KEEPING THE MONKEYS AWAY FROM THE TYPEWRITERS:
AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S VIEW OF THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ODYSSEY

John F. Sherry, Jr., Northwestern University

Abstract

In this essay, the Consumer Behavior Odyssey is subjected to a premature personal evaluation. The project is viewed in both its scientific and mythopoeic aspects, as a significant pilot with potentially profound long term consequences.

Introduction

This essay is an idiosyncratic reaction to a picaresque research project. The project itself was intended to build upon Tucker's (1967) long neglected call for truly innovative research into the foundations of consumer behavior. The essay is more impressionistic than analytical, insofar as little analysis of primary field materials has yet been conducted. Rather, I will seek to interpret the significance of the project from an anthropological perspective that is highly personal.

The Odyssey has its origins in the dissatisfaction of a handful of researchers with the excessive reliance of their colleagues upon a logical positivist paradigm to interpret consumer behavior. It has been said that if a roomful of monkeys were seated at typewriters and allowed to bang randomly upon the keyboards, they would eventually produce the entire works of Shakespeare. Norbert Weiner (1964), the father of modern cybernetics, once observed that one of the needs of science is to keep the monkeys away from the typewriters. This marvelously ambiguous directive is the theme I intend to explore in this essay. I will attempt this exploration with the same ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence Bronowski (1973) expected of serious students, and with the same fine disregard for rules that William Webb Ellis displayed in originating the distinctive feature of the rugby game. Both of these principles are exemplified in my Odyssey fieldmates, and together provide an appropriate inscape for the task at hand.

In many ways, the spirit of Jack Kerouac presided over the Odyssey. Temple's (1986) interview with William Burroughs captures something of this presence. "Jack Kerouac was a writer," says Burroughs. "Many people who call themselves writers and who have their names on books are not writers - the difference being, a bullfighter who fights a bull is different from a bullshitter who makes passes with no bull there. The writer has been there or he can't write about it. And going there he risks being gored." Similarly, the Odyssey fieldworkers have been there, and have come here today to risk being gored. As a member of the research team, I will attempt something of a pre-emptive goring.

A number of monkey-and-typewriter disputes currently animates consumer research. Among the paradigms contesting for interpretive primacy are those labelled logical empiricist, sociopolitical, subjective world, and liberating (Arndt 1985; Morgan 1980). Analytic scientists, conceptual theorists, particular humanists and conceptual humanists are among the types of researcher currently investigating consumer behavior (Hirschman 1985; Mitroff and Kilmann 1978). Shweder (1986) has recently taken us on an amusing tour of the emic hierarchies of science that has social scientists deferring to physical scientists, who in turn defer to physicists, who in their turn defer to mathematicians who claim their work is ultimately quite mystical and intuitive. Each of these disputes distract us from the critical intramural issue in consumer research. At issue is our ability to discriminate between genuine, or competent research on the one hand, and spurious, or incompetent research on the other,

no matter which intellectual tradition is averred as the researcher's home turf. Holbrook's (1987) eloquent plea for the sheltering and nurturing of "new" approaches in consumer research may help buy us enough time to make this discrimination possible.

Picaresque Paradigmatic Pluralism

A number of concerns have driven my participation in the Odyssey, and have shaped my perception of its significance. First in importance is my fascination with metaphor. Several authors in particular (Arndt 1985; Fernandez 1974; Gusfield 1981; McCloskey 1985; Turbayne 1962; Turner 1974; White 1978) have influenced much of my recent thinking on the ideological consequences of metaphoric discourse. No way of knowing is exempt from the influence of metaphor, and this notion needs to be injected quite forcefully into the mainstream of consumer research. Several distinct metaphors and their variants appear to be contesting for a hearing within the field. Turbayne (1962) wisely suggests that three options are available to supplanters of paradigms. You can lose awareness of your metaphor and mistake it for literal truth; you can treat your metaphor as an allegory yourself, but offer it for literal consumption to other people and other times; you can realize there are no proper sorts into which facts must be allocated, but only better metaphors. It is this third option that seems most viable, and which reminds us to be aware that our adoption of a metaphor alters our attitude toward facts.

A second motive for embracing Belk's picaresque proposal is my sense that some sea change in consumer research is in progress. This change is less an incipient paradigm shift than a mild irritant at this time, but this heretical spirit has already infused enough of a critical mass of researchers that some hope exists for accretion of new knowledge. Whether we tilt at windmills like Quixote or carry our oar inland to be identified as a winnowing fan as Odysseus once did remains to be seen.

A third incentive for joining the Odyssey stems from my dismay over weird science and killer paradigms. In our pursuit of normal science, most of us protect the investment we have in our training (and in our sense of self) by advancing our research orientations as more than one mere way of knowing. We also search for (or assume we have) a model capable of explaining consumption in all its complexity, rather than entertain seriously the notion of some scholars (Barrett 1984; Levine 1985) that since ambiguity and uncertainty may be the norm of social life, our models must incorporate ambiguity. To politicize their efforts to complement or supplant accepted approaches to consumer behavior, some researchers have taken to promoting alternative approaches as "weird science." This politicized stance is a mispositioning of the critical issue of pluralism, and may alienate as many potential recruits to the cause as it attracts naive converts; the concept implies an anarchic or irrelevant iconoclasm, and wears a tainted halo. The pluralism enshrined by Hirschman (1985) may as easily be entombed by Hirschman (1986) if this metaphor is popularly adopted. As a compromise between weird science and killer paradigms I suggest we consider Malinowski's "coefficient of weirdness" - the power of words to unite the user with the beings to whom he or she wishes to connect - to apply to all of our research efforts.

A final concern prompting my participation in the Odyssey is the growing interest I detect among practitioners in ethnography. Several recent trade press articles have praised the merits of ethnographic research as practiced

by ad agencies and marketing consultants, but reveal little understanding of that approach. In fact a range of "ethnographic" approaches, linked by little more than labels, has prompted me to think in terms of the good, the bad, and the ugly in qualitative research. We have traditional ethnography, the long term labor intensive field immersion favored by academic researchers. We have "adnography," a kind of rip-and-run hot-button solution to the need of managers for intimate yet efficient contact with contextually embedded consumers. Finally, we have "blitzkrieg ethnography," which combines some of the best and worst features of the other variants. Blitzkrieg ethnography provides just enough field exposure to tantalize and to aid hypothesizing, but not enough for comprehensive understanding. By joining the Odyssey, I gave up my fear of becoming a member of a qualitative swat team in favor of experiencing the tension between blitzkrieg ethnography and what Whyte (1978) has called diagnostic research.

Comforting myself with the Odyssey's emergent design, its interesting balance of individual initiative with the buddy system, and its fascinating mix of principal investigators, I drew up a list of researchable issues. On my list were small group culture, secondary markets, ethnicity, tourism and market pitching. My negotiated participation was to be a comfortable one. Base field sites at which ongoing research was unfolding, coupled with more extemporaneous, free-form investigations in transit between fixed sites I found to be a workable compromise. That the project would become a travelling seminar, or on-going workshop of sorts, at which professional researchers would both teach and learn, was perhaps its most appealing feature.

Scientific Aspect: Naturalistic Inquiry

In the absence of an analyzed corpus of field data, I will discuss briefly what I think to be some of the major strengths and limitations of the Consumer Behavior Odyssey. The reader is advised that these remarks are tentative and exploratory; certainly some of them may be revised as the field data is analyzed and shared.

Substantively, the project has several major strengths. Given the political field within which interdisciplinary research into consumer behavior is conducted, perhaps the most significant aspect of the project was that it was funded, and funded well. Funding would seem to be a clear signal of the promise of a project, especially one as exploratory as the Odyssey. Multiple funding sources - advertising agencies, Marketing Science Institute, numerous universities - and multiple types of backing - grants, equipment, lodging, personnel - are further indicators of the appeal of a novel approach. The use of numerous venues as research sites allowed for a kind horizon expansion and comparative investigation atypical of consumer research in general; multiple venues made it possible to honor the spirit of Tucker's (1967) call for foundation work. An infrastructure of contacts, informants and colleagues established during the project will become the basis for longer term follow-up investigations of selected phenomena. Studies begun on the summer pilot will be continued and extended by project personnel in the coming year. The creation of a research culture and a consumer franchise to speed acceptance of naturalistic inquiry into consumer research is among the most significant of the Odyssey's accomplishments. A larger critical mass of naturalistic inquirers and an audience more receptive to postpositivist methodology have each been generated through the project. The establishment of an archive to house and circulate data collected during the Odyssey is another major contribution of the project. Once suitably altered (via pseudonyms, etc.), Odyssey data will be made available to researchers outside of project personnel. A final substantive strength of the project was the opportunity it afforded participants for personal growth. Shweder (1986) has observed that good ethnography in an intellectual exorcism in which we are wrenched out of our self. Each of the participants shared such an experience, and increased his or her acuity as an instrument in the bargain.

Methodologically, the Odyssey exhibited several distinct strengths. The use of participant observation and emergent design to study consumer phenomena, and the express avoidance of survey or laboratory methods of any type, are significant in their own right. The meticulous recording of data through journals, fieldnotes, audio- and videotapes, photographs and artifactual collection, all with an eye toward auditing by scholars not affiliated with the project, and toward eventual deposit in a public archive, should serve as a benchmark for subsequent naturalistic inquiry into consumer behavior. The use of an interdisciplinary team approach to inquiry, rare enough in consumer research of any kind, is an especially significant contribution. Logistical headaches and intellectual property rights disputes notwithstanding, the melding of disciplinary (and school) perspectives and the level of adversarial discourse in the service of consumer research themselves were a wonder to behold. The daily Odyssey audit - and its peripatetic cousin, the periodic Odyssey audit - that helped shaped the emergent design of the project and kept inquirers close to the corpus was another methodological plus. Finally, the techniques of auditing, autodriving and member checking helped provide an integrity to the project that is often lacking in other qualitative studies.

A number of substantive shortcomings are evident in the project as well. Principal among these was the phenomenon I have taken to calling "mesomorphic" description. Many of the observations and insights notched by the project fall along the clinal zone between the "thick description" (Geertz 1973) to which the inquirers aspired and the "thin description" to which we have become accustomed in consumer research. Short term field immersion and pressure to produce a tangible project conspired in many cases to produce description that, while contextually rich, lacked much of the fullness that might have been captured. An outgroup focus also produced a serious flaw in the research. For a number of reasons, no systematic ethnography of the small group research culture was attempted, leaving only journal entries and post hoc anecdotal material (including some marvelous war stories) from which some retrospective account might be constructed. Finally, division of labor among Odyssey researchers was suboptimal throughout the project. The merits of redundancy are considerable, if pursued strategically. However, a large and continually changing crew, along with some belief in the possibility of consensus, militated against efficient use of each member's talents.

Methodological shortcomings are also apparent. The tension between blitzkrieg ethnography and diagnostic research to which I earlier referred was a source of concern. As if he or she were some curious hybrid of Levitt's (1983) derivative fox and hedgehog, the researcher often felt at turns quite knowledgeable and quite ignorant; myopic at one time, hyperopic at another. Feelings of being spread too thin, or of being the proverbial "kid in a candy store" accompanied this tension. As the summer progressed, the group became more proficient at observing and interpreting common phenomena across sites, but the exploration of solitary and ephemeral phenomena proved more problematic. Flawed enculturation rituals also marred some of the cohesiveness the group might have been expected to attain over time. More attention to building organic solidarity within the group would have produced a collective instrument of greater acuity. Finally, the curious high tech/low tech learning transitions that each inquirer experienced in acquiring new research skills served to impair competence and performance over time.

To render a judgment that may be clearly premature, I viewed the Odyssey from a scientific perspective as an important pilot study with significant long term potential. Whatever substantive research reports are generated may be expected ultimately to be dwarfed by the secondary gains or ripple effects the project will produce. As a benchmark study, the Odyssey succeeded in getting a

naturalistic foot into the door of legitimate consumer research concerns. It seems to have been an enterprise toward which few researchers were indifferent. A quick head-count of sympathisizers and detractors suggests that the project succeeded in capturing the imagination of the field at large. In the following section, I will attempt to interpret the significance of that imagination.

Mythopoeic Aspect: The Heroic View

If we allow full play to the metaphor that undergirds the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, it is not presumptuous to suggest that the ultimate significance of the project is its mythopoeic value. Belk has advanced what might be glossed as a heroic view of consumer research, and I will explore briefly some of the mythic aspects that contribute to that vision.

Heroism in classical perspective is enshrined in two prominent vehicles. The first is the epic. Epic heroes traditionally exhibit qualities of fortitudo and sapientia. Fortitudo is strength that ranges from the merely physical to the nearly mystical. Sapientia is wisdom that ranges from street smarts to true enlightenment. Both are qualities that enable the hero to prosper in an imperfect world. The route to self-fulfillment has varied narrowly through time. The heroes of Homer and Virgil (Achilleus, Odysseus, Aeneas) travelled the sea. Those of Spenser, Cervantes and Fielding (Arthur, Red Cross Knight, Don Quixote, Joseph Andrews) travelled the open road. Mailer's heroes (Aldrin, Armstrong) travel space, while those of Kazantzakis and Milton (Odysseus and Satan) travel, and become, the cosmos. Latter day heroic travellers such as Kerouac, Kesey and Kurault provide a contemporary genealogical link between the classic heroes and Belk's Odysseans. The heroic view of consumer research casts alternative paradigms as the principal actor.

The second heroic vehicle is ritual. I will use Campbell's (1949) monomyth as the archetypal heroic ritual. Campbell views the nuclear unit of the monomyth as a cyclical process of kathodos (a down-going), katharsis, and anodos (an up-coming). The hero ventures forth from the everyday world into a region of supernatural wonder. In his encounter with "fabulous forces," the hero wins a decisive victory and returns from his adventure with the power to bestow boons on others. Once again, Belk's Odysseans propose that the naturalistic paradigm, having been tested in radical encounters with the other, be adopted by researchers.

Another mythic interpretation of the Consumer Behavior Odyssey frames the project as a rite de passage. In Van Gennep's (1960) scheme, rites de passage have a tripartite structure: separation (detachment from a stable, fixed sociocultural state), margin (a terminal phase characterized by ambiguity and communitas, during which an individual is betwixt and between familiar classification), and aggregation (return to classified, secular social life). This progression from structure through antistructure back to structure (Turner 1969) is precisely the pattern followed by the Odyssey project, at both the literal, physical level and at the abstract, paradigmatic level. Just as the Odysseans dropped out of their traditional social roles and created a community of the road before returning, so also did they renounce traditional disciplinary affiliations and models to embrace alternatives, before returning to the fold.

A final mythic view of the Odyssey equates the project with a pilgrimage. The process of the pilgrimage is described succinctly by Turner (1978); the goal of the pilgrimage is specified by Tucker (1967). According to Turner (1978), pilgrimage is characterized by such factors as release from mundane structures, homogenization of status, communitas, ordeal, reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values, emergence of the integral person from multiple personae, movement versus stasis, and individuality posed against institutionalized milieu. Given the metaphoric correspondences established earlier, the Odyssey clearly qualified as a pilgrimage,

and can be interpreted as a metasocial commentary. A pilgrim is an initiand entering into a deeper level of existence than he or she has known in a customary setting; the pilgrim confronts, in a special, "far" milieu, the basic elements of his or her faith (Turner 1978). Perhaps the most potent qualifier of the Odyssey as pilgrimage can be quoted directly from Turner: " ... in the present age of plural values, increasing specialization of function and role, and potent mass communication ... pilgrimage ... serves ... to recollect, and to presage, an alternative mode of social being ... Thus out of the mixing and mingling of ideas from many traditions, a respect may grow for the pilgrimages of others (1978)." Belk's Odysseans sought Tucker's foundations as one way of advancing consumer research.

Conclusion

On my way out the door to join the Odyssey launch, Sid Levy advised me to beware of sirens. As always, his advice is sound. Whether naturalistic inquiry is in fact the winnowing fan that Odysseus' oar must become remains to be seen. I am satisfied that I spent my summer vacation merging the ludic with the ergic. I can think of few more effective strategies for monkeying with typewriters.

References

Arndt, Johan (1985), "On Making Marketing More Scientific: Role of Orientations, Paradigms, Metaphors, and Puzzle Solving," Journal of Marketing, 49(3): 11-23.

Bronowski, Jacob (1973), The "Ascent of Man, Boston: Little Brown & Company.

Barrett, Stanley (1984), The Rebirth of Anthropological Theory, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Campbell, Joseph (1949), The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fernandez, James (1984), "The Mission of Metaphor in Expressive Culture," Current Anthropology, 15(2): 119-145.

Geertz, Clifford (1973), The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic Books.

Gusfield, Joseph (1981), Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hirschman, Elizabeth (1985), "Scientific Style and the Conduct of Consumer Research," Journal of Consumer Research, 12: 142-154.

_____ (1986), "Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria," Journal of Marketing Research, 23(August): 237-249.

Holbrook, Morris (1987), "The Study of Signs in Consumer Esthetics: An Egocentric Review," in Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale, eds. Jean Umiker-Sebeok and Sidney Levy, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Levine, Donald (1985), The Flight from Ambiguity. Essays in Social and Cultural Theory, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levitt, Theodore (1983), "The Globalization of Markets," Harvard Business Review, 61(3): 92-102.

McCloskey, Donald (1985), The Rhetoric of Economics, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Mitroff, Ian and Ralph Kilmann (1978), Methodological Approaches to Social Science, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morgan, Goreth (1980), "Paradigms, Metaphors and Puzzle Solving in Organization Theory," Administrative Science Quarterly, 25(December): 605-622.

Shweder, Richard (1986), "Storytelling Among the Anthropologists," <u>New York Times Book Review</u>, September 21, 1: 38-39.

Temple, Kerry (1986), "Jack Kerouac's Two-Lane Highway," <u>Notre Dame Magazine</u>, 15(2): 23-28.

Tucker, William, ed. (1967), <u>Foundations for a Theory of Consumer Behavior</u>, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Turbayne, Colin (1962), <u>The Myth of Metaphor</u>, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Turner, Victor (1969), <u>The Ritual Process</u>, Chicago: Aldine.

_____ (1974), <u>Dramas, Fields and Metaphors</u>, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

_____ (1978), <u>Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture</u>, New York: Columbia University Press.

Van Gennep, Arnold (1960), <u>The Rites of Passage</u>. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Weiner, Norbert (1964), "Intellectual Honesty and the Contemporary Scientist," <u>Technology Review</u>, (April): 17-18; 45-47.

White, Hayden (1978), <u>Tropics of Discourse</u>, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Whyte, William (1978), "Organizational Behavior Research - Where Do We Go From Here?" in <u>Applied Anthropology in America</u>, eds. Elizabeth Eddy and William Partridge, New York: Columbia University Press, 129-143.