. Agreed-upon guidelines for employing negative case analysis (i.e., how extensively one should search for negative cases and use those that appear as exceptions to the emerging analysis) do not exist (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Further, analysts typically give virtually no description of how they employed negative case analysis.

In her study of addiction Hirschman (1992) purposively sampled six drug users who were not self-labeled addicts to compare their experiences with those of admitted addicts. She conducted these interviews after she had developed her analysis (although her choice of these informants was not derived from the analysis) in order to make systematic use of comparison and contrast of the themes that she had identified as common to addicts. However, rather than modify her analysis on the basis of the finding that the nonaddicts exhibited two of the seven themes that she had formulated as related to addiction, she simply noted their occurrence. Thus, while she used her analysis of addicts' experiences to interpret the nonaddict interview data, she did not, in turn, reformulate or qualify her analysis.

Belk et al. (1989) tested their emerging interpretation by examining it sequentially in different contexts using succeeding contexts as empirical checks on ideas developed in preceding ones. They modified their emerging interpretation, dropping propositions that were not confirmed. They apparently did not reanalyze prior contexts in light of the interpretation of subsequent ones. In addition to multiple contexts, they drew their data from multiple sites, enhancing the generalizability, or transferability, of the analysis. They did not use sites, however, as a basis for sequential tests of their emerging perspective. One *could* use contexts, sites, venues, cases, or other units of organization as a basis for sequential tests.

All three types of refutation previously described are similar in their intentional scrutinizing of the emerging analytical product. Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommend adopting a general stance of skepticism toward one's developing ideas. Throughout the research process, the analyst should constantly subject the emerging analysis to the test of data, reformulating and modifying the analysis, and specifying conditions and variations.

Refutation so conceived becomes part of inference, not a separate operation that one performs after inference. The investigator attempts to refute by subjecting inference to data collected either prior to or after its formulation. Thus, it differs from strategies to enhance trustworthiness on the basis of consensual validation, such as postinferential checks whereby informants or experts are asked to comment on the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Summary and Guidelines

The analytic operations—categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation—provide a means for managing qualitative data for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. The focus here has been on analytical procedure, rather than on interpretations that spring from it. The investigator cannot program these operations in a mechanical fashion. But, one can proceed systematically and thoroughly. I propose several guidelines for thinking about these operations. These guidelines include proceeding systematically, recording analytic procedure, and explicit reporting.

Proceed Systematically. There are many possible ways to proceed through and analyze qualitative data. One can read through all the data before rereading records for each case, or read and reread the record for each case before going to subsequent cases. As one categorizes, abstracts, compares, and integrates one can move through the data horizontally (i.e., grouping indicators of categories and constructs, fragmenting cases), or vertically (i.e., grouping records of cases, fragmenting constructs), or both sequentially. Tabulations can be helpful in promoting systematic comparisons. Tabulations by construct (i.e., for each construct, list all incidents that represent the construct across cases) and tabulations by case (i.e., for each case, list all incidents that represent the construct) function as mechanical data organizing and retrieval devices. They promote a systematic back-and-forth movement through the data and encourage one to make all potentially fruitful comparisons of incidents in the data.

The purpose of proceeding systematically is not to straitjacket the analysis, but to stimulate a complete analysis, uncovering all possible leads. Systematic processes minimize potential distortion from selective use of the data.

Record. The primary sources describing qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Wallendorf and Belk 1989) strongly encourage the investigator to keep records of the analysis in process in the form of memos, journals, charts, or other documents. Records may be of two types. The first are records that the investigator uses to condense, summarize, and integrate data—any displays or doc-

uments that *facilitate* the analysis, such as the tabulations previously described, or theoretical summaries, or diagrams and illustrations investigators create to explore and present relationships between the elements of the conceptual structure.

The second are records that *preserve* the construction of inference. These may include memos about insights and ideas as the investigator generates them, notes about ideas and directions to explore and about activities, attempts, and summaries of how one proceeded. This practice allows the investigator to write down ideas and potential lines of inquiry as they occur, returning to them later for development. Further, it permits the reconstruction of inferential processes, allowing the researcher or other expert to judge how logical, extensive, and methodical the inferences were.

Report. Investigators using qualitative data commonly report their procedures for collecting data and for submitting their conclusions to informants, auditors, and peers for assessing its trustworthiness. They communicate comparatively less about their analytical procedures. As a reviewer noted, it is not clear whether this fact represents a procedural, or a reporting, deficiency. Greater detail in descriptions of analysis would (1) result in the sharing of the useful, duplicatable techniques and procedures that researchers use to go through, manipulate, scrutinize, store, and retrieve data for other researchers, (2) provide more information for others to judge the epistemic warrant (Hunt 1989) of the research product, (3) provide those who view these methods as loose, nonrigorous, self-confirming, and unrefutable (see Calder and Tybout 1989) with more information, and (4) encourage a greater tradition of replication of research findings across domains, contexts, groups of individuals, and cultures. Investigators might report explicit, but not lengthy, descriptions of the following:

1. The volume of text that they used to produce the analysis and how many cases, sites, or locations they studied
2. How many times they read the texts and in what order rereading occurred
3. Whether and how they modified previous interpretations on the basis of subsequent reading and interpretation
4. Procedures used to ensure that analysis was systematic and thorough and a general description of how they reduced, fragmented, managed, reconstructed, stored, and retrieved data for analysis, especially in the form of tabulations
5. Specific iterations involving what data they collected and what cases they chose for study on the basis of prior analysis
6. The extent of and procedures for locating negative evidence and how they consequently modified the emerging interpretation

Some investigators put a high premium on reproducible, logical, methodical, and systematic inference even when the objects of their investigation are the subjectively experienced worlds of others or cultural codes. To some extent one can be trained through practice to proceed in a systematic, methodical way precisely because we can describe these procedures. Thus, the researcher-as-analyst develops by gaining familiarity with, practicing, and experimenting with analytical procedures. Interpretation as a form of inference is not as amenable to a linear description. The subsequent discussion may shed some light on the nature of interpretation as an inference-making tool.

INTERPRETATION

Analytical procedures manipulate data; interpretation makes sense of data through more abstract conceptualizations. We can describe data manipulation as a series of operations; not so for interpretation. The intuitive, subjective, particularistic nature of interpretation renders it difficult to model or present in a linear way. In interpretation the investigator does not engage a set of operations. Rather, interpretation occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning, as in deciphering a code.

We cannot, then, view interpretation as a set of procedures. However, the field of literary rhetoric offers some concepts that may illuminate interpretation. Ethnographers and researchers in a number of other fields have turned to literary and textual analysis to help resolve their crises of representation (Krupat 1992; Marcus and Fisher 1986). Many scholars view culture, behavior, and scientific writing as texts (see Atkinson 1990; Geertz 1973; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Manning 1987) and interpretation as reading, or translating, texts. We can view interpretation and translation as the transfer of meanings across texts, objects, or domains. This perspective can be useful in understanding interpretive processes in consumer research.

Despite their different aims, designs, and analytical strategies, consumer researchers using alternative perspectives attempt to understand and represent meanings by studying (1) the meanings that others attach to their experiences, (2) how those meanings cohere and form patterns, and (3) how symbolic forms, rituals, traditions, and cultural codes (especially those involving consumption) affirm and reproduce cultural themes and culture. After describing the process of interpretation broadly, I present a perspective on interpretation that links it to each of these three research aims in decoding meaning.

Arriving at an interpretation results from an emergent, holistic, extralogical insight, or understanding. The interpreter translates some *distant*—less familiar, abstract, indirectly apprehended—object, experience, or domain (encoded in signs) into one that is *near*—more familiar, concrete, directly apprehended. Through

this translation the interpreter grasps a meaning by seeing resemblances between a new sign system, a text, and a previously understood one.

Viewing interpretation as translation, or "reading text," frames it as metaphorical or as simulating other literary and figurative devices that are based on resemblance. These devices (literary tropes) suggest, indicate, imply, or allude to correspondences and parallels across or within domains. The constructor of tropes uses them to expand, concretize, and emphasize meanings. Tropes relevant for interpretive research include metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (Manning 1979). Qualitative researchers can use tropes as lenses through which to make sense of data and to represent their interpretations. Such playful viewpoints, incorporating juxtapositions of similarity and difference, enlarge our vision and permit us to see patterns not readily apparent with a literal perspective.

Metaphor and Irony. Metaphor requires us to suspend our ordinary frame of reference of viewing some aspect of the world "as is" and, instead, view it "as if" (see Manning 1979). In using metaphor as a lens, we seek correspondences, similarities, and identities between domains. Thus, one domain is compared to or seen in terms of another (see Mick 1986, p. 206). The comparison involves a mapping of the elements of one domain onto those of the other.

Lakoff and Turner's (1989, pp. 59–63) discussion of metaphor distinguishes between the target domain (that which we wish to illuminate—the distant one) and a source domain (that from which we draw to provide illumination—the near one). In the highly conventionalized metaphor, life is a journey, we understand the target domain (life) in terms of the source domain (journey). We understand the source domain, not as metaphor, but through our observations, experiences, habits, and routines in the world.

In using this metaphor we understand life (target) through applying the conventional components, or slots, of a journey to it—traveler, starting point, destination. We may further apply optional components—vehicle, guide, fork in the road. We access the source domain (journey) as a schema with predefined slots. Metaphors involve mapping the slots, the relations of the slots to one another, and the properties of the slots from the source domain to those of the target domain. The power of a highly conventionalized metaphor derives from the ease wherewith we can identify and apply slots. The creative user of metaphor explores many optional slots from the source domain to illuminate the target domain or uses innovative source domains (Lakoff and Turner 1989, pp. 62–63).

Metaphor is particularly appropriate for representing the synthetic and creative activity of interpretation. Stein (1983) points to its role in the creative process, citing a number of innovations whose creators got an idea by seeing a problem in metaphoric terms (e.g.,

Bell's using the structure of the inner ear for the telephone). Noblit and Hare (1988) argue that metaphors allow us to reduce data, while preserving the integrity and the meaning of the original text. The reduction is idiomatic, rather than literal. In fact, a literal translation is one that sacrifices meaning for inappropriate exact correspondence.

Ironic viewpoints posit parallel structures in a phenomenon and its opposite. Manning (1979) shows how he used irony to reveal similarities between the behaviors and motives of drug dealers and narcotics agents. The former inhabit an "immoral world" that reflects the "moral world" of the latter. Here, as in metaphor, we see commonalities, or parallels in two dissimilar, even opposing domains.

Other Tropes. Metonymy and synecdoche function as indexical signs (functionally or causally related, or culturally contiguous), inviting the reader to make implicit comparisons between objects within a domain—substituting the part for the whole, the whole for the part, or one part for another (Manning 1979; McQuarrie 1989; Mick 1986).² These tropes encourage the reader to transfer, or project, the properties and meanings from one object onto another, as do metaphors.

Manning (1979) provides an example of a synecdochal illumination in realizing that narcotics agents viewed a variety of specific activities and events (i.e., creating drug transactions, surveillance, interrogation) as signifying their law enforcement role. This view explained their motivations and behaviors. In contrast, he perceived the administrative officials to view arrests, a concrete, measurable indicator, as the purpose of the organization as a metonymy. These tropes aided his insights into the contrasting perspectives of the narcotics officers and the administrators and provided an understanding of why the "case," as understood and controlled by the officers, bore little relationship to that of the organizations's official records. Manning used tropes to understand his informants and to represent his etic interpretation of the data.

We can apply the idea of interpretation as transferring meanings within and across textual domains (i.e., tropic insights) to understand the meanings of others, identify patterns in these meanings, and represent how systems of meanings reproduce culture, deciphering cultural codes.

²A number of researchers appear to use metonymy to refer to all tropic connections between referential concepts within a domain—part-for-whole, whole-for-part, part-for-part. Manning (1979) distinguishes synecdoche, formed by an expansion of meaning from part to whole (i.e., seeing a single activity as a microcosm of a larger process, a single element as indicating an entire system or structure), from metonymy, formed by a reduction of the whole to its elements, frequently more concrete, directly observable elements or indicators of more abstract concepts. I use metonymy to refer to all implied comparisons of elements or whole within a domain.

Grasping the Meaning of Others

As investigators, we attempt to understand our informants by grasping a concept, idea, or experience in their terms—emically. Such understanding represents one layer of meaning that undergirds subsequent conceptual layers (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, p. 350). We may grasp their meanings and experiences by translating between their “text” (e.g., a passage in an interview)—the target domain, the distant text—and our own experience, knowledge, and ideas—the source domain, the near one. We see points of correspondence between their experiences and our own. In doing so, we grasp others’ viewpoints not by attempting to get inside their heads (cf. Geertz 1983, pp. 57–58). Rather, we metaphorically translate their experiences into our own, drawing upon our stock of previously grasped meanings. We can recall our own experiences holistically and in context. This unified retrieval allows us to retain the context and meaning of both experiences (i.e., the target experience of the informant and our own, the source experience).

Interpretation of others’ experiences is inherently subjective. No two investigators have the same store of experience or archive of source texts for mapping onto target texts. Working in interpretive groups (Thompson et al. 1989) and staying close to the data minimize the possibility of idiosyncratic readings.

Viewing through metaphor is not mere empathy, but a deliberate act of seeking correspondences and parallels. As such, in using metaphor to understand others, we embrace both a detached and an involved point of view. That is, we remain inside and outside simultaneously (cf. Crabtree and Miller’s [1992] description of constructivists).

Seeking Patterns in Meanings

Many investigators represent the meanings and experiences of informants as forming coherent patterns. They do so by aggregating them into larger wholes, identifying unified themes by which individual informants construe their worlds and more generalized patterns that characterize their sample of informants.

Here interpretation results in recognition of resemblances in meanings—emic redundancies (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993)—across contexts, situations, projects, and individuals. The investigator sees parallel structures, similar themes, recurring elements, and common concerns across various incidents for an individual, for example, Thompson et al.’s idiographic issues (1990) and Mick and Buhl’s primary life themes (1992), or across individuals, for example, Thompson et al.’s global themes (1990) and Mick and Buhl’s shared life themes (1992).

As a result of this process, the researcher creates abstract and nomothetic constructs—synthetic representations of informants’ experiences. Such constructs,

while perhaps distant from the labels informants use, do not necessarily betray their perspectives. This feat requires the investigator to stay close to the meanings of informants, metaphorically grasping the commonalities and parallels in their idiographic perspectives. The investigator remains grounded through constant connection and reference to the data as s/he identifies correspondences (cf. Wiseman 1987).

This form of interpretation surpasses the grasping of the meanings of informants. Through pattern recognition it constructs a representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations.

Deciphering Cultural Codes

Several consumer researchers in employing ethnographic methods to interpret cultural patterns have read culture as text and used tropic devices, both explicitly and implicitly (Belk et al. 1988, 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989; Sherry 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Sherry (1990) uses an explicit metaphor in his interpretation of a flea market, describing it as a cacophonous polylogue, a “buzzing confusion” of multiple meanings. He intends this metaphor to capture the perspectives of its participants and to represent his own grasp of its nature. In a more complex metaphor, he defines the dialectical character of the flea market by its location on two dichotomous dimensions—formal/informal and festive/economic. He notes that it is the festive, informal quality that gives consumers a “decentering and recontextualizing experience” resulting in an integration of market and social relations. This integration permits the affirmation of consumer culture that is continuously threatened by commoditization and structured rationalism. Here festivity and informality serve as source domains for mapping the flea market experience.

Belk et al. (1989) use the concepts sacred and profane as a central organizing metaphor to represent many aspects of consumption. They draw parallels in the processes of defining and sustaining the definition of the sacred between consumer goods and consumption experiences (the target domain) and those of religion (the source domain). In addition, their descriptions of informant perspectives employ many metonyms; individuals invest sacred objects with transcendent and extraordinary meanings because the objects represent something else, functioning as indexical signs. Examples include a collection of rabbit replicas representing the self-identity of a woman named Bunny and a belt buckle signifying the nostalgic past for a boy who bought it as a gift for his uncle.

In their interpretation of the religious park, Heritage Village, O’Guinn and Belk (1989) point to the heaven metaphor (signed by ethereal lighting, other effects, and atmosphere of the shopping mall), the tangibilization of the idealized past and values through the metonymy

of the Victorian motif, the ironic intersection of commerce, self-indulgence, and luxury with religion, and the doctrine of prosperity as a metonym for faith.

Finally, in a rich, tropically informed reading of Thanksgiving, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) interpret the national holiday as a celebration of simple abundance expressed through consumption. Individuals participate in practices and rituals that send metonymic messages (e.g., stuffed turkey, stuffed plates, and stuffed guests). Participants may be only vaguely aware that their universal ritual enactments affirm social inclusiveness, provide linkages between past, present, and future, and preserve such particularistic distinctions as gender, age, and class. From their etic perspective the investigators view adherents to Thanksgiving consumption rituals as affirming cultural categories.

Investigators who aim to find patterns in meaning and decipher cultural codes frequently view meanings as expressed in paired opposites—Samantha's issue of completeness/incompleteness (Thompson et al. 1990), Anders' concern with having/not having status (Mick and Buhl 1992), the sacred and the profane aspects of consumption (Belk et al. 1989), and festive/economic and formal/informal dimensions of the flea market (Sherry 1990; cf. Levy 1981). Literary analysis helps us to sharpen and resolve these polar opposites, rather than view them as contradictions and inconsistencies.

Summary

Interpretation is playful, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative, and representative. Interpretive insights often spring from serendipity. I propose no guidelines for the use of interpretation. The development of the researcher-as-interpreter cannot depend on learning techniques and mechanics. Interpretive insights, especially creative ones, spring from mental activities, some of which are not accessible to the interpreter.

Stein (1983) points out that most models of creativity specify an incubation phase when the creator processes material unconsciously after a phase of intense conscious effort directed at a problem. The illumination, or conscious insight of a breakthrough, a solution, results from both the conscious and nonconscious phases. Technical training will not produce creative insights. Two activities that may aid in developing the researcher-as-interpreter are practice (cf. Hirschman and Holbrook 1986) and working in interpretive groups (Thompson et al. 1989). In addition, familiarity with literary devices and analysis may strengthen one's interpretive skills.

We can array researchers of consumer behavior and experience using the contextual, native, emergent, qualitative agenda along a continuum anchored by polar types. Those approaching one pole use procedures of analysis amenable to linear description; those at the other employ a more intuitive, holistic grasp of data. These poles overlap with two styles that Crabtree and

Miller (1992, pp. 17–28) describe. In the editing style the researcher identifies discrete units of texts, sorts and organizes them into categories, and “explores the categories and determines the patterns and themes that connect them.” Bergadaà (1990) probably best represents this pole.

In the immersion/crystallization style researchers alternately immerse themselves in and reflect on the text until they intuitively grasp its meaning. Sherry (1990), Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), and Thompson et al. (1990) probably best represent this pole. Some research falls more toward the center of the continuum. Belk et al.'s (1989) investigation of consumption using the sacred and profane metaphor combines literary insights with systematic analytical procedures.

The majority of articles in the *Journal of Consumer Research* using this agenda employ a style that is more analytical than the literary interpretive style. These styles represent different orientations to inference and how investigators map their way through data. Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) note that all researchers adopt a stance or sequence of stances toward data that alternately permits immersion in and distance from data. Analysis as data manipulation permits distancing. Interpretation as understanding the meanings of others requires immersion. However, interpretation as seeking patterns in meanings (developing nomothetic constructs) and as deciphering cultural codes represents a distancing. In these interpretive processes the researcher engages a theoretical scheme that is removed from the perspectives of informants (cf. Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, p. 350). Styles of research reflect the type of stance that one adopts toward one's data.

EVALUATING RESEARCH

Can we specify criteria for evaluating research using the analytical and interpretive styles? If so, should these criteria be any different from those used to evaluate other styles of research, including positivist? I frame these as questions which focus on the final product, the textual representation of the research.

Usefulness. Does the work aid in furthering inquiry? Even if we believe with Geertz (1973) that the goal of such research is to enrich human discourse, not to build a formal body of knowledge, we also value empirical work that helps us accumulate ideas, concepts, and frameworks that promote our understanding. We might use two tests to assess a study on this issue: (1) Do investigators make connections between their representations and the central issues, problems, and debates in the field? and (2) Are the constructs, ideas, and framework applicable, transferable, (Wallendorf and Belk 1989) to other research settings, contexts, and domains? Do the inferences and the description of their generation provide a way of looking at phenomena that extend beyond the specific domain studied?

Innovation. Do the constructs, ideas, and framework provide new and creative ways of looking at experience and behavior? Do they transform our conceptualizations? Is the representation new (cf. Hunt 1989)?

Integration. Does the representation achieve a synthesis, an emergent integration, a holistic framework (Strike and Posner 1983) that goes beyond the identification of common themes in the data? Is the representation more than an assemblage of inferences or reporting of regularities in emic perspectives (cf. Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, p. 350)? Is there a unifying idea, concept, or framework that unites the observations and inferences?

Resonance. Is the work enlightening, resonating, evocative, and sensitizing to us (see Glaser and Strauss 1967)? Does the representation enrich our understandings about identical, similar and even dissimilar phenomena?

Adequacy. Is there a sufficient basis presented for assessing how grounded in the data the representation is? Even if we assume that many interpretations, or readings, of a text are possible, we can admit that some have greater evidentiary claim than others. Ultimately, for all research, we evaluate the quality of the ideas and the extent to which we trust them as representations.

Wallendorf and Belk's (1989) criteria for assessing trustworthiness extend those of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and parallel those of positivist inquiry. We could usefully apply the additional criteria of usefulness, innovation, integration, resonance, and adequacy to positivist inquiry, although their salience may differ.

CONCLUSION

Bagozzi (1984) contends that knowledge development depends on theory construction and recommends that greater attention be paid to the process of theory formation—particularly the structural aspects of theory construction and the linkages between empirical and conceptual domains.

This article has focused on how researchers using qualitative techniques move between data and inferences, conceptualizations, and representations of data. My purpose has been to promote more explicit description of and reflection about the processes we use to connect the empirical and conceptual domains in research employing qualitative data.

We can describe our manipulation of data through the seven analytic operations, reporting how we arrived at inference and conclusions. We can access and use tropic insights to generate interpretations and represent them to our readers. As Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) note, inference requires researchers to engage a conceptual scheme, imposing it upon data, or developing one that accounts for data. More explicit attention to our procedures of inference—analysis and interpretation—encourages us to think about the connections be-

tween the empirical and theoretical domains, about the products of our inferential labors, and how they are linked to broader theoretical concerns in the field.

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