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## AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN MARKETING AND CONSUMER RESEARCH

*Autoetnografia e experiência subjetiva em marketing e pesquisa do consumidor*

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### ABSTRACT

Marketing and consumer research is often associated with the methods of natural science applied to experimental and survey data, but there are also strong traditions of interpretive and qualitative work that draw on disciplines such as qualitative sociology, ethnography and anthropology. This paper outlines one such approach, autoethnography, in order to consider its wider adoption in marketing and consumer research. The paper refers to multidisciplinary sources along with autoethnographic studies published in American and European marketing and consumer research journals. It concludes by suggesting that a stronger understanding of autoethnographic research principles could broaden the scope, reach and relevance of marketing and consumer research.

**KEYWORDS:** Autoethnography, marketing, consumer research.

### RESUMO

Embora as pesquisas em marketing e comportamento do consumidor sejam frequentemente associadas a métodos das ciências naturais aplicados a dados experimentais e de *survey*, também há fortes tradições de trabalhos qualitativos e interpretativos que se baseiam em disciplinas como a sociologia qualitativa, etnografia e antropologia. Este artigo trata de uma dessas abordagens, a autoetnografia, a fim de considerar sua adoção mais ampla em marketing e em pesquisa do consumidor. O artigo faz uso de, e se refere a, fontes multidisciplinares, juntamente com estudos autoetnográficos, publicados em periódicos norte-americanos e europeus de marketing e pesquisa do consumidor. Ao final do artigo sugere-se que uma maior compreensão dos princípios de investigação autoetnográfica podem ampliar o escopo, alcance e relevância da pesquisa em marketing e sobre o consumidor.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Autoetnografia, marketing, pesquisa do consumidor.

## 1 Introduction: autoethnography in social research

Marketing constitutes the experience of daily life for billions of people in developing and developed nations. As consumers, and as producers and professionals, we experience marketing in many ways, both good and bad. Yet, more than a century after the first university courses in marketing appeared in the USA (Hackley, 2009a), it remains unusual to encounter the subjective experiences of producers or consumers in published academic marketing research studies. How does the experience of marketing make people feel in different situations? What are the implications of marketing for social class, freedom of opportunity, identity, and quality of life? What are the barriers to better or more useful marketing? Indeed, should we have less marketing, or marketing of a different kind? Such questions could often benefit from the subjective accounts of consumers, managers, and producers, but these are often seen only at arm's length through a survey, an experiment, or though qualitative research that does not necessarily report the participants' original words. The voice of the consumer, in particular, tends to be erased in much academic marketing research. This paper assumes that the subjective, personal account of experience, called autoethnography, has value as a form of research data. It further assumes that autoethnographies can form part of a response from academic marketing research to criticisms that it lacks relevance to practice and that it fails to connect with other social and human sciences (Hackley, 2009a).

Broadly understood as the use of first-person, subjective accounts of experiences, feelings and memories as research data in the arts and human sciences, autoethnography combines elements of biography and autobiography with fieldwork techniques such as participant observation, phenomenological interviews and diaries. There are many variations of autoethnography as Denzin (2014) notes, including, but not limited to, "meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2009)... collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013)... duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012) collaborative writing (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon and Davies, 2011) ethnodrama (Saldana, 2011)... sociopoetics (Pelias, 2011)... ethnographic fiction, polyvocal texts and mystories (Richardson, 2000; Ulmer, 1989) (p.vii).

Denzin (2014) locates autoethnography in a tradition inspired by C. Wright Mills (1959) and J-P Sartre (1963) because it liberates the sociological imagination and re-connects the personal with the social. Reed-Danahay (1997) positions it as a postmodernist turn in ethnography that reflects the problematisation of the unified self and a collapse of realism and objectivity. This places autoethnography in a position to challenge the epistemological assumptions of positivistic scientific reporting. Pratt (1992) emphasises its critical potential, referring to the voice autoethnography can give to the marginalised, giving it a liberatory quality. Allsop (2002) emphasises autoethnographic writing's self-reflexivity, in a study of the way immigration changes the notions of being home or not home, while Tiwsakul and Hackley (2012) take the same theme of immigration/emigration in a collaborative autoethnography to explore the shifting sense of identity of the immigrant and how that marginalisation is expressed and identity re-ordered through selective consumption.

Within marketing and consumer research, probably the best-known approach has been Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) (Holbrook, 1995) which uses introspection as a source of consumer research data, as in Gould's (1991) 'introspective-praxis' approach to studying his own drives and their influence on his consumption behaviour. Narrative forms of autoethnography, categorised by Gould (1995) as 'extrospection' as opposed to introspection, have also appeared in the marketing and consumer research literature, as discussed below. Narrative autoethnography broadly refers to the subjective personal account of social and historical events, and differs from SPI in that it articulates the

subjective voice in a social and historical context, integrating internal thoughts and emotions with accounts of events that are external to the writer.

Autoethnographies differ from conventional social research reports in that they do not rhetorically position the speaker outside the text as a neutral observer. Rather, they express social research as a person-centred phenomenon, and in a humanistic spirit. The stories told by those experiencing marketing are, in and of themselves, treated as having value. Below, we briefly discuss some examples of published autoethnography in the marketing subject area, before outlining some of the controversies and criticisms of the approach.

## 2 Autoethnography in Marketing and Consumer Research

As the logic of marketing practice shifted from delivering utility to mobilising meaning (Levy, 1959), the inner rationalisations and subjective experience of the consumer have assumed greater importance as a topic for social and managerial study. In postmodern and poststructuralist traditions of marketing and consumer research, consumption is mooted not as an exercise in rational choice with the end of utility maximisation, but as a symbolic exercise of liberatory postmodernism (Fuat and Venkatesh, 1995) through which consumers' use and display of brands symbolically constructs a subjective sense of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Autoethnography is well-placed to elicit the subjective construction of meaning through acquisition and display of brands.

The espousal of anthropological principles in brand management is regularly recycled as a putatively new trend, but the informal use of consumer ethnography as opposed to formal survey data in marketing is far from new, dating from the origin of sports marketing with Adi Dassler and the origins of Adidas (case discussed in Hackley and Hackley, 2015). Academic marketing has lagged some way behind marketing practice in its use of research methods, even though anthropological approaches to the symbolism of branding have been established in the field for more than fifty years (Levy, 1959; see also Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). For example, two of the most prominent academic marketing and brand consultants, Grant McCracken (e.g. 1986) and Douglas Holt (2004) are trained anthropologists who have developed their cultural ideas of marketing over several decades.

Autoethnographic research has made inroads into marketing and consumer research with some landmark studies (especially Gould 1991; and Holbrook, 1995, as noted above) and a lineage of subsequent contributions, including some based on Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) (Shankar, 2000; Holbrook, 2005), and others on narrative autoethnography (Belk, 1996; Brown, 1998; Hackley, 2006), collaborative autoethnography (Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2012) teleethnography Sherry (1995), and ethnomusicological ethnography (Olsen and Gould, 2008), amongst others. There are many more instances of qualitative studies in business and management research that use elements of biographical or autobiographical data, such as the life history method deployed to explore advertising creatives' professional lives in McLeod's (2009) study, or the use of personal subjective vignettes to give reflexive context to a study of top advertising agencies' working practices (Hackley, 2000). The small but distinctive contribution of autoethnography in marketing and consumer research was celebrated in 2012 with a special issue of the *Journal of Business Research* edited by Stephen Gould and including papers such as Brown (2012a), Wohlfeil and Whelan (2012), Minowa, Visconti and Maclaran (2012), Patterson (2012) and Roberts (2012). In a more recent publication, Hackley et al. (2015) have used the subjective personal stories of young people to gain insight into the role of alcohol and excessive drinking in their social lives.

In marketing and consumer research, as well as the wider realm of social science, autoethnography has been seen as a development of postmodern (Brown, 1995; 1997) and

experiential (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) research that challenged not only the ontological assumptions of the dominant neo-positivistic natural science research and research reporting model but also its writing conventions. As Brown (2005) has noted in his literary analysis of the writing style of some of the leading figures of academic marketing and consumer research, the success of the marketing subject field is nothing if not a triumph of style over substance. This is not to denigrate the contributions of its seminal gurus- their writing was punchy and compelling, anecdotal and personal, and, moreover, widely read. In his autobiographical essay on the disciplinary implications of marketing writing, Brown (2012b) laments the stilted scientism that renders so much current research in the field unreadable, and unread, at least by non-academics. He argues that since marketing's turn to a natural science model of research in the mid-1960s, its research papers have become more technical and more formulaic, with dense citation, sophisticated statistical models, and little personality. As a result, practitioners do not read them anymore, and academic marketing and consumer research operates in a performative silo, making solipsistic and unconvincing claims of connection to the worlds of marketing managers and consumers.

Brown's (2012b) focus on writing is not an issue of 'mere' style. Popular textbook marketing has developed a set of stylistic conventions with which it is closely identified (Hackley, 2003) and which have been key to its growth as a global force in university education. Arguably, marketing and consumer research have become part of the ideological language-games of economic neoliberalism (Hackley, 2009b). The implicit conventions in marketing writing that language can be used to represent the concrete world, and that research writing in the field refers to a real world that lies beyond the text, are challenged fundamentally by autoethnographies. As Deetz (1998) has noted, philosophy of science debates around method that focus on epistemology and the nature of (social) scientific knowledge often ignore the more fundamental issue of ontology. There remain many deep questions about the nature of human experience and knowledge. Autoethnographies and other interpretive methods can open up, problematise and engage with such questions in ways that are invariably provisional but can be personally and culturally resonant. In positivistic social science, the world is a finished thing that can be placed under investigation. In interpretive social sciences such as autoethnography, the world is continually made and re-made, through the ways in which we describe it.

### 3 Writing and Autoethnography

Whilst autoethnography emerged from anthropology and ethnography, a more literary version of the subjective perspective has also proved popular. Creative Non-Fiction (CNF) also called literary journalism (Gutkind, 2006: and for a discussion in marketing research, Hackley, 2007) foregrounds the autoethnographic virtue of trying to write in an engaging and compelling way to connect with the reader. Writing craft is central to success in academic and practical consumer research (Brown, 2005) yet it receives little attention, even though it is can itself be a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Broadly a form of narrative ethnography, CNF is not typically included amongst ethnographic work, and neither has it made major contributions to marketing and consumer research. However, it can help to illuminate some important issues. For its critics, too much output under the CNF label is neither good writing nor useful social commentary: as with autoethnography, it can be self-indulgent and turgid. For enthusiasts, though, it can be transforming for reader and author and can contribute to a better understanding of the world and of the person in the world. It has been described as a hybrid of literature and non-fiction, at its best it is characterised by a vivid expositional style, a literary voice, uses of narrative techniques such as scene-setting, and a tendency to show rather than tell. In CNF, as with autoethnography more generally, the standards of truth or verisimilitude are autobiographical and the distinction of fiction/nonfiction is dispersed amongst writerly values of sincerity, historical truth, subjective truth, and fictional truth (Denzin, 2014, p.13).

The first-person account of subjective experience written in a literary style is a popular genre of non-fiction writing in work by writers like Knut Hamsun, Laurie Lee, Jack Kerouac and Pete McCarthy. Important characteristics of the structure of the autobiographical autoethnographic text include an origin story, family, gender, ethnicity, class: and the epiphany, the transformational moment or event which, at the time or retrospectively, appears to be loaded with meaning (Denzin, 2014). The epiphany reflects Turner's (1986) concept of liminality, in which a person occupies a space and time in which personal change is imminent, but not yet realized. In Turner's (1986) oft-repeated term, at the liminal moment the subject is 'betwixt and between', neither occupying their previous place in the social structure, nor yet elevated to a new one.

#### 4 Criticisms and Risks of Autoethnography

Autoethnographic studies remain relatively rare in marketing and consumer research partly because their critical orientation is perceived to be professionally risky in intellectually conservative business schools (and top marketing and consumer research journals) that are firmly wedded to a natural science model of social research. Autoethnography offers a striking counterpoint to, and, an implied criticism of, the paradigmatic norms of studied objectivity and statistical generalization that obtain in business research. Holbrook (1995) warned PhD students and early career academics that using SPI, his version of autoethnography, might well incur the displeasure of senior colleagues paradigmatically opposed to its epistemology, its ontology, its tone, and its choices of subject matter. Gould (2008), another pioneer in the field, recognises that his noted 1991 study of his own sexual drives published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* was regarded as highly controversial by many disciplinary colleagues, and indeed, still is, with long term implications for Gould's career and academic reputation. Others, such as Brown (1999) acknowledged its notoriety (p.4) but thought it a work of genius. The trenchant criticisms of autoethnography in consumer research, often focusing on the issue of data validity (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993: see Gould, 1995), remain a point of contention in academic business and management research. Nonetheless, its subversive aura also makes autoethnography attractive to critically inclined business and management academics.

The domination of a natural science model of research in academic marketing dates from the Ford and Carnegie reports in the USA in the 1960s, and consumer research has split off from marketing to become a separate professional field, even though the distinction is artificial. Academic marketing was founded a century ago on the principle that it was the discipline of consumer insight (Hackley, 2009b). Within the academic field of consumer research, a parallel split has now developed between the dominant experimental paradigm and a marginalised interpretive paradigm, much of the latter grouping being loosely represented under the label Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

The subjective aspect of autoethnography attracts its most severe criticisms. To list a few examples, it is said to be "too artful...not scientific...for having no theory, no concepts, no hypotheses...for not being sufficiently rigorous, theoretical or analytical", and, if more criticism were needed, autoethnographers are criticised for using "small samples...biased data...and bad writing" (Denzin, 2014, p.70). These criticisms arise from within the natural science paradigm and hence autoethnography cannot engage with them on their own terms. Rather, autoethnographies have to be judged on literary criteria. For autoethnographers, reliability and validity are seen in literary terms: reliability refers to the writer/narrator's credibility, and validity invokes the reader's response: is the account convincing, coherent, and emotionally resonant? The paradigmatic divide between art and science is heightened in autoethnography, and quasi-positivist criticisms of autoethnography as scientific method are ultimately irreconcilable with its ontology, aims and goals.

Autoethnography, then, stands in direct contrast to the conventions of third-person objectivity, positivistic reductionism and statistical generalization more familiar to readers of business, management and organisation research studies. A goal of autoethnography is to use the subjectivity of the author as a bridge to the reader and by so doing to re-constitute some element of life or the world in a way that resonates at a personal level. Consequently, quantitative social scientists often see it as belonging in the realm of art and literature rather than social science, echoing the positivism expressed by A.J.Ayer (1936) who argued that if a phenomenon cannot be measured, then it belongs in the realm of metaphysics rather than in empirical science. In contrast to this view, social scientists who prefer working in interpretive traditions feel that autoethnography generates rich ethnographic insight as opposed to narrow generalisation. For Deetz (1980), though, the goal of insight is not incompatible with science, since it is not "...a statement of the irrational in contrast to the rational nor the subjective over the objective" (p.7) but, rather, it recontextualises knowledge as a means, not as an end. Interpretive research generates insight that is not positivistic but critical and transformational, and yet it does not necessarily stand in direct opposition to positivistic knowledge. Deetz (1980) suggests that knowledge and insight need not be mutually incommensurable.

## 5 Concluding Comments

For many social scientists, science is the task of gaining agreement on general principles, even though this may entail an order of reductionism. It matters not that such research fails to capture the human condition, because that is the task of art. On such a view, interpretive social science methods like autoethnography confuse the two ends, the scientific, and the humanistic. An alternative view is that interpretive work can re-inscribe social science with a sense of meaning that has been lost in so much of our self-referential published research, and that can re-connect it to culture. Autoethnography represents one such approach as an attempt to invest social research with meaning, humanity and zest, capturing both the scientific value of truth, and the human need for meaning.

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