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Source: *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Special Issue: Recent Developments in Survey Research (Aug., 1977), pp. 353-364

Published by: [American Marketing Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3150774>

Accessed: 28/06/2011 14:46

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Use of the focus group technique is widespread in qualitative marketing research. The technique is considered here from a philosophy of science perspective which points to a confusion of three distinct approaches to focus groups in current commercial practice. An understanding of the differences among these approaches, and of the complex nature of qualitative research, is shown to have important implications for the use of focus groups.

Focus Groups and the Nature of Qualitative Marketing Research

INTRODUCTION

There have come to be two kinds of commercial marketing research. One is commonly called qualitative, the other quantitative. For most marketers, qualitative research is defined by the absence of numerical measurement and statistical analysis. Qualitative research provides an in-depth, if necessarily subjective, understanding of the consumer. In practice, qualitative research has become almost synonymous with the focus group interview. This technique involves convening a group of respondents, usually eight to 10, for a more or less open-ended discussion about a product. The discussion "moderator" makes sure that topics of marketing significance are brought up. The research report summarizes what was said, and perhaps draws inferences from what was said and left unsaid, in the discussion.

One can detect in several quarters conflicting feelings about focus groups. The results do seem useful to management. But there is concern about the subjectivity of the technique, and a feeling that any given result might have been different with different respondents, a different moderator, or even a different setting. Most commercial reports contain a cryptic statement acknowledging this conflict. The statement cautions that focus group research should be regarded as preliminary. Results should not be generalized without further quantitative research. Most users

probably have a vague sense of uneasiness with the technique. As aptly put by Wells [18, p. 2-145], "How can anything so bad be good?"

In addition to the general uneasiness, numerous procedural questions surround the use of focus groups. The following are typical questions.

- Should focus group research ideally be generalized through additional quantitative research?
- When should focus group research be used?
- How many focus groups constitute a project?
- What is the role of interaction among the group members?
- Should focus groups be composed of homogeneous or heterogeneous people?
- What expertise and credentials should a moderator have?
- How important is the moderator's interviewing technique?
- Should management observe focus group sessions?
- What should a focus group report look like?

These questions currently are debated by marketing researchers on the basis of their professional experiences.

Neither the conflict between the apparent utility of focus groups and the reservations expressed about them, nor the typical procedural questions have been the subject of systematic argument. The marketing literature has been of little help to qualitative marketing researchers. There have been occasional descriptions of applications [e.g., 7] and expositions of techniques [e.g., 2, 10, 17], but this work has not established a general framework for thinking about focus group

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research. The purpose of this article is to provide such a framework through a critical inquiry into the fundamental nature of qualitative marketing research.

Qualitative marketing research is considered first from a philosophy of science perspective. This perspective is not used simply to hold up the focus group technique to a list of ideal criteria for scientific methods. The author fully realizes that many practitioners are not interested in being "scientists." They are, however, interested in developing knowledge from research. The philosophy of science provides a valuable perspective on knowledge—not just scientific knowledge, but the entire realm of knowledge. The point of the philosophy of science perspective developed here is to analyze the type of knowledge sought by qualitative research, be it scientific knowledge or otherwise, to determine what this implies about the use of the focus group technique. The implications of seeking either nonscientific or scientific knowledge through focus group research are not well understood.

Though many practitioners might avoid the "scientist" label, the distinction is not as simple as it may seem. There are actually three different approaches to focus group research in current practice. Drawing upon the philosophy of science perspective developed, this article shows that each of these approaches reflects a different kind of knowledge being sought. Though none of the three approaches seeks scientific knowledge in its strictest form, two are meant to yield knowledge which is in some sense scientific.

A PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

What comes to mind when most people think of research is the image of "scientific" research. This image is somewhat fuzzy, and it is not easy to articulate. Thus it may help to begin with a consensus view of what science is. Science is a particular way of trying to understand the real world. For social scientists the real world is the full physical complexity of objects and behaviors. But the real world is much too complex to be understood in and of itself. At the heart of science is the process of conceptualization, which seeks to *represent* the real world in a simple enough way to allow understanding. Scientific constructs are abstracted forms and represent only limited aspects of real-world objects and behaviors. If scientific constructs mirrored the full complexity of the real world, one could no more understand science than one can directly understand the real world.

Constructs are simplifications and idealizations of reality. They are, in short, abstractions of the real world. Some may seem more "real" than others—say, "taste buds" as opposed to "attitudes"—but they are all abstractions; they "exist" only within the realm of scientific discourse. Scientific theory consists of constructs and the interrelationships among them [5]. The value of this theory depends on the fact that abstract conceptualization is not a one-way process.

As depicted in Figure 1, scientific conceptualization must work in reverse, too. One must be able to use constructs to interpret the real world, to determine whether real objects and behaviors possess the properties and relationships embodied in scientific theory [cf. 19]. This is the business of theory testing. It is the most visible part of science, for it entails all of the methods and procedures associated with "being scientific." Basically, these methods are simply systematic procedures for determining whether a theory is consistent with the workings of the real world. If consistency is detected, the theory is retained, though it is not considered proved; otherwise the theory is modified. The uniqueness of science is in the logical rigor and documentation employed in testing scientific constructs and relationships against the real world.

Let us return to the nature of scientific constructs. An important question is, how do we develop scientific constructs? Where do they come from? In all of science, the origin of constructs is somewhat problematic [cf. 11]. Part of the answer seems to be that good theory spawns its own constructs (the best example being particle physics). There is also the process of modifying constructs on the basis of empirical evidence. Still, there must be an external origin at some point in theory development, and this origin is the world of everyday thought and experience. As shown in Figure 1, the world of everyday thought is separate from scientific discourse. It is composed of the terms and ordinary language that people use to give meaning to the world in their everyday lives. As such, its function is analogous to that of science. It allows one to interpret the real world by use of simplified ideas. The only difference is that scientific constructs are supposed to be more powerful and to be subject to more rigorous and critical verification than are everyday ideas. Although everyday thought may initially supply ideas for scientific constructs,

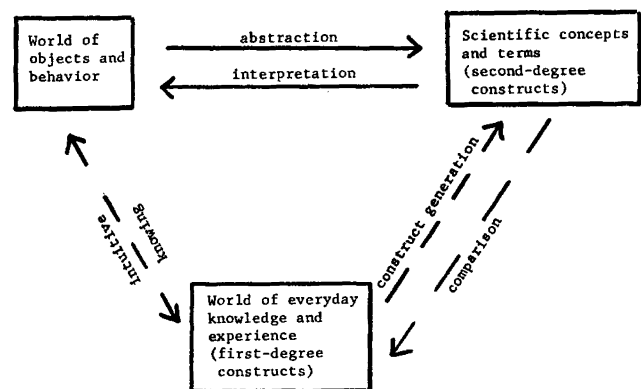


Figure 1
OVERVIEW OF A PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE
PERSPECTIVE

the two types of knowledge are independent. Scientific knowledge is subject to its own rules of evidence. But this independence is not absolute. Modern philosophers of science agree that all knowledge is highly presumptive [8, 13, 16]. No single hypothesis can be examined without at the same time assuming the truth of the bulk of all other knowledge, both scientific and everyday.

Neither scientific explanations of consumer behavior nor explanations based on everyday knowledge can be proved. All knowledge reduces to the choice between alternative explanations. It is thus entirely reasonable to compare scientific and everyday explanations. The truly scientific explanation may be expected to have advantages, but it is not automatically superior. In the case of social science, these advantages are seen by many as more assumed than real. Such considerations have led Campbell [6] to argue for the cross-validation of social science by qualitative common-sense explanation. This step rarely is taken, and is probably generally considered to be "unscientific." Nonetheless, some form of comparison between scientific and everyday explanation should be part of a sophisticated view of science, and this relationship accordingly appears in Figure 1.

An example may clarify the nature of this comparison. Suppose that a researcher postulates an attitude process (scientific) explanation for a brand choice which to most consumers is so low in involvement as to be, say, strictly a function of shelf-facings. The foregoing discussion suggests that the researcher should reconsider his attitude process explanation. The everyday explanation certainly does not prove that the scientific explanation is wrong, but it does indicate the need for increased skepticism.

The overall conclusion emerging from this discussion is that the philosophy of science clearly implies a separation, though not an impenetrable boundary, between everyday and scientific discourse. Explanatory concepts of the everyday kind are sometimes called "first-degree constructs" (cf. Fig. 1). They are based on the social construction of reality by a set of actors; they are imparted to a person as a consequence of socialization within a culture. In contrast, second-degree constructs belong to the realm of science. They are supposed to be highly abstract and to be subject to scientific methods, but they are no less a construction of reality. It is not "unscientific" to compare the everyday and the scientific.

The categorization of knowledge as scientific or everyday has strong implications for the division between quantitative and qualitative marketing research. Quantitative research commonly is associated, at least implicitly, with the realm of science. This connotation is not always accurate, however. Actually, there are two approaches to quantitative research. What can be referred to as the descriptive approach supplies numerical information relevant to everyday,

first-degree constructs. Demographic analyses, such as breakdowns of consumption figures by age, are a prime example. This research, in itself, bears more upon everyday than scientific explanation. Age, used purely descriptively, is not a scientific construct. Quantitative research which does seek scientific explanation can be referred to simply as the scientific approach. Here, quantitative means much more than merely working with numerical amounts or rating scales. It implies the use of second-degree constructs and causal hypotheses which are subjected to scientific methods. The methods in common use are the experiment, some types of cross-sectional and panel surveys, and time series analysis. Scientific quantitative marketing research, in sum, aspires to the scientific knowledge depicted in the philosophy of science perspective.

Qualitative marketing research similarly cannot be restricted to a literal definition of "doing research without numbers." *Unlike the case of quantitative research, the relationship of qualitative research to the scientific and everyday knowledge dichotomy is very ambiguous.* An underlying confusion about this relationship has led to three approaches being lumped under the label of "qualitative marketing research." The three approaches should be kept distinct. Each

Table 1
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH APPROACHES DISCUSSED

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Type of knowledge desired</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
<i>Quantitative</i> Descriptive	Everyday	To find numerical patterns related to everyday concepts (e.g., consumption breakdowns by age)
Scientific	Scientific	To use numerical measurement to test scientific constructs and causal hypotheses
<i>Qualitative</i> Exploratory	Prescientific	To generate scientific constructs and to validate them against everyday experience
Clinical	Quasiscientific	To use second-degree scientific constructs without numerical measurement (i.e., clinical judgments)
Phenomenological	Everyday	To understand the everyday experience of the consumer

represents a different version of the relationship between qualitative research and the partition of scientific and everyday knowledge.

The first two approaches seek knowledge that is on the boundary between scientific and everyday, whereas the third clearly seeks everyday knowledge. The following sections describe the approaches in turn. A lack of understanding of the differences among them is responsible not only for much of the uneasiness surrounding qualitative marketing research, but also for misuses of this research.

THE EXPLORATORY APPROACH

Qualitative marketing research frequently is undertaken with the belief that it is provisional in nature. Focus groups often are conducted before the fielding of a large sample survey. This exploratory approach can take one of two somewhat different forms. Researchers may be interested in simply "pilot testing" certain operational aspects of anticipated quantitative research. Their objective might be to check the wording of questions or the instructions accompanying product placements. Alternatively, researchers may have the much more ambitious goal of using qualitative research to generate or select theoretical ideas and hypotheses which they plan to verify with future quantitative research. For this purpose, focus groups are usually less structured; respondents are allowed to talk more freely with each other.

When focus groups are conducted in anticipation of scientific quantitative research, their purpose is really to stimulate the thinking of the researchers. They represent an explicit attempt to use everyday thought to generate or operationalize second-degree constructs and scientific hypotheses (cf. Fig. 1). Though the subject of exploratory qualitative research is everyday knowledge, the knowledge desired is best described as prescientific. The rationale of exploratory focus groups is that considering a problem in terms of everyday explanation will somehow facilitate a subsequent scientific approach. Focus groups are a way of accomplishing the construct-generation process shown in Figure 1.

As was noted, however, the process of generating second-degree constructs from first-degree ones, of moving from the everyday to the scientific, is very poorly understood. The philosophy of science supplies no precise guidelines. Nor has any thought been given to this process in the marketing research literature. This is not to say that the exploratory approach is not worthwhile, only that it is being attempted without benefit of any well-developed ideas of how to do it. The most relevant sources to which qualitative marketing researchers might turn are sociologists concerned with the notion of "grounded theory." This term refers to theory systematically generated from qualitative as well as quantitative research as opposed to theory generated by its own internal logic. The

idea is that "grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses" [9, p. 3]. In other words, such theory is developed within the context of its application. The aim of the exploratory approach might well be described as grounded theory.

Much qualitative research follows the exploratory approach even though it never leads to quantitative research. The putative second-degree constructs and hypotheses developed from focus groups frequently are not subjected later to scientific methods. Most often this omission is due to the high costs of a second quantitative stage. In such cases, concern commonly is expressed about the risk of generalizing from the small samples of qualitative research. But there is much more at risk than sample generalizability. What happens with this truncated exploratory approach is that what is still essentially everyday knowledge (that of the researchers and focus group participants) is cast in ostensibly scientific terms and treated as if it were a scientific finding, instead of being at best a prescientific starting point. The problem is that this knowledge has not been subjected to scientific methods for any sample; to assume that it is scientific is risky indeed.

Exploratory qualitative research which is not followed by a quantitative stage is not necessarily useless. Taken as everyday knowledge (as will be shown in discussion of the third approach), it may well be very useful. The mistake is to represent prescientific everyday explanation as fully scientific but merely lacking sample generalizability.

One final point with regard to the exploratory approach is almost never recognized in marketing research practice. The approach concentrates solely on the construct-generation relationship from the everyday to the scientific (cf. Fig. 1). Of equal importance in terms of the philosophy of science is the comparison relationship from the scientific to the everyday. It is useful to think of this relationship as cross-validating scientific explanations against everyday ones. If the two explanations are not consistent, a choice must be made. Given the current development of social science, this choice sometimes will favor the everyday explanation. That is, consumers' explanations will sometimes be favored over theoretical hypotheses.

Thus, it is potentially misleading to assume that qualitative research must always be provisional. It is also desirable to conduct independent exploratory qualitative research. In this way, scientific explanations can be compared with everyday ones. Contrary to current practice, it is just as appropriate to conduct focus groups *after* a quantitative project as before it. Scientific explanations should be treated as provisional also.

The exploratory approach to qualitative research seeks prescientific knowledge. This knowledge is not meant to have scientific status. It is meant to be a precursor to scientific knowledge. Its status is ulti-

mately rooted in the creativity of the individual. The exploratory approach could be adopted to compare scientific with everyday explanations. In this case, the objective would be not prescientific, but everyday knowledge.

THE CLINICAL APPROACH

Whereas the exploratory approach seeks to generate scientific constructs from everyday thought and to compare scientific and everyday explanations, a second approach expressly attempts to conduct qualitative research as a scientific endeavor. With this approach qualitative methods are viewed as an alternative to scientific quantitative ones. In marketing this approach most clearly reflects the perspective of clinical psychology. A "clinical" heritage has deeply influenced qualitative marketing research practitioners, both those with and without actual clinical experience.

Two premises underlie the clinical approach. One is that the constructs of everyday thought are often misleading as explanations of behavior. The explanations people can verbalize, by which they can describe themselves, commonly conceal the real underlying causes of behavior. Self-reports, the grist of many quantitative techniques, cannot be taken at face value. Indeed, the actual causes of behavior may be at least partly unconscious. Self-reports are filtered through a variety of defense mechanisms such as rationalization and thus do not directly reflect these unconscious determinants.

The second premise follows directly on the first. It is that the real causes of behavior must be detected through the sensitivity and "clinical judgment" of a specially trained analyst. The usual *tools* of quantitative research are not adequate for this purpose. Clinical judgment is an analytical skill of somewhat nebulous dimensions, though much faith is placed in it. It is an ability developed largely from practical experience for diagnosing the major causes of behavior from the complex overdetermination of both unconscious and conscious causes. Although it is basically an art, as is the medical model in general, it is widely held to be scientific because clinical judgment is supposed to take scientifically valid theory as a starting point and as a problem-solving framework. The clinical approach thus attempts to make use of scientific knowledge without being bound by quantitative methods of analysis.

The clinical approach was most obviously in vogue in marketing during the ascendancy of "motivation research." The wide variety of qualitative techniques (e.g., projective tests and free association) employed by motivation researchers were intended to provide informational input for clinical judgment. The popularity of many of these techniques has now receded. Though perhaps not as visible, the clinical approach is definitely alive, having largely assumed such names as "depth research." The statement perhaps most

indicative of the present clinical approach is Goldman's [10] description of the "depth" focus group interview. The term "depth" expressly "implies seeking information that is more profound than is usually accessible at the level of interpersonal relationships" [10, p. 63]. Moreover, the depth focus group "defies routine analysis" and an approach similar to the way "psychotherapy sessions are analyzed" [10, p. 68] should be used. In other words, focus groups provide a qualitative source for clinical judgment.

The clinical approach has led to some excesses in marketing. The nature of clinical judgment is such that faulty or even far-fetched explanations may be accepted too easily by uncritical lay clients. This problem apparently has led some marketers to conclude that the clinical approach is inherently unscientific. On the contrary, put in proper perspective, it is the most scientific of the three approaches to qualitative marketing research. One must be very careful, however, about the relationship between the clinical approach and the partition of scientific and everyday knowledge. The clinical approach is not scientific in precisely the same sense as scientific quantitative research. Clinical judgment does not conform to the rules of scientific evidence. But, ideally, such judgments are based on second-degree constructs and scientific explanations.

The depth focus group interview is not meant to be (or at least ought not to be represented as) a scientific method. It is merely a device for obtaining the kind of information useful for clinical judgment. The group discussion is intended to stimulate the participants to produce relatively unguarded comments. This is why Goldman stresses the creation of rapport among participants by the moderator. The claim of the clinical approach to being scientific rests not on this method, but on the presumed scientific knowledge of the analyst. This knowledge underlies his clinical judgment and presumably renders it more scientific. Explanations developed in this way might best be described as quasiscientific.

Because the clinical approach assumes the existence of scientific knowledge as a basis for clinical judgment, it is crucial to appreciate the nature of the scientific theories favored by clinicians. Though any scientific theory could logically be treated clinically, the concern of clinicians is with the underlying causes of behavior which are not directly available from self-reports. This concern is what leads them to the need for clinical judgment as a means of scientific interpretation. The theories they employ are thus psychodynamic ones which postulate constructs that are personal to the individual and develop over the course of his life history. These theories are at root *intrasubjective*. They explain in terms of individual, subjective experience. Given this theoretical basis, it is reasonable that the depth focus group interview should concentrate on causing participants to reveal their inner experience

in a way that is susceptible to clinical judgment and therefore clinical scientific interpretation.

Contrary to what one might expect, the most troublesome aspect of the clinical approach is not the use of the depth focus group, or even more exotic devices such as TAT pictures. The major cause for concern is the scientific knowledge on which clinicians rely. It is fairly well known that psychodynamic theories can be classified only questionably as scientific knowledge. They have not been subject to extensive scientific verification, nor are they even thought to be in testable form. The clinical approach is thus at best a calculated risk, but a risk that could pay off. More disturbing, and this is less well known, clinicians frequently draw more from everyday knowledge in making judgments than from psychodynamic theory. London [14, p. 22] describes this as a confusion of morality and science, "the imposition of value and fact upon each other." He contends that if the clinician "knew a little more of astrology or charlatanism or faith healing or the development of priestly castes, he might see some ironic and perhaps worrisome parallels between his own and some less-honored crafts" [14, p. 22].

Such a breakdown in the ideal of clinical interpretation very likely carries over to marketing research. Many qualitative researchers may believe that they clinically interpret behavior in terms of scientific causation, while in practice they explain why people do things, even involuntarily, in terms of everyday motive and meaning.

The clinical approach to qualitative research seeks quasiscientific knowledge. This knowledge is meant to have scientific status. It is not fully scientific, however, because it has not itself been subject to scientific methods, only to clinical judgment. To the extent that the process of clinical judgment fails, the clinical approach results in everyday knowledge which masquerades as scientific. Therefore, at its best, the clinical approach yields quasiscientific knowledge; at its worst, it yields phony scientific knowledge.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A third approach to qualitative research in marketing is summed up succinctly by Axelrod's description of the focus group [2, p. 6] as:

A chance to "experience" a "flesh and blood" consumer." It is the opportunity for the client to put himself in the position of the consumer and to be able to look at his product and his category from her vantage point.

This statement may not seem much different from the exploratory or the clinical approach. However, the difference is profound, it has the strongest implications for appreciating the nature of qualitative marketing research, and it is to be understood only in terms of the partition of scientific and everyday knowledge.

Certainly many practitioners would recognize Axelrod's statement as descriptive of their own use of qualitative research. It is common in agency circles, for instance, for creative people simply to say that they would "like to hear consumers talk" in requesting focus groups. The experiential utility of focus groups is accepted even by persons who implicitly think of their own research as mainly exploratory or clinical. This acceptance does not seem in any way at odds with an exploratory or a clinical approach. Unfortunately, the notion of experiential utility has received little reflection beyond its practical acknowledgment, despite the fact that this notion is the primary concern of the richest literature on qualitative research. Sociologists are the most active contributors to this literature.

Their work is by no means unified; in fact, it has several current streams. Perhaps the best general name for it is "sociological phenomenology," and thus the label "phenomenological" is chosen here to refer to the approach in marketing. The core ideas of sociological phenomenology derive from writings of the philosopher-sociologist Alfred Schutz [cf. 15, 17]. In philosophy, the study of phenomenology is concerned with the representation of knowledge as conscious experience. Schutz approached this experience as *intersubjectivity*. Essentially, intersubjectivity refers to the common-sense conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors. It corresponds to the everyday knowledge depicted in Figure 1. The term "constructs of the first degree" is Schutz's. Toward the world of everyday knowledge one assumes "the natural attitude." This is the philosopher Husserl's term and can be defined as [17, p. 320]:

The mental stance a person takes in the spontaneous and routine pursuits of his daily affairs, and the basis of his interpretation of the life world as a whole and in its various aspects. The life world is the *world of the natural attitude*. In it, things are taken for granted.

The individual adopts the natural attitude from birth, accepts everyday knowledge, and functions in terms of this knowledge.

The seeming objectivity of everyday knowledge depends on the natural attitude. In turn, the natural attitude, Schutz argues, depends on the actor's assumption that others see the world in the same way. The natural attitude is based on the assumption of a reciprocity of perspectives. Intersubjectivity is thus defined socially, not individually.

Schutz contends that every actor is born with a unique "biographical situation." No two people experience the world in precisely the same way. But for everyday knowledge to be usable, and to seem objectively reliable, it must for the most part be shared by other actors. Not only must it be shared to some extent by all actors, but it must be shared increasingly with the closeness of interpersonal contact among

actors. For any given actor, intersubjectivity arises from his contact with other actors (including common patterns of general socialization). Thus intersubjectivity is relative; different sets of actors will differ in their particular intersubjectivity to the extent that they have less contact and have had dissimilar socialization. Intersubjectivity will be greatest within primary groups and will be less within larger, more encompassing groups.

The key variable is the degree of personal contact and similarity of socialization, which is basic to all social groupings, such as those based on social class, geographic location, race, or whatever. For example, intersubjectivity is less between social classes in the United States than within them. Although major aspects of everyday knowledge are shared by different social classes, many features are not. The unshared features of everyday knowledge conform to different intersubjectivities. Each class adopts the natural attitude toward its own intersubjectivity but is ethnocentric toward that which is not shared by other classes.

This capsule version of Schutz's ideas captures much of the spirit of recent work on phenomenological sociology within the areas of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. Note especially the dependency of intersubjectivity on the reciprocity of perspectives arising from the contact of a set of actors. The conclusion emerging from this work is that qualitative research requires actual contact between the researcher and his subjects. For the researcher to describe the intersubjectivity of a set of subjects, he must interact with them to the extent that he acquires the ability to take their perspective so that their intersubjectivity seems natural to him. A recent sociological qualitative research text [4, p. 8] puts this very simply: "*In qualitative methods, the researcher is necessarily involved in the lives of the subjects*" (original italics). As Blumer [3, p. 86] argues:

. . . the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying. Since the *interpretation* is being made by the acting unit in terms of objects designated and appraised, meanings acquired, and decisions made, the process has to be seen from the standpoint of the acting unit. . . . To try to catch the *interpretative* process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism—the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it [italics added].

The necessity of contact for truly grasping the intersubjectivity of a set of actors has led phenomenological sociologists to favor the method of participant observation. The text [4, p. 5] referred to previously broadly defines this as "*research characterized by a period of intense social interaction between*

the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter" (original italics). Also favored is unstructured interviewing in which, according to the same text [4, p. 6], "*people reveal in their own words their view of their entire life, or a part of it, or some other aspect about themselves*" (original italics). Both participant observation and unstructured interviewing seek the description of the intersubjectivity of a set of actors through the researcher's own experience of that intersubjectivity. The focus of any interview technique becomes vicarious experience.

The goal of the phenomenological approach to qualitative marketing research is identical to that of phenomenological sociology. Both attempt to experience a set of actors and to describe that experience. Though sociologists historically have been more interested in deviant groups (e.g., gangs), marketing researchers are concerned with the intersubjectivity of different groups of consumers. Although deviant groupings vary more in intersubjectivity than most consumption-related groupings, the exercise of qualitative research should be the same in principle. Marketers for the most part belong to social groupings whose intersubjectivity is not the same as that of many of their target segments. Reality in the executive suite differs drastically from that of most kitchens. Qualitative research is an excellent way of bridging social distance.

There is more to be seen in phenomenological sociology, however than a confluence of purposes. The ideas of phenomenological sociology provide greater methodological direction than is currently available in marketing research practice. Focus groups following the phenomenological approach amount to an effort to get consumers to talk to each other about product-related issues. But the role of the moderator in this interaction is very poorly prescribed. The moderator's behavior most often is left to the idiosyncracies of the person moderating. To the extent that the moderator's technique is not idiosyncratic, it most likely is drawn implicitly from the exploratory or clinical approaches. These two approaches are not compatible with the phenomenological approach. Exploratory focus groups entail creative prescientific intellectualization. Clinical focus groups concentrate on *intra*subjectivity, on quasiscientific interpretations based on second-degree constructs which are personal to the individual. Neither allows the active involvement, the highly interactive personal contact, called for by the phenomenological approach.

A bias toward the seeming objectivity of the exploratory and clinical approaches forces an unduly detached moderator style in many applications of the phenomenological approach. Similarly, too much reliance sometimes is placed on the professional qualifications of moderators. It is more important in the phenomenological approach to employ moderators whose own backgrounds make it easier for them to

take the role of a particular consumer segment.

These considerations lead to the question of the relationship between the phenomenological approach and the partition of everyday and scientific knowledge. Clearly, the intersubjectivity that is the *object* of inquiry constitutes everyday knowledge. But does the treatment of this everyday knowledge itself belong to the world of everyday knowledge or to that of scientific knowledge? Most researchers would contend that, as ordinary description derived from experiencing the role of the other, the phenomenological approach results in everyday knowledge.¹ This description, however systematic and thorough, still relies by its nature on first-degree constructs. For most phenomenological sociologists, this status does not preclude the development of a social science of second-degree constructs. It does raise a difficult problem, though. Some sociologists, mainly the ethnomethodologists, lodge a powerful criticism against conventional social science. They claim that all too often researchers confuse first-degree constructs with second-degree ones. The explanatory constructs of everyday life are assumed implicitly to have some scientific status.

The concern of the ethnomethodologists is that the validity of most of the supposed second-degree social science constructs rests more on their utility in everyday knowledge than on scientific evidence. Consider an example. In everyday life it is natural to explain the behavior of people in terms of personality traits. Nearly 5% of the English language is given over to trait names [1]. The first-degree constructs of traits have been carried over into the realm of social science. Traits have certainly received considerable attention in consumer behavior research. Nor is this an improper way of generating a second-degree construct. It is possible, however, trait explanations are not scientifically valid. Empirical evidence indicates that trait theory needs considerable elaboration [e.g., 12]. That simple trait theory persists in social science may be attributable to its entrenchment in everyday explanation rather than to its scientific merits.

The point is that much of what is considered to be scientific may belong more to everyday explanation. Phenomenological qualitative research therefore may have a stronger claim to the use of conventional social science constructs than does scientific research. In any event, this criticism should give pause to marketers who would condemn the nonscientific status of the phenomenological approach to qualitative marketing research. Not only does this work have practical utility, but it is also entirely defensible as the approach of

choice, given the current development of social science.

To summarize, the phenomenological approach provides a systematic description in terms of first-degree constructs of the consumption-relevant intersubjectivity of a target segment. The description is of how consumers interpret reality in their own terms. In contrast, the clinical approach gives what is hoped to be a scientific interpretation of reality. This interpretation employs second-degree constructs representing the intrasubjectivity of individual consumers. The logic of the phenomenological approach dictates that the researcher have close personal involvement with consumers. He or she must share, participatively or vicariously, the experience of consumers. It is misleading, on reflection, to say that the value of phenomenological focus groups is in the experiencing of consumers. What they should yield is the experiencing of the experience of consumers.

The phenomenological approach to qualitative research seeks everyday knowledge. This knowledge is not meant to have scientific status. It is the everyday knowledge, the experience, of the consumer.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING RESEARCH PRACTICE

Qualitative marketing research is more complex than any simple notion that quantitative research permits objective numerical analysis which qualitative research sacrifices for intensive analysis and fast turnaround. That there is more involved than a trade-off between precision and flexibility is especially evident in light of the three distinct approaches to qualitative research in current practice. These approaches must be viewed in terms of the partition of everyday and scientific knowledge. The exploratory approach seeks prescientific explanations stimulated by everyday thought. The clinical approach seeks quasiscientific explanations based on clinical judgment. The phenomenological approach seeks everyday explanations derived from personal contact. The three approaches are summarized in Table 1.

These three approaches are not well understood by those who use them. Frequent confusion of the approaches testifies to this lack of understanding. Marketing researchers often subscribe to the exploratory and clinical approaches (as evidenced by the usual statements included in the introductions of commercial reports) but commonly pursue something more akin to the phenomenological approach. It is hoped that discussion of each approach provides a deeper understanding of them. The discussion also has several specific implications for questions typically raised about the use of focus groups.

Perhaps the most common question is about generalizability, which usually is considered by analogy with the quantitative survey—how can one project to a larger universe results which are not stated as numeri-

¹It should be noted that social psychologists have sought specifically to investigate the constructs and hypotheses of everyday knowledge scientifically. This was the goal of Heider's original work on "naïve psychology." It continues to be ill-acknowledged rationale for current attribution theory studies in social psychology.

cal scores and are based on poor sampling? The conventional answer is that such results can be generalized only by a followup quantitative stage. But analogy to quantitative techniques is the wrong point of reference. One must consider the nature of qualitative research in thinking about generalizability.

For the exploratory approach, sample generalizability is not even particularly meaningful. The goal is either to generate ideas for scientific constructs or, as urged here, to compare scientific with everyday explanations. It is difficult to specify what projection to a larger universe means in this context. The likelihood of generating an idea or confidence in a comparison should depend to some extent on the number of focus groups, but this is not the same as sample generalizability. What researchers presumably have in mind is generalizability *when* the scientific construct or explanation is employed in quantitative research. However, this is a problem for the quantitative research procedure, not a concern of the qualitative research. The error is to assume that focus groups are provisional in the sense of yielding preliminary versions of quantitative findings. On the contrary, exploratory focus groups only suggest a construct or provide a comparison with everyday knowledge. They do not constitute a scientific test. Sample generalizability is a property only of subsequent quantitative research. It is misleading even to speak about the generalizability of exploratory focus groups.

Generalizability is more meaningful for the clinical approach. Here a scientific interpretation is being made, and one would like to know whether it holds beyond the focus group sample. Recall, however, that the basis of this interpretation is clinical judgment. Clinical judgment is not itself sufficiently specifiable to permit systematic extrapolation. Generalizations of clinical judgment can be accomplished only through intuition, and this has no claim to being scientific. Poor generalizability is inherent in clinical focus groups. It might be thought that generalizability can be assessed through subsequent research designed to test the clinical interpretation with a quantitative technique. This notion is somewhat paradoxical, however. The justification for the clinical approach is that it allows the use of scientific constructs (unconscious thoughts, etc.) which are difficult to investigate quantitatively. Attempting then to base the generalizability of a clinical interpretation on quantitative results, and not on clinical judgment, makes no sense. If it did make sense, there would have been no rationale for the original use of clinical judgment. A quantitative technique would have been more appropriate from the first. Generalizability is thus a critical issue with clinical focus groups; unfortunately, no one really knows how to determine it, aside from conducting more and more groups.

Generalizability is also important for the phenomenological approach, though it has a different meaning.

The problem is to determine the extent to which a particular intersubjectivity manifested in focus groups is shared. That is, how large is the social grouping which has a particular perspective in common? Here it does make sense to address generalizability through a descriptive quantitative survey. Both opinion polling and psychographic/life-style surveys can be seen as attempts to do just this. These are not attempts at scientific explanation so much as checks on the extent of everyday perspectives. The present popularity of using pictures of consumers to illustrate different psychographic profiles is indicative of the phenomenological character of this work. Surveys do seem effective in establishing the generality of different patterns of intersubjectivity. But recall that the phenomenological approach is predicated on experiencing the experience of consumers. This is best done through personal contact. Quantitative surveys, though they permit estimates of generality, are a poor substitute for even vicarious experience. The best way to generalize from phenomenological focus groups is to conduct additional groups in an attempt to cover as many different social groupings as possible. The widespread faith in the superiority of quantitative over qualitative research is clearly reversed for the phenomenological approach.

How then does one answer the typical question, "*Should qualitative research ideally be generalized through additional quantitative research?*" Conventional wisdom says yes. The foregoing discussion says no. This strategy makes sense only for the phenomenological approach. And even then it is neither an effort to attain scientific legitimacy nor the preferable method of generalizing. Focus group research basically must stand alone!

The ideas discussed here bear upon other typical questions as well. *When should qualitative research be used?* The phenomenological approach should be used when management is out of touch with the consumer, or when target segments consist of minority or rapidly changing social groupings. The exploratory approach should be used when scientific explanation is desired but researchers are uncertain about second-degree constructs, or when a scientific explanation is at hand and researchers wish to compare it with the consumer's interpretation. Finally, the clinical approach should be used when researchers invoke scientific constructs which are not amenable to self-report or direct inference.

How many focus groups constitute a project? It is usually said that focus groups should be continued until the moderator can anticipate what is going to be said in the groups. This typically happens with the third or fourth group of a particular kind. This rule of thumb seems adequate for the phenomenological approach: anticipation probably reflects vicarious experience. But one can anticipate without having yet made a clinical judgment or having formed

an idea for a second-degree construct. The number of groups for the other two approaches should vary according to when the desired results are actually achieved.

What is the role of interaction among the group members? One of the few real dictums of focus group research is to avoid serial questioning where a number of people are simply being interviewed at once. Interaction among the participants is thought to be a major virtue of the technique. Group dynamics, members stimulating other members, is held up as the basic rationale for the technique. In contrast to this consensus about the importance of interaction, there seems to be little agreement about the role of interaction. What does it accomplish? Interaction is clearly important for the phenomenological and clinical approaches. But to understand the role of this interaction, one must specify the relation of the moderator to it. This relation is different for the two approaches. With the phenomenological approach, the moderator must be part of the interaction. He or she must participate in the group dynamics as a member. It is necessary to feel a part of the group in order to experience the group's shared perspective. With the clinical approach, the moderator is not a part of the interaction. He or she must be detached from it so that the group dynamics can be used as a tool to probe and manipulate the defenses of the members. Interaction has a different purpose for each approach. For the exploratory approach, however, interaction is not nearly so important. The group functions as a convenient device for interviewing a number of people, one or more of whom might stimulate the moderator's scientific thinking. The exploratory approach implies more participation from key members and more one-to-one interaction with the moderator than do the other approaches.

Should focus groups be composed of homogeneous or heterogeneous people? Heterogeneous groups might yield rich information for the exploratory or clinical approaches. Clinical groups, however, should most often be homogeneous to facilitate rapport. Phenomenological groups require homogeneity. A shared perspective cannot be expected to emerge if the people are not similar.

How important is the moderator's interviewing technique? Many focus group moderators affect stylized interviewing techniques which encompass everything from how respondents are seated, and whether or not they are addressed by name, to how nondirective the moderator is. From the present perspective, these techniques do not seem crucial for the exploratory or the phenomenological approach. Anything which is comfortable for the participants is probably consistent with these two approaches. One technique or the other is not likely, in itself, to help much in obtaining ideas for scientific explanations or in understanding the consumer's experience. The phenome-

nological approach even seems to call for the absence of any style that would be apparent to the group. Such a style might make it difficult for the moderator to take part in the group as a member. Interviewing technique may be much more crucial, however, for the clinical approach. The process of clinical judgment is related intimately to interviewing technique. Clinicians believe that some techniques facilitate clinical judgment and others do not. There may well be effective and ineffective styles for the clinical approach, though it would be no simple task to identify which are effective and which are ineffective.

What expertise should a moderator have? The clinical and exploratory approaches demand a high degree of sophistication with scientific theory. In contrast, most important for the phenomenological approach are previous experiences which are maximally compatible with those of the focus group participants. There may also be dispositional characteristics which allow some people to take the role of others more readily.

Should management observe focus group sessions? Opinions differ sharply on this question. From the present perspective, observation is of no use with the clinical and exploratory approaches. What is being revealed cannot be seen by the lay observer. Observation makes sense for the phenomenological approach if it helps the manager to experience the consumer's experience.

What should a focus group report look like? Obviously the approaches identified call for different

Table 2
PROFILES OF THE THREE APPROACHES TO FOCUS
GROUP RESEARCH

	Exploratory	Clinical	Phenomenological
The approach can be generalized with a followup quantitative stage	No	No	Yes
The approach should be used when the goal is to experience the consumer	No	No	Yes
The anticipation rule-of-thumb is appropriate for determining the number of groups conducted	No	No	Yes
Obtaining a high level of interaction among the group members is essential	No	Yes	Yes
A homogeneous group of people is necessary	No	No	Yes
The moderator's interviewing technique is crucial	No	Yes	No
The moderator must have scientific credentials	Yes	Yes	No
Observation by management is appropriate	No	No	Yes
Verbatim quotes should be emphasized in the report	No	No	Yes

styles of reporting. The phenomenological report should include extensive quotes ("verbatim") from consumer comments. It might be supplemented by edited tapes of the sessions. Oral presentations also should be helpful. Anything which better conveys the reality of the consumer's perspective is appropriate. Reports of clinical or exploratory groups should concentrate much more on the analyst's own reasoning in reaching conclusions.

To sharpen the distinction among the three approaches to focus group research, the implications discussed are summarized in checklist form in Table 2. The columns of this table provide a convenient profile of each approach. Remember that the only claim being made is that these approaches are discernible, though often blurred, in current practice; qualitative marketing research would profit greatly by fuller appreciation of the differences among them. These differences stem directly from the types of knowledge sought (see Table 1). Important questions about focus groups should not be resolved by convention, predilection, or happenstance. Different approaches, reflecting the need for different types of knowledge, require different answers.

THE FUTURE OF QUALITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH

As previously stated, the three approaches detected and elaborated on are not sharply distinguished in the minds of marketing researchers. It is hoped that the foregoing discussion, if nothing else, shows that qualitative marketing research is a diverse activity. Otherwise the confusion of approaches may worsen. Most troubling is an increasing fuzziness of the clinical approach. Recall that the rationale for this approach is that it allows scientific interpretation where constructs cannot be investigated quantitatively; hence the need for clinical judgment. Increasingly, however, all kinds of theories are being applied with "clinical" judgment. Focus groups are interpreted in terms of any available social science construct (e.g., attitudes, values, traits, roles, norms, etc.). This is not an application of the exploratory approach. It is an attempt to extend the clinical approach to all constructs, without regard to their amenability to existing scientific methods. This is a misuse of qualitative research. It is an attempt to shortcut the scientific process, without the attendant justification of the traditional clinical approach. The result is often explanations which have no claim to being even quasi-scientific. Social science constructs are used merely as convenient (and probably overly intellectualized) ways of describing the phenomenology of consumers.

This trend leads to purportedly scientific interpretations which either (1) are needlessly based on clinical judgment or (2) are in fact phenomenological descriptions couched in social science jargon. Perhaps these are useful to marketing management. But they may

be more a license to "qualitative clairvoyance" than good research.

Scientific integrity might best be maintained by having two largely separate realms of marketing research. Most routine qualitative research would follow the phenomenological approach. The exploratory and clinical approaches would be used with caution, and only when clearly dictated. Present misconceptions about the desirability of linking qualitative and quantitative research would be abandoned. Marketers would recognize the need for *both* qualitative phenomenological research and scientific quantitative research.

Whatever trends emerge in qualitative research, one thing is certain. Focus groups should not be the exclusive technique. The nature of qualitative research does not limit it to any one best technique. Other techniques are just as legitimate as the focus group, and should be explored. The greatest threat to qualitative research findings is not lack of generalizability but lack of validity. Validity can best be assessed with multiple methods. The commitment to focus groups, like the conventions surrounding their use, is based on opinion conformity rather than the nature of qualitative marketing research.

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