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Intègraphy: A multi-method approach to situational analysis

Sidney J. Levy [a,*], Charles H. Kellstadt [b]

[a] Eller College of Management, University of Arizona, United States
[b] Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is a way to analyze situations of consumer behavior. Usually, the goal is to capture richness of detail, complexity, and a sense of the wholeness of the phenomena of interest. Unlike the common conduct of laboratory experiment studies that observe a single variable or the interaction of two or a few variables, through the use of qualitative approaches one may study the subtleties of language, explore contradictions, generate hypotheses, and clothe statistical findings. Under the heading, Intègraphy, this paper describes three studies that show how information and insight may be derived from such fuller, richer inquiries. The studies highlight the necessary role of introspection.

This article is an introspection and a commentary on the consumer research process and an example of a study of situations. There are many ways of doing research. They all seek knowledge about some issue, but there are different ways of gathering data, organizing them, and reasoning about them. Each discipline has its preferred methods, using for example telescopes, microscopes, cloud chambers, atom smashers, test tubes, magnetic resonance imaging; and, in the consumer research field, surveys with structured questionnaires or open-end interviews, participant observation, projective techniques; and experiments in laboratories, in the field, some natural and some contrived. There is measuring, modeling, statistical and content analysis, ethnographies, and netnographies. The list of methods used in science is long and the goals are varied. Sometimes the researcher wants to explore for fresh insights and sometimes to test the validity of an idea or to measure its prevalence. Often the focus is on observing a single variable or the interaction of two or a few variables. A distinction is made between "research into marketing," that is considered basic and theoretical; and "marketing research," that is considered descriptive and applied; although each may well serve the other.

Alternative approaches to the study of complex situations (Weiss, 1966) distinguish between the *analytic* and *holistic* approaches, making these main points:

1. In the analytic approach investigators are prepared to see a complex situation as a tangle of related elements. They take as their task the isolating of elements from each other, or, perhaps, the identification of a small number of linked relationships. This approach requires the identification of the important elements of the complex situation and usually a measurement leading to a statement of their interrelations.
2. In the holistic approach investigators see a complex situation as containing within itself, perhaps hidden from casual view, a system of interrelated elements constituting its underlying structure, in terms of which the phenomena of the situation are to be understood. They are concerned with identifying the nature of the system rather than with focusing on particular independent–dependent variable relations. The chief interest might be phrased as "Taking it all together, how does the whole thing work?"
3. Neither of these two approaches is preliminary to the other. In practice, each approach may support the other; identified regularities may help to clarify the whole system or examining the system may reveal some regularity.
4. The study of a single case is the most promising strategy for understanding how elements are organized in at least one instance. Small sample studies are natural extensions of the case study approach. They usually lead to groupings of cases that display similar organization and to the development of typologies.

Illustratively, the analytical approach is exemplified in the twelve articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) in the June, 2009, issue. The first article includes a school laboratory experiment and the only structured survey in the issue. There is one article based on the content analysis of open-ended interviews with a convenience sample. All the other ten articles report on studies that include from 2 to as many as 6 experiments as the authors seek to more finely parse the behavior at issue under the microscope of psychological analysis. The major goal is to obtain graphs with two straight lines to demonstrate the success of the hypothesized interaction rather than a mere main effect.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: slevy@eller.arizona.edu (S.J. Levy).

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Each of the studies might be excellent, but the almost exclusive use of experiments to test hypotheses about consumers' motives and cognitions leads to an exaggerated clarity of conclusions and supposed illumination of behavior. The search seems a desire to find a major explanatory generalization, as if it were some natural law of consumer behavior, even if it does not apply to everyone. It suffices to have a statistically significant finding at the 95% level, so that we learn, say, that highly materialistic people are unhappy, ignoring all the people who enjoy their possessions. Similarly, because experiments by Tversky and Kahneman (1991) demonstrated that people are unhappy over losing something more than they are over failing to gain something, we are now glib about "loss aversion"—or perhaps "retention preference?" Certainly it is more grievous to lose a job than not to get a promotion, if we needed an experiment to tell us that; but there are also clearly instances where failure to gain something causes suffering anyway, showing that the phenomenon of "gain desire" can also be strong.

Likewise, we toss off "reduction of cognitive dissonance" or "buyer's remorse," and various other such reductions that are useful insights although we may thereby disregard the complexities of specific circumstances. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Richard Posner (2009) worries that a proposed consumer protection agency will rely too much on simplified findings from studies by behavioral economists, saying "The plan of the new agency reveals the influence of 'behavioral economists' which teaches that people, even when fully informed, often screw up because of various cognitive limitations....Behavioral economists are right to point to the limitations of human cognition. But if they have the same cognitive limitations as consumers, should they be designing systems of consumer protection? (A15)."

The meticulous article by Rindfleisch et al. (2009), works conscientiously to prove that highly materialistic people use acquisition and possessions to ward off their terror of death; and claims innovation and priority for this finding, putting in the shade the earlier emphases on status striving and Veblenesque conspicuous consumption as the main explanations, although they are surely also true. Perhaps terror will become the cliché explanation although it is hardly novel to discover that some people who fear death amass possessions to protect themselves. That has been recognized even as a source of amusement: for example, in the classic comedy where the title is the catchphrase we use to warn such people that *You Can't Take it with You*.

I thought it telling to compare this modern fashion with the contents of the first issue of the JCR, which contained nine articles. The first article is by George Katona (1974) titled "Psychology and Consumer Economics," and is based on data from the Economic Behavior Program at the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The content is about large issues such as the effects of inflation on consumer spending, personal saving in periods of prosperity and recession, wealth and saving and saturation with consumer goods. In the next article three professors discussed Katona's ideas (presumably in place of three reviewers working away from public view). The third article used open-ended interviews coded to serve a multivariate discriminant analysis of the effect of advertising on children. The fourth article was a longitudinal analysis of consumers' reactions to the requirements of Truth in Lending legislation, based on detailed surveys with 793 consumers and 196 re-interviews. Two articles were about the behavior of husbands and wives, their marital roles and influence on behavior.

The work by Davis and Rigaux (1974) was based on separate interview surveys with husbands and wives in 73 households. The article by Olshavsky and Summers (1974) used a structured questionnaire to examine the role of beliefs and intentions among cigarette smokers. Only one article, by Jacoby et al. (1974), reported an experiment, testing the influence of information overload on a sample of 192 housewives. The last article was a thoughtful report by Bettman (1974) that discussed various techniques for coping with consumer decision net models.

These early discussions point to the value of studying situations of broad and current consequence and usefulness, focusing on component elements of consumers' attitudes and reasoning but giving attention to their contexts in a more holistic way. While articles nowadays reflect the methodological sophistication that has grown over 35 years, the first issues show a greater diversity of attention to economic and sociological matters as part of a larger, more macrological perspective on consumer research. Thus, reflecting the contemporary style emphasized by faculty as researchers, mentors, and reviewers, the *Journal* evidently neglects a level of consumer research that seeks to answer larger or broader questions, inquiries that address matters beyond the scope of the undergraduate subject pool; and has evidently fallen away from the ambitious aims that the first editor, Ronald Frank, expressed in his introduction. Tellingly, only three years after the creation of the *Journal*, Robert Ferber (1977), a founder and distinguished editor of the *Journal,* 1977–1981, severely criticized the already growing reliance on student subjects.

Rather than measuring variables to find such things as their main effects, their correlations, interactions, variations, and significant differences, qualitative research is a way of analyzing situations. Usually, the goal is to capture richness of detail, complexity, a sense of the wholeness of the phenomena. Through a diversity of qualitative approaches (Belk, 2006), researchers study the subtleties of language, the nature of a culture, explore contradiction, generate hypotheses, and clothe statistical findings. Further, rather than rely on a single qualitative research method, it is useful to answer the questions of the inquiry by integrating a variety of perspectives and levels of information. I coined the term intègraphy not to imply a new approach, but rather to refresh awareness of the holistic tradition and its value, as described above by Robert Weiss (1966). Here, this kind of research is illustrated as a process simply described by four major stages: Observation, Annotation, Investigation, and Implication. To illustrate, I will present summaries of these four stages as they occurred in three instances of situations with markedly different purposes and audiences.

1. *Observation* refers to the activities and thinking of the researchers that precede the launch of the actual study and takes specific account of the role of introspection as a factor in doing research: that is, researchers necessarily examine their own thoughts and feelings. Research reports vary in the extent to which researchers tell how they came to their particular focus. Of course, readers may not care about this background to the research but its antecedents might help in understanding the preconceptions and biases that fueled the study. There is always a personal aspect to doing a study no matter how mechanical the procedure. To manage any study is a human affair that requires thinking about it to begin with. Researchers are observers. Some of them tell how they came to the particular topic although doing so is not usually expected in a formal report. The researchers' background, initial actions, and observations are part of their embarking on the study and are essential or they would be doing something else.

The preliminary stage of the intègraphy process includes a participant-observation role that requires sensing, note-taking, remembering, making choices, and determining how best to carry out the study, to understand the data, and how to make it most meaningful. Because the researchers' ability and experience make some workers better than others, background information can help readers better evaluate the quality of the work. When there is more than one researcher engaged in the project, their interaction, discussions, and distribution of responsibilities are significant in determining its character; but these are commonly not reported, perhaps to avoid political complications. Whether doing "marketing research" or "research into marketing," the researcher observes the client or audience whose needs are involved and whose judgments are to be satisfied, whether they are business managers funding the project, dissertation chairs and committees, journal editors and reviewers, or readers in the field. It is useful to describe this background of experience and thinking to clarify where the researcher is coming from since hypotheses are after all usually preferred beliefs.

The reporting recommended here raises the issue of the double-blind process required by most scientific and academic journals, which