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A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet

RUSSELL W. BELK
JOHN F. SHERRY, JR.
MELANIE WALLENDORF*

Naturalistic inquiry as an ethnographic approach is explained and utilized for exploring emergent themes in buyer and seller behavior at a swap meet. Components of the method used include purposive sampling, triangulation across researchers, emergent theme analysis, autodiving, memoing, member checks, and auditing. Four emergent dialectical substantive themes are discussed: freedom versus rules, boundaries versus transitions, competition versus cooperation, and sacred versus profane.

This study investigated a single swap meet in order to understand and develop an ethnography of that site, and to serve as a pilot study of the methods to be used in a more extensive project studying second order marketing systems at a variety of sites. In the sense that this study was intended as a detailed ethnography of Red Mesa Swap Meet, we intended to be descriptive and to provide a thick characterization of the specific nature of buying, selling, and social interaction that take place there. Qualitative methods of this sort are intended to provide a rich portrait of the phenomenon so that the reader not only learns inputs and outcomes but also gains an understanding of the texture, activities, and processes occurring in the day to day operations at this swap meet.

*Russell W. Belk is N. Eldon Tanner Professor of Marketing, Graduate School of Business, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112. John F. Sherry, Jr. is Assistant Professor of Marketing, J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60201. Melanie Wallendorf is Associate Professor of Marketing, College of Business and Public Administration, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721. Authors are listed alphabetically; all have contributed equally to this work.

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The authors would also like to thank Harold Kassarian of the University of California at Los Angeles, Robert Prus of the University of Waterloo, and Dennis Rook of DDB Needham for serving as auditors of the field notes, journals, photographs, and videotapes produced by this project. As is customary in participant-observation studies, names of informants and sites have been changed here to preserve their anonymity.

But in the sense that this study was to serve as a pilot study, we wished to identify themes and develop hypotheses for further study. The swap meet is a curious anachronism in contemporary U.S. buying and selling and involves substantial second order (used) goods sales. Given our broader interest in studying small scale buying and selling in second order marketing systems, we chose the swap meet for study because it would give us an opportunity to develop initial theoretical insights to be more fully tested in a follow-up project termed the Consumer Behavior Odyssey. Very briefly, the Odyssey was a coast-to-coast summer-long qualitative investigation of consumer behavior, employing depth interviewing, photography, audio and video recording, and participation at a variety of consumer behavior sites. For more thorough descriptions of the Consumer Behavior Odyssey and its purposes, see Belk 1987b, Holbrook 1987, Kassarian 1987, Sherry 1987b, and Wallendorf 1987b.

In planning for the Odyssey, it was essential to explore and test the use of the ethnographic data collection and analysis procedures that we planned to use in the follow-up study because they have been infrequently used in the field of consumer research. The primary purpose of this article is to demonstrate the outcome of that test of methods. The set of methods employed is perhaps most broadly known in current research argot as "naturalistic inquiry" (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These methods take place in a naturally occurring context, are typically qualitative, and represent a systematic set of procedures for assessing the credibility of the findings.

TECHNIQUES AND APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The literature on the conduct of qualitative research is large and growing, both within the consumer behavior

field (e.g., Heisley and Levy 1985; Hirschman 1986) and outside its boundaries (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984). Our purpose is not to review the variety of qualitative techniques available or to detail the postpositivist philosophy of science that produces the research approach taken here. It is, rather, to outline the techniques used in the current work and the logic leading to their selection for the naturalistic investigation of Red Mesa Swap Meet.

Data Collection

Because the hallmark of naturalistic inquiry is the interpretation of data collected in situ, such research begins with the selection of an interactional site at which the phenomena of interest to the inquirers are known to occur. Given our interest in consumer behavior and the short time frame funded for data collection on this project, we designated our site of interest to be a single consumption venue in which purchase, consumption, and disposition of material possessions could be observed and discussed with a varied sample of participants. This consumption venue, Red Mesa Swap Meet, was then inhabited by a three-person team of inquirers with a shared interest in consumer behavior but with divergent training in anthropology, psychology, and sociology. This team attempted to produce as thorough as possible a description of the activity occurring at the site from its own perspective (a distanced perspective that ethnographers call "etic") and from the perspectives of participants engaged in that activity (this more documentary and empathetic perspective is termed "emic").

Data collection at the consumption venue proceeded primarily through four days of observation and interviewing. Since a major goal of this project was to explore these methods in a team setting as a precursor to launching the summer-long Consumer Behavior Odyssey, the short time span was of less concern than it might otherwise have been. Often, particularly in social rather than research interactions, a much longer time span is required to develop rapport and understanding sufficient for interpretation. However, with careful interviewing style (Douglas 1985) utilizing the unique "confessionals" that may occur for the researcher by assuming the duality of both insider and outsider typically found in the role of "the stranger" (Simmel 1971), rapport can develop through a depth interview to a surprising level of intimacy in a short time (Wallendorf 1987a; cf. Rook 1985). Even in the short time span employed for data collection in this project, the project's methods emerged and developed over time. During the earliest phase of data collection, the inquirers observed swap meet activity taking place. As our understanding of this activity led us to formulate recurring questions, we began talking with and then interviewing participants. Typically, a naturalistic researcher travels along the continuum from passive to participant observation,

generating insights from each vantage point. Similarly, our interviews at the consumption venue began in a nondirective, open-ended fashion and shifted over time to a more directive format as our understanding of the focal phenomena was refined.

Data Recording

The output of this observation, participation, and interview process is a set of field notes and journal material that serve as the raw data for interpretation. In addition, for some interactions, mechanical recording of field data in the form of photographs, videotapes, and audio tapes was used to supplement the field notes and journals written by the inquirers (see Figure A). While some authors have indicated that they believe the use of such mechanical recording equipment is too intrusive (Hirschman 1986), through our actual use of this equipment, we have found this to be a problem only in the first moments of an interview, if at all. It has been our experience in using such equipment and techniques that informants (called subjects in experimental research and respondents in survey research) become habituated to the presence of equipment just as they do to the presence of inquirers and generally behave appropriately (for more discussion, see Whyte 1984 and Worth and Adair 1972). Although the equipment is intrusive in the sense that it leads the informant to expect an explanation, this is an opportunity rather than a problem for the inquirer who is appropriately interested in explaining his or her role as a researcher and involving informants in the research (see Figure A, Photograph #1 of a video interview being conducted at the site). Further, the intrusiveness of the equipment occasionally causes it to serve as a magnet, drawing interested observers and passersby into off-camera interactions with inquirers, adding to the sample pool and partially removing sampling biases that may occur due to researchers' selectivity. However, as noted by one auditor after viewing the videotaped interviews and reading a draft of this paper, the videotaped material did take on an "unnatural" or staged dimension for some of the informants. Thus, peoples' behavior during an on-camera interview is understood to be potentially different from regular behavior, although its expression is necessarily given longer life. For this reason, not all interactions were recorded using the video camera, and it was not even introduced into the site until the researchers and the nature of their project were already known to a number of the participants. Videotaped interviews are certainly not the only source of data used in this project.

Whether collected manually or mechanically, naturalistic inquiry data are ultimately transcribed and recorded in field notes by the researcher. Field notes are elaborated, redacted transcriptions of the researcher's daily efforts. The researcher attempts in the field notes

FIGURE A
RED MESA PHOTOGRAPHS



1. Video interview being conducted in overflow area at Red Mesa Swap Meet.



2. Autodriving an informant using video camera.



3. Sellers in the regular selling area; these informants performed a member check on the project several months later.



4. Overflow sales area adjacent to parking lot.



5. Seller of personal possessions in overflow area.



6. Seller in regular selling area with permanent display facilities.

to capture and represent in as accurate and fine detail as possible the phenomena encountered. It is standard practice to record as much detail as possible, usually well beyond what the inquirer at the time thinks will be necessary. This is particularly true in the early phases of a project, because themes emerge as the project unfolds (Strauss et al. 1969). Field notes are written from opportune jottings in notebooks while in the field, observations dictated into audiorecorders, and systematic transcription or cataloging of mechanically recorded data. Each of the members of this research team had a slightly different style in writing up field notes, but each aspired to the goals of comprehensiveness, accuracy, and timeliness. Group culture served to sharpen our attention to attaining these goals. We shared our notes with each other following the completion of separate note writing such that none of us read the others' field notes prior to completing our own. The three sets of field notes stand as separate recordings of the research activity. Collectively, the field notes constitute the major corpus of data for interpretation.

The following excerpts from the field notes collected by the inquirers in the course of the present study serve as examples:

Alice has met a number of other vendors and finds them to be very helpful. She has seen several of them at other swap meets. Two other vendors told her to get rid of the display rack that Paul built for the towels. They said it looked too nice for people to want to look through the towels. So she got rid of it and their sales improved . . . Paul drove up in the van. Alice introduced me to him and explained my project. He sat down and began talking with us. He said they enjoy the freedom of being there and traveling around to different places. He said they are planning to stay in Pueblo through the winter, so they could take some marketing courses at Hohokam Community College. He wanted to know if I thought they would learn anything that would help them in their swap meet selling. [MW]

A second field note excerpt from a different inquirer describes a different interaction.

I begin an interview with Corinne and Cindy, two W/F/late 20s—early 30s. Each of them is a new mother, and each works in a bank. They have come out here this morning and will stay only for the first session (@3:30). They work from the back of a pickup truck and sell only stuff they have previously owned. They are quite willing to discuss their Red Mesa Swap Meet activities, and enjoy teaching me about local practices. When you drive your truck to your chosen site, other vendors 'swarm all over you like flies.' They help unload your truck without your having asked for help, so eager are they to see what you've got. 'Sometimes people get ripped off' by this unsolicited help. Vendors are each others' own best customers, says Corinne; Cindy readily assents. [JS]

In addition to the set of field notes, naturalistic inquiry follows the anthropological practice of having inquirers keep a more introspective and personal journal.

The journal provides the researcher and subsequent auditors (external judges of the faithfulness of interpretations to the data) with a record of personal impressions and biases, emotional and attitudinal dispositions, individual motives, and speculation and extemporaneous theorizing, all of which is useful in retrospectively interpreting the substantive field notes. The journal is also an effective outlet for ventilation of emotions experienced in the highly involving, labor-intensive field-work enterprise. As illustrative examples, the following passages are excerpted from the researchers' journals:

As always, people are natural teachers if the students are sincere. Informants have been more than happy to spend time with us today. Even the ones who clearly grasp our professional identities and interests are willing to instruct us on the finer points of their behavior.

I ran the gamut of family types today on my own subjective scale of ideal types. I spent time with the 'perfect family' and enjoyed watching them interact. Much love and mutual respect was in evidence there. By contrast, I watched a number of dysfunctional, even abusive interactions occur among other families I observed. Red Mesa Swap Meet is an excellent venue for observing family behavior in a consumer culture. I find myself having very angry reactions to some of the ways that children are socialized in particular subcultures. So much potential can be obliterated so easily that it literally makes your head swim. After today, I find myself missing my own wife and kids.

Despite the regional cast of our fieldsite, it is interesting to note how often religion-as-product/ministry-as-service transcends geography. That ideology can be marketed as effectively as durable goods is an issue that the summer project might explore in depth.

I find my concern with blitzkrieg ethnography being tempered somewhat by the phenomenon of high-tech equipment as license. Both researchers and informants can become disinhibited, not just inhibited, in the presence of video equipment. [JS]

Another excerpt from a different journal comments on the relationships between inquirers and informants formed in response to the video camera.

When we finally got out the video camera we were surprised to find people coming up to us asking to be interviewed (some thought we were the TV news, but others just wanted to be filmed). One 14-year-old (Ephram) even wanted to pay us and played two guitar numbers for us. On the other hand, 83-year-old Sidney wants a copy of the videotape portion with him on it (we'll pick up his blank tomorrow).

[The three of us] have a fine rapport with each other, and we are known (and I think respected) by various informants at the meet. No one has really refused us, except for one vendor on whom we'd gotten a false lead that he wanted to be videotaped. On the other hand, I think the quality of our videotaped interviews is a bit lower than that of our non-taped interviews. Alice told Melanie that some people are envious of those we chose to interview. [RB]

The journal provides a form of metacommentary on the research process and on the individual researcher's personal growth during the project. When written in a brutally honest fashion, with no regard for eventual public disposition, the journal becomes a very effective interpretive tool. For example, posthumous publication of Malinowski's journal (1967) shed new light on the ethnographer's seminal work in the Trobriand Islands; the Baffin Island diaries kept by Boas (Cole 1983) are similarly valuable.

In total, this project resulted in 10 pages of field notes and 12 photographs from a preliminary site visit; 87 pages of field notes, 14 pages of journal notes, 82 black and white photographs, 24 color slides, approximately 2 hours of videotaped interviews, and miscellaneous artifacts from the four days of intensive data collection; 10 additional pages of field notes and 12 additional black and white photographs from a later visit to the site for a member check (a reinterview of selected informants after sharing the report with them); and letters of attestation and/or commentary on the manuscript from three external auditors. These materials, along with the larger data set of materials from the follow-up project referred to as the Consumer Behavior Odyssey are available to qualified scholars through an archive housed at the Marketing Science Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Research Team

In contrast to the logical positivist tradition of attempting to eliminate the impact of the researcher upon the phenomenon studied, naturalistic inquiry demands that the researcher become the instrument. To a large extent, the investigator and the method are inseparable, and any attempt to divorce the two is futile. Thus, self-consciousness in data collection (Douglas 1985; Glazer 1972) and self-disclosure in both field materials and the resultant published documentation is a critical dimension of naturalistic inquiry. At a minimum, this disclosure must include a rigorous description of the conditions under which data are collected such that readers of the interpretations provided by the researchers can evaluate the adequacy and appropriateness of the method used for arriving at these interpretations.

Ideally, disclosure extends much further and is facilitated greatly by the journal. Feedback from members of the research team is an important source of information on one's own professional style. The formation of small group culture depends in part upon the constructive criticism of the emergent, technical expertise of the team. Thus, the team is at once an instrument and a venue; as a focus of reflective consciousness, its acuity as an instrument is alleged to sharpen with longevity. The evolution of interdisciplinary small group research culture is imperfectly understood in part because it is so infrequently documented (see Bott 1971 for an exception). While such documentation was at-

tempted in the pilot project, a full-scale examination of group culture formation was deferred.

In the present study, the research team was formed to reflect variety of actual substantive field exposure to the phenomena being studied.

John has been researching a Chicago swap meet on and off for about a year, but Melanie (despite a prior one-hour visit with photos and field notes to Red Mesa Swap Meet) and I won't know quite what to expect until we see the meet in action. [RB]

In addition, the research team was composed to represent varied backgrounds in social science theory (psychology, sociology, and anthropology) to ensure a wide range of concepts and theories from which to draw in interpretations.

More importantly, the research team members attempted to prepare themselves in field work methods. Researchers employing a positivistic research approach are expected to have formal training in experimental and survey design, sampling theory, analysis of variance and regression, and multivariate statistics, as well as to learn by doing such research under the guidance of (typically) a dissertation committee. Conducting naturalistic inquiry research is also a skill that requires training and learning. It is not as simple as talking to some people and writing a paper. And it is not a research approach that should be adopted cavalierly by the novice or the untrained without appropriate background work. Furthermore, qualitative fieldwork and analysis inevitably requires more time and patience than survey and experimental work. In this project, it has taken a year and a half after data collection was completed to computerize and clean the data, code the photographs, conduct the iterative process of analysis, write a draft report, conduct member checks and audits, and revise the manuscript to reflect these processes before submitting the paper for review for publication.

In addition to the substantive knowledge base just indicated, each of the three researchers in this project has training and experience in the conduct of qualitative field work of this type. Because of the team approach, however, not all researchers needed to come to the project with identical skills. Among the research team members, we had as data collection techniques practice and training in video photography, ethnographic fieldwork, participant-observation methods, group depth interviewing, and photography.

Purposive Sampling Design

Consistent with the emergence of themes and foci for the research, naturalistic inquiry employs an emergent sampling design with a serial selection of sample units that has been called judgmental (Bailey 1978), theoretical (Glaser and Strauss 1967), or purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985). That is, the sample is not specified a priori; rather, each sampled unit is selected

on the basis of the inquirer's experience with previously sampled units. The units are generally people, but also include times, places, and institutions, and are stratified by informant genders, roles, and ages. This emergent design permits continuous adjustment of the sample to focus on those units that are most relevant for developing or testing an interpretation until redundancy of information is achieved.

As in forming the research team, variety and contrast were primary criteria in selecting informants (Miles and Huberman 1984). Whereas the traditional survey research approach would be to sample in order to get representativeness, this is only the beginning approach to sampling in naturalistic inquiry. Later, in constructing an understanding of our focal consumption venue, sampling units were purposively determined both by individual researchers and by emergent group consensus. The following journal excerpts illustrate the kinds of sampling criteria that emerged.

I then walked around to talk to sellers who were selling their own possessions. I wanted to get stories about the objects and their connection to the people's lives, and feelings about disposition and current sense of self. [MW]

[We] have spent much more time talking to sellers than to buyers (other than those who are also sellers). For tomorrow, we must decide to be more focused and either stay with sellers or shift emphasis to buyers. [RB]

We decided to do more consumer interviews on film and to finish those interviews with sellers which would hopefully give us some quality material, now that we have had a chance to view our efforts from the previous day. [MW]

In an effort to comply fully with the spirit of informed consent, we attempted to explain our identities and our research interests to all informants. Except for a few general site photographs, no unobtrusive recording was attempted. Rather than finding the suspicious, unwilling response that often greets survey researchers (e.g., Dillman 1978), we found people to be amazingly warm and receptive in talking to us. In fact, several informants also introduced us to others they knew at the swap meet. In other cases, informants had already seen us interviewing others and had some idea of our purposes before we approached them.

The use of covert techniques as practiced by Cialdini (1984) and advocated by Hirschman (1986), despite their superficial appeal and claimed benefit, were not employed in this study. While they are sometimes claimed to be the only way to study a phenomenon, covert techniques are ethically invasive, and violate both the letter and spirit of informed consent. Further, such techniques can effectively "poison the well" for future researchers interested in related phenomena if informants discover the duplicity. Finally, as interpretation is frequently negotiated between analyst and informant, and as informed consent and ethnographic

rigor frequently produce insightful collaboration, covert research often violates canons of common sense.

Through our emergent sampling procedure a shared interpretation of critical structural and interactional features of the swap meet was developed. In total, 110 informants were directly interviewed, while many others were observed. Naturalistic inquiry is not based on the premise that a larger sample size is always better, particularly, as pointed out by one auditor, if depth of understanding is sacrificed in the quest for quantity. However, the present study, as a pilot for a much larger project, was concerned with using a sufficiently large sample to provide contrasts in types of participants and activities. Available time and money constraints, as is usually true in naturalistic inquiry, helped determine ultimate sample size, as did reaching redundancy, where further interviews (or further interviews with a particular type of informant) offered no new insights.

Autodriving and Memoing

Two supplemental techniques of data collection were employed in this project: autodriving and memoing. Autodriving (Heisley and Levy 1985) involves showing people photographs or video images of themselves as stimuli in interviewing or reinterviewing them (see Figure A, Photograph #2 of autodriving using the video camera for playback). The video footage or photographs of previous encounters with the informants serve as a closely personal projective device (Whyte 1984). Through this technique we were able to see informants' reactions to previous states.

We returned a set of pictures to some people whom Russ had photographed earlier. We used the photographs to autodriving. They recalled items which had been sold. The family was able to recapture for the first time the items which were now gone. This was the first time that they had confronted that loss. They reflected on the loss as they looked at the photographs. It reminded me of looking at photographs of deceased people, but the family didn't indicate any remorse. They said that the children were the only ones who felt sad about selling things . . . They indicated that they had experienced some indecision as to whether to bring certain items with them, but once the item was at the swap meet, they were committed to the idea of selling it and parting with it without remorse. [MW]

Through such autodriving with photographs and video footage of informant interviews, we were able to direct an informant's attention to a prior state without orally directing the thought process using questioning and requesting imaging (visualizing a behavior).

A second supplemental data collection technique used was memoing (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Memoing involves sporadic oral or written briefings of other team members regarding one's emerging interpretations of data or sense of project progress. This may be accomplished by sharing journals with the other researchers:

journals contain emerging interpretations (which are pertinent to memoing) as well as introspections about the interviews conducted during the day. However, memoing may also occur in oral or written communication about emerging interpretations after the field work is completed. Close contact among team members during the field work stage of the project enhanced our ability to draw upon each other's varied skills and insights and to engage in frequent memoing.

Our breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and residence together were essential. There were non-interviewing hours, but no after-hours since Red Mesa Swap Meet was our constant and continual focus. Far from being a chore, it is a fascinating challenge. [RB]

Memoing was routinized in an evening debriefing in which the day's filming was viewed, and a discussion of themes and impressions was undertaken.

Our team approach seems to work quite well. Circulating individually, convening periodically for discussion, and working jointly provide us with a range of observations during the course of the day. Late at night, we conducted a clinical staffing of sorts (an audit, a post mortem, etc.—we'll have to decide upon an appropriate metaphor—Odyssey audit? How about DOA/daily odyssey audit? The acronym would capture the physical condition of naturalistic [vs. positivistic] researchers at day's end) . . . We seem to possess a strong set of individual skills which complement each other nicely. [JS]

Clearly, memoing had a profound impact on the conduct of the remainder of the project in forcing a review of activities to date. It shaped and challenged our emerging consciousness of themes and the development of sampling plans.

Data Analysis

The analysis of naturalistically obtained data is not an inclusive, discrete phase that follows data collection. Rather, analysis begins during initial collection of data and continues throughout the project, consistent with the emergent design of a naturalistic inquiry. Analysis proceeds along the lines of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), in which new data are constantly compared to prior interpretations as the researchers interact with each other and their informants on a daily basis. It also proceeds on the level of postfield discourse. Because data have been recorded in visual and verbal form through field notes, still and video film, and audio tape, postfield analysis is frequently guided by conventional quantitative forms of content analysis (Kassarjian 1977), as well as more qualitative interpretive approaches.

Recently, Miles and Huberman (1984) have attempted a practical, eclectic inventory of over 50 reduction and display techniques for managing qualitative data. Their contribution is valuable not so much for the cataloging of techniques as for the discussion of the

stages of research wherein analysis takes place—from initial bounding of collection, through collection itself, to postfield analysis. Among the analytic techniques employed during the data collection phase of this study were coding devices such as reflective and marginal remarks, pattern coding (coding the raw data by mechanisms that explain why particular events or processes occur), memoing, and periodic site analysis meetings during which the researchers would conduct an internal audit of progress to date. Techniques employed upon return from the field include pattern and thematic notation, clustering of observations into conceptual groupings, the forging of metaphors, and triangulation of interpretations among team members. Where data are extensive, computerized (qualitative) analyses are sometimes used. In the present study, such computer analyses were not needed; they were employed, however, when the full-scale Odyssey project was undertaken.

Member Checks

Member checks (Lincoln and Guba 1985) were also employed in this project. A member check involves providing all or a portion of a final report to people who have served as informants on the project—that is, who are members of the sample. Their commentary on the interpretations in the report are sought as a check on the viability of the interpretations. It is not necessary to revise the report to cover all disagreements a particular informant may have because differences in interpretation may derive from the different roles played by various actors in the system and differing individual interpretations. However, it is necessary in a member check to consider why this person disagrees with the interpretation and to note such differences in the report.

In this project, two member checks were conducted: one with two sellers who had served as informants, and one with a buyer who had been an informant. Since buyers and sellers each have distinctive roles and expectations with regard to swap meet participation, it was deemed important to include both types in the member checks. One member from each role (a husband/wife pair in the case of the sellers) was chosen to provide this diversity. Members were sought who were willing to read a document such as this, somewhat articulate, and knowledgeable participants in swap meet activity. Rather than representativeness in some modal sense, a reasonable understanding of the purpose of our project and sufficient interest were the criteria for selection.

Each member check participant was asked to comment on a first draft copy of the report to the funding agency. In the case of the sellers, the member check also provided an opportunity for a more longitudinal understanding of their activities because it necessitated two later visits to the swap meet. This member check confirmed our earlier impression that these two infor-

ments—Alice and Paul—were competent business persons with a dedication to financial success despite their sparse supply of merchandise and poor sales during the four days of data collection for the pilot project (see Figure A, Photograph #3 of member check sellers taken during the four days of data collection).

As I rounded the corner, I glanced over to the side of the aisle to see if Alice and Paul's van was there. I didn't see it, but then looked over to the opposite side of the aisle to see Alice smiling and coming over toward me. Her stand was mostly set up and was quite different from two months ago when I had first talked to her. The changes overwhelmed me for a bit and she was very happy to see that . . . Alice said that she had thought of calling me several times to tell me about all of their changes, but had been very busy. As was now obvious to me, she said that they are now doing very well. [MW]

This member check was useful in confirming behaviorally what had previously been merely our impression of Alice and Paul. With the buyer, the member check served to reinforce our earlier impressions of his consumption style.

Bud was excited to read the report and approached it as a treasure hunt (much as he approaches the swap meet) hoping to find hidden treasures inside . . . Bud was most pleased with the part of the report which characterized the swap meet as being a part of the wild west. He said, 'That's probably why I like it so much!' He repeated the wild west words to himself several times with pleasure. [MW]

This confirmation of our earlier impression provided some evidence of the trustworthiness of the understanding we developed in the earlier field work.

Despite informants' favorable reactions to being included in a member check, the member checks themselves resulted in alterations in the report. Both sets of informants had comments on the overall atmosphere of the swap meet, particularly with regard to the extent of wholesome vs. illegal activity. Interestingly, the buyer thought we had characterized the swap meet as more wholesome than it actually is, while the sellers thought we had portrayed it as containing more illegal activity than it actually does. However, these differing perceptions from different role occupants led us to a better understanding of the way in which illegal activities are necessarily embedded in legal activities and use them as a cover.

External Auditors

External auditing of field data and subsequent analyses were also employed. Three peers familiar with the conduct and interpretation of naturalistic research were provided with complete data sets (field notes, journals, videotapes, photographs) and were asked to examine the report for its grounding in data. All three auditors have conducted qualitative studies of their own and are familiar not only with the techniques, but also with the

role of the inquirer. Their task as auditors was to criticize the project for lack of sufficient data for drawing its conclusions if they saw such a void. They were also asked to check the logic of the analytic categories employed in analyzing and interpreting the data. Also, auditors were asked to comment on the extent to which they saw the findings flowing from the data rather than being imposed by the biases of the inquirers. Finally, sampling choices and the level of triangulation (agreement) among inquirers were reviewed.

Although strongly recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), external auditing was not a technique with which the auditors felt entirely comfortable. For example, one auditor pointed out his reservations about the procedure:

I am happy (and interested) to do this for you, but I am not impressed with the method of trying to validate/credential field research. The real question is whether one achieves 'intimate familiarity' with the subject matter or not, and that usually becomes very evident from reading an ethnographic report. I would rather have people spend more time gathering data and trying to convey this in a manner which reflects its essence than running after audit reports. You can't assess qualitative research in the same way you can assess accounting techniques or computer runs. [RP]

The authors would agree that the auditing process has its problems. However, we are still convinced that it is appropriate for use in the field of consumer research given the lack of an ethnographic tradition and the resultant lack of systematic training in the methods, ethics, and spirit of inquiry that characterize qualitative fieldwork. We are convinced that careful use of auditing techniques and scrutiny of their outcome by reviewers and editors could prevent the publication of works that, in the final analysis, are not based on careful field methods and data collection. For examples of such controversial pieces, see critiques of Castaneda (deMille 1980; Douglas 1975), Donner (Holmes 1983), Hirschman (Belk and Wallendorf 1987; Brinberg and Kumar 1987; Sherry 1987a), and Mead (Freeman 1983).

Clearly, an auditor cannot replace the judgment of each reader who must critically view these or any other research results. But auditors do at least receive a complete data set: it is impossible, after all, to reduce qualitative data into the characteristic summary statistics used with numerically represented data. As one auditor pointed out, because ethnographic research illustrates just how complex the world is, the data take on an expansive quality. Nevertheless, we have attempted here to include sufficient excerpts from the field notes and journals to provide the critical reader with a grounding in the data. For those who desire additional materials, an audit trail of data (as suggested by Lincoln and Guba 1985) left by the research team is available for inspection.

Thus, an audit goes far beyond the informal review of a manuscript that colleagues often perform for each

other: it goes beyond a mere reading in that auditors are presented with all of the raw data. The auditors' task is to ascertain the adequacy of the data for drawing the conclusions and interpretations included in the paper. However, auditors may draw slightly different interpretations of the data given their different conceptual backgrounds and their own etic points of view; they are not called upon to agree that the interpretation provided by the inquirers is the one and only one that can be drawn. In fact, like colleagues who provide critical comments on a manuscript, they may express their disagreement with the interpretation. But this is not the primary function of an audit; rather, the auditors are asked to comment on the dependability and confirmability of the findings. Of course, it is expected that auditors who will feel free to come to the conclusion that the research lacks dependability or confirmability will be chosen, just as it is expected in the journal review process that reviewers who can give a fair and critical review to a manuscript will be chosen.

In this study, only one of the auditors was involved in the planning of the project. This minimized the possibility of auditors being co-opted by such inclusion while permitting comments from one auditor involved throughout the project. Each auditor produced a letter of attestation indicating his findings from the audit process. These are also available to interested scholars.

PRIOR SWAP MEET RESEARCH

Although this inquiry attempted to begin without predispositions, theory, or hypotheses about swap meets, it does not exist in isolation. In order to position our study within the extant literature, this section briefly reviews what is known about swap meets more broadly before we turn to the specific findings that emerged from our study of the Red Mesa Swap Meet.

Swap meets or flea markets are ostensibly recent forms of buyer-seller exchange that closely resemble the oldest and most basic forms of exchange outside the household. They bear a strong resemblance to contemporary markets in traditional and peasant societies (e.g., Beales 1975; Geertz 1963; MacKay and Weeks 1984) as well as medieval markets and fairs (e.g., Braudel 1967). In describing a rural Guatemalan Indian economy, Tax said (1963, ix):

Every man is his own firm and works ruggedly for himself. Money there is, in small denominations; trade there is, with what men carry on their backs; free entrepreneurs, the impersonal market place, competition—these are in the rural economy. But commerce is without credit, as production is without machines. It turns out that the difference between a poor people and a rich one is the difference between the hand and the machine, between money and credit, between the merchant and the firm; and that these are differences between the 'modern' economy and the primitive 'underdeveloped' ones.

With few exceptions, Tax's description might well refer to a contemporary North American swap meet instead of a "primitive" society's economic system.

Because of their similarity to peasant markets combined with their presence in contemporary North America, swap meets provide an excellent context for meeting the goals of the present project, which were to (1) present a methodology not commonly used in the field of consumer research, and (2) provide a "thick" description (Geertz 1963) of a consumption context as a means of demonstrating the value of the methodology.

Like farmers markets (Pyle 1971; Sommer, Wing, and Aitkens 1980) and garage sales (Camia 1985; Dovel and Healy 1977; Freedman 1976; Herrmann and Soiffer 1984), swap meets may be seen as modern anachronisms in which smaller scale, more direct, and often less efficient exchange mechanisms have partly supplanted newer, less costly, larger scale exchange institutions. Yet, swap meets coexist with these more bureaucratized institutions for exchange.

King (1981) suggests that the swap meet caters to lower class shoppers and vendors and contrasts these buyers and sellers to the more elite patrons of flea markets, crafts markets, charity bazaars, antique shows, and modern renaissance fairs. While there is some support for this class-based difference in prior studies (e.g., Razouk and Voight 1985), variation across swap meets suggests that King's impression is misleading. For instance, Maisel (1974) found that in the Alameda Penny Market, the representation of white collar and professional occupations was greater than that of blue collar occupations. Furthermore, work at various sites by the authors suggests that the linguistic swap meet/flea market distinction is more regional than socioeconomic. For purposes of this article and in general usage, flea markets are swap meets. They are a pervasive phenomenon that is not restricted to poorer people or more rural areas and that is peopled by buyers and sellers with full access to more "modern" retail settings.

Several reasons have been offered for the growth of the curious anachronism of contemporary swap meets. Without comparable historical data we can only speculate about why they emerged. However, it is clear that contemporary swap meets serve a variety of functions for the several types of participants in swap meet activities. First, as a part of the underground economy, there are illegal financial advantages to be had in the sale or barter of merchandise on which taxes are not always paid, and income is not always reported (McCrohan and Smith 1986; Sherman, McCrohan, and Smith 1985). This feature also offers some opportunity to sell stolen goods (Maisel 1974).

A second function of flea markets, besides offering new goods for sale, is providing one of the culture's few structures for lateral cycling of used goods (Brown and Johnson 1973; Claassen 1975; Kassander 1973; Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy 1981; Young 1973). In lateral cycling, the use and form of used merchandise remains

constant while the user changes, whereas in recycling, form, use, and users all change. The recent increase in lateral cycling has been criticized for replacing the downward socioeconomic movement of goods found in charity donations with exchanges that now occur primarily within a social class (Gordon 1985). The criticism suggests that sellers and buyers frequent swap meets for economic reasons and that other social mechanisms for the redistribution of used goods decline as a result.

Perhaps some prior researchers have seen the swap meet as a response to declining purchasing power by the lower and middle classes (e.g., Razzouk and Gourley 1982; Razzouk and Voight 1985; Sherman et al. 1985) because they have viewed such meets as solely an economic phenomenon. As Maisel (1974) found, however, there is often a searching for action or adventure that occurs at the swap meet. McCree (1984) characterizes these meets as a place in which the satisfaction of playing an ancient "game" can occur. Treasure-hunting, magic, and the quest for the American dream of self sufficiency may all play a role in motivating swap meet sellers.

From the buyer's perspective, the broad array of swap meet offerings also affords some of the magic and surprise of a treasure hunt (Freedman 1976; McCree 1984; Wiseman 1979). The perception of bargains may be part of the allure (Razzouk and Voight 1985), although behavioral evidence suggests that price sensitivity on site may be low (Trinka 1980). If economic motives predominate, treasure hunting and bargain hunting (also primitive metaphors) must be strong buyer attractions because used goods and swap meet settings are associated with higher perceived risk (Yavas, Claibach, and Riecken 1981; Yavas, Riecken, and Claibach 1982).

Again it appears that there is more to swap meets than economic transactions to account for their attraction. It has been suggested that swap meet sellers prefer the freedom, individualism, and easy-entry entrepreneurship of the swap meet to the corporate world of 9 to 5 employment (Maisel 1974), and that socializing and a resulting sense of community serve as attractions for both buyers and sellers (Camia 1985; McCree 1984). The motivation of recreation or fun has been reported by both buyers and sellers at swap meets and related forms of retail exchange (Herrmann and Soiffer 1984, Camia 1985), and there is some evidence that swap meets facilitate exchange between buyers and sellers who need to acquire or dispose of goods because of role transitions, changes in family life cycle stage, or geographic movements (Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy 1981). In this sense, swap meets may be more adaptive to changes in a consumer's life status than are more conventionally studied retail settings. However, almost no work exists that traces the processes by which people actually become involved in swap meet activity.

The non-economic features of swap meets in partic-

ular suggest that they may serve interesting functions that are rare or absent in more conventionally studied retail settings such as suburban malls, department stores, and fast food outlets. Because most prior studies of swap meets and other secondary marketing systems have concentrated on demographic descriptions of patrons and questionnaire responses concerning economic motives and attitudes (Dovel and Healy 1977; Razzouk and Gourley 1982; Riecken, Yavas, and Battle 1979; Sherman et al. 1985; Yavas et al. 1981; Yavas and Reicken 1981; Yavas et al. 1982; Young 1973), much room remains for more detailed investigation of the phenomena and interactions of the swap meet.

Among the relevant activities and processes that are not well understood in the context of the swap meet are pricing and bargaining (Prus 1985; Schouten 1987), the symbolic contamination of extended self in used goods (Freedman 1976; Goffman 1971; LaBranche 1973; O'Reilly et al. 1984; Winakor and Martin 1983), the lifestyles of the swap meet (Herrmann and Soiffer 1984), determinants of "used good" status versus "collectible" or "antique" status (Thompson 1979), lateral cycling versus recycling of used goods (Brown and Johnson 1973; Claassen 1975; Kassander 1973; Schiffer et al. 1981; Wood 1973), determinants of product disposition (Burke, Conn, and Lutz 1978; Hanson 1980; Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977), and folklore in the swap meet (Freedman 1976; Maisel 1974).

RED MESA SWAP MEET: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

As a pilot study for a longer term naturalistic inquiry into consumer behavior, the present investigation focused on a single consumption venue and explored a variety of significant settings, actors, events, processes, and objects central to that venue. These initial sampling parameters were chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of the venue and to facilitate and improve the kinds of diagnostic research (Whyte 1978) to be undertaken in the follow-up project. From the description and analysis of these parameters emerged a number of patterns or "themes" that organized the ways in which analysts and informants perceived the swap meet as a phenomenon. As is standard in the field of anthropology, the interpretations of analysts are termed "etic" while the perceptions of informants are termed "emic." An interpretive summary of these themes is presented in the balance of this article, following a discussion of the site, the lineup and setup processes, shopping activities and ambience, and illustrative portraits of sellers and buyers.

The ethnography presented in the following pages is a distillation of a longer technical report (Belk et al. 1986), which, along with the primary field materials, is available to interested inquirers from the authors.

Pseudonyms have been employed for people and places throughout the document to preserve the anonymity of informants. Further, the discussion of themes has been telescoped in the interest of brevity. The themes discussed convey much of the information that a more exhaustive commentary would provide, especially given the exploratory nature of the project. These themes are not intended as a conceptual unit, but rather as useful concepts for explaining the major activities and processes observed during this project. The concepts selected are also those that seemed most fruitful for further examination in the follow-up project.

The four themes that emerged are freedom versus rules, boundaries versus transitions, competition versus cooperation, and sacred versus profane. Other contrasting pairs treated at length elsewhere (Belk et al. 1986), including male versus female, corporeal versus incorporeal goods, bargaining versus buying, and treasure versus junk, are also present in this ethnographic summary, although they are not treated in depth. The following pages present an overview of the Red Mesa Swap Meet that is suggestive of the complexity of this institution and that provides a number of points of departure for additional research.

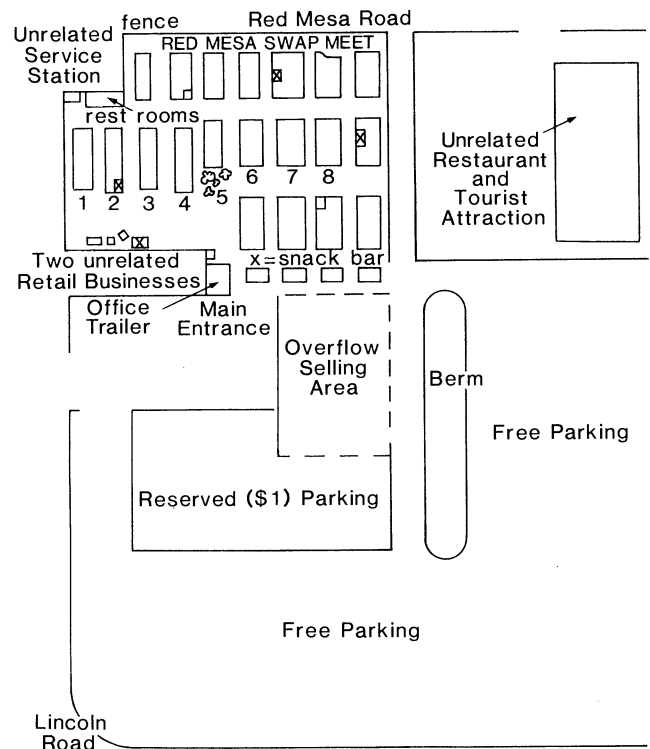
The Site

The Red Mesa Swap Meet is a fenced outdoor trading area located at the intersection of two major commercial streets in a largely upper-middle class residential area of Pueblo, New Mexico. This is a high desert region with picturesque mountains rising behind the foothills on the edge of this side of town. Pueblo is a community of about 450,000 and growing. The population is predominantly white with a large number of Mexican Americans and a somewhat smaller number of American Indians comprising the largest local subcultures. Red Mesa is located on the Anglo side of the town, which has recently annexed this area to include it within the city limits. The immediate neighborhood is predominantly an upper-middle class shopping district with restaurants, stock brokers, banks, a ski shop, and specialty stores that are not likely to feel direct competition with the swap meet. There is only one other major swap meet in town—a smaller one on the Hispanic side of town. A map of Red Mesa is provided in Figure B.

The main vendor area is slightly larger than a U.S. football field, with an adjacent overflow vendor area of approximately one-third this size. Parking is provided at no charge, and closer preferred parking is available for \$1.00. At peak hours, the free parking area is filled. There is no charge for buyer admission to the meet. Sellers must pay \$8.00 per session for a regular 10 × 20-foot space and \$9.00 per session for a premium space. There are six sessions per week on Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday afternoons/evenings and on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

FIGURE B

MAP OF RED MESA SWAP MEET



There are 620 seller spaces marked out in the regular selling area, of which 290 are set aside for monthly rental at the prices indicated above. The overflow area will accommodate about 200 additional unmarked spaces. These are generally occupied only on weekend daytime sessions since they lack the lights, electricity, and other amenities (e.g., snack bars, restrooms) of the regular selling area (see Figure A, Photograph #4 of overflow selling area). There is no limit on the number of spaces a seller may rent, but spaces are allocated on a first come, first served basis. As a result, in order to get a particular location or a specific number of adjoining spaces, there is a lineup Friday morning by some sellers who do not rent by the month.

Lineup and Set-up

Sellers who begin to line up on Friday morning are most likely to be in a van or panel truck that is packed tightly with boxed merchandise. These are the "regulars" who either come to this meet every week or rotate between this meet and others throughout the year. Out-of-state license plates from states such as Texas, Ohio, Indiana, California, Colorado, and Florida are more common than in-state plates. Many vehicles pull camper trailers and sport stickers from other swap meets around the country. The sellers themselves are a mixed group: many are retired from other occupations or the

military, a number work other full-time jobs, and others make selling at this and perhaps other swap meets their sole occupation. There are a number of younger entrepreneurs in their twenties, and the retired sellers are primarily in their fifties or sixties. There are fewer sellers in their thirties and forties; these sellers often have their families working with them. Many of the older and younger sellers work with a spouse, and occasionally a group of friends sell together. Some booths are run by extended families. In the case of some Korean vendors, a large kin network was believed to be functioning as a unit. Some retailers with permanent shop space elsewhere also trade at the meet. A variety of racial groups are represented, with whites the most frequent sellers, followed by Hispanics and Orientals. Black sellers are rare, and we saw no Indian sellers. Nevertheless, Red Mesa is a rich cultural mosaic with a pronounced Southwest regional cast.

A few radios and cassette tape players fill the air with music as the regular dealers methodically set up their displays. The amateur local dealers on the weekend add a variety of used household goods to the meet, but the array of primarily new merchandise of the regular dealers is large: purses, backpacks, tents, earrings, new hardware, used hardware and machines, t-shirts with custom or iron-on designs, knives, swords, gold necklaces sold by the inch, stationery, cassette tapes (both English and Spanish language), rock music posters, blankets, lawn statues, Mexican pottery, antique furniture, house plants, toys, electronics, services (e.g., tarot reading, tattoos, autoharp playing for tips), used bicycles, knit ponchos from Ecuador, fruits and vegetables, and much miscellaneous merchandise.

Shopping Activity and Ambience

Shoppers begin to enter before the Friday afternoon opening, but it does not get crowded until dinner time. Dress is very casual and dictated by the cool November evening temperatures. The shoppers are families, couples, and individuals. Later in the evening, families are eclipsed by teenagers. The number of Hispanics is large, but perhaps no more so than in the local population. As night falls and the lights come on, the leisurely but anticipatory mood of the shoppers reminds us of a crowd passing by carnival booths without barkers. But before the 11:00 pm. closing, the crowd thins out and some sellers close early, claiming it was a bad night for business. Many vendors sleep at the meet in their camper trailers, buses, or vans.

Saturday and Sunday the meet is much more crowded with both buyers and sellers. One reason is the swell of additional sellers composed mainly of local amateurs. Most of these sellers have simple card table, tailgate, or blanket-on-the-ground displays in the overflow area. Most are also clearing out miscellaneous personal possessions, but some are selling crafts, new manufactured items, or used goods they have acquired for resale. The

overflow area has overflowed, and the crowd of shoppers is thicker outside the regular selling area than in it. These shoppers are even more diverse than Friday night's, with families and even extended families much in evidence. The shoppers are also buying, and several are seen making multiple trips to their cars and trucks to store their newly acquired possessions. Some bargain; most do not. Some are looking for a particular item, but many are just shopping to find something unexpected and appealing. Of the nearly 800 sellers at the meet this weekend, those we spoke with indicated that it is a good weekend. The management of the meet estimates that 50,000 shoppers attended the meet between Friday and Sunday.

To illustrate the variety among key actors at the swap meet, the following sections present profiles of some of the buyers and sellers encountered in the course of research. These profiles serve as a prelude to the discussion and interpretation of some of the patterns emerging from the activity of the swap meet. The profiles also suggest something of the diversity of the individuals who shape and reflect the character of Red Mesa.

Diversity of Sellers: Selected Examples

1. *Walter* is a first-generation Korean American from San Diego. He has driven all night in a new Toyota van full of t-shirts, display racks, and a machine for imprinting a large inventory of designs onto these shirts. He is in his twenties and has been doing this for three months at San Diego swap meets. This is his first trip to Red Mesa, and it was inspired by a tip from a friend. Most of his shirts sell for \$3.00 to \$4.00, with custom lettering extra. Only about one in five customers asks for a discount on the prices he quotes, and he generally gives one when asked.

He is concerned that there are four other t-shirt vendors at Red Mesa this Friday, one of whom is only 50 feet away and has a larger inventory. Still, he believes that others are not able to buy at the low wholesale prices he is able to get in California, so he hopes to do well even if price competition ensues. By the end of a slow Friday night, he has been able to clear a \$100 profit, which makes his trip from California worthwhile. In his few months in business, he has learned that Mexican Americans are his best customers, and he stocks a number of designs that have a Spanish flavor.

On Saturday, Walter has hired a young assistant on the recommendation of one of the boy's relatives who sells at the meet. Finding someone trustworthy is a big concern for Walter; apparently a young Asian boy he tried Friday did not work out. Compared to the swap meets he is familiar with in San Diego, Walter thinks these 10 × 20-foot spaces are spacious and inexpensive. At the San Diego meets, no one can have more than two spaces (here it is open), and the more popular meets auction off the best spaces for as much as \$600 for the weekend. At the same time, he does not expect to sell

as much here as in San Diego, where \$500 per day would not be too unusual.

2. *Bill* is one of a group of three men and one teen-aged son who sell miscellaneous furniture and used household items out of the back of their red half-ton pickup truck. When we first talked to them Saturday night, they were sitting in upholstered reclining chairs drinking beer and appeared to have been doing so all day. They are selling this truck (\$850) so they can buy a three-quarter-ton truck to haul appliances to sell at the meet.

During a later interview with one of the men, we learned that the men all had full-time jobs, but supplemented their income by selling at the meet. They acquired the goods at auctions and some garage sales in town. Bill had probably never heard of Wroe Alderson, but he nonetheless explained Alderson's sorting concept perfectly. Bill attends auctions where he might buy a box of 100 miscellaneous household items for \$10. He then sells these items individually at the swap meet for an average of \$1 each. He explained that someone who has just moved to Pueblo doesn't need a whole box of miscellaneous things, but they can find one or two items that they do want and will gladly pay a dollar or two for them. These men don't aspire to ever do this full-time (although a retail second-hand store is a possibility) because it is not a dependable enough source of income. They do enjoy selling out here, though, and find that it is a "good American way to earn money." They indicate that swap meets allow people to make some extra money, and that paying taxes on what they sell is up to each individual.

3. *A group of neighborhood women* and a teenaged son of one woman are selling in the overflow lot on Saturday. They have brought unwanted household items in an enclosed trailer and have set up a small picnic table to display these items. They each handle the transactions and money for their own merchandise. While we interview them, someone buys the left-handed golf clubs of Joan's former husband from whom she had been divorced for eight years. Having sold her wedding dress, prom dress, and the headboard from her bed, Joan remarks, "that will be the end of him." Her friend, Ann, wants to sell a prom dress that reminds her of her own former husband. They are not sure what they will do with any merchandise that is left over.

Diversity of Buyers: Selected Examples

1. *Frank, Dollie, and their daughter Amanda* (age 11) are a local family who come shopping at the Red Mesa Swap Meet almost every weekend. It is their entertainment. "If we come out here and spend \$10, \$15, or \$20, it is money well spent." "We'd rather be out here enjoying the sunshine than inside watching a movie." He works in an office and doesn't feel he gets enough exercise or fresh air. That is another reason to

come out to Red Mesa. They look for certain items such as victrolas that Frank restores, music boxes that Dollie loves, dishes from the thirties and forties that they both collect, and board games and toys that Amanda likes to buy.

They acquire so many things at the swap meet that their shed overflows, and they must come out as sellers about twice a year. They also have an older son and daughter who work at the meet. They bargain for what they buy and try to distinguish their "wants" from their "needs" on the basis of "immediate desire." Frank and Dolly look for non-regular sellers who have cleaned out their home storage areas (closets, garages, storage sheds)—the type who will donate anything that doesn't sell to a charity. They believe that these types of sellers are more willing to bargain and to give you a good price. By looking for things that such buyers underprice, Frank and Dollie are able to pick up valuable dishes that the antique stores in town just don't carry. This Saturday, they have bought one armload of merchandise (including her 10th music box) and taken it to the car. They are back looking for more and having fun. They like this type of economic activity, but claim the city doesn't like the underground economy nature of the activity.

2. *Sam and Gloria* have come to the swap meet with their two-year-old daughter to find a used black and white television. They moved here from Iowa in their 1967 Chevrolet several months ago and he works as a dishwasher at a hotel in town. They find a television with a \$10 asking price and have their offer of \$8 accepted. They had seen another for \$20 that had a fuzzy picture. The present picture can not be examined, but they will try it out at home and bring it back if it doesn't work well. "They don't want me to come back here and bad mouth them in front of their customers. I'm sure it will work fine like they said."

3. *Bud* is a recently retired fireman in his mid-forties. He is the divorced father of two teenage boys and prides himself on being a very frugal person. He has built several houses using materials that others have discarded or that are damaged and are therefore less expensive. The woman he has been living with has just moved out and he is looking for a shower soap rack like the one she took when she moved. He jokes with a number of the regular merchants whom he knows by name. They know him also; they are aware of some of the events in each others' lives. He has firm ideas on what part of the meet and what times during the weekend are likely to yield good buys. Eventually he finds the sort of rack he is looking for, bargains, and buys it. He comes to the meet often and enjoys it. However, he regrets having been too impulsive in buying on some occasions when he had been drinking beer as he shopped.

Having examined some of the actors, settings, processes, events, and objects that give Red Mesa its particular character, it is time to explore some of the pat-

terns emerging from these parameters. The following section proposes several themes and hypotheses that serve as a framework for interpreting the significance of the Red Mesa Swap Meet.

Emergent Themes and Hypotheses: Some Illustrations

1. Freedom versus Rules. The interplay of freedom and rules is a recurrent theme at Red Mesa. Freedom is an important motivation for both buyers and sellers at the swap meet and often transcends economic motivations. They enjoy being free from the institutional constraints of jobs, stores, offices, sales and income taxes, and indoor and formal retailing rules of behavior. At the same time, there is a need for some structure. The coexistence of desires for freedom and structure resulted in a curious set of rules and rule enforcement procedures at this swap meet. The social order of the swap meet results from a dialectical interaction of structure, in the form of official regulation, with anti-structure (Turner 1969, 1974), evinced in selective rule-breaking and rule-flouting.

The management of the swap meet consists of three men who have been involved since the inception of this meet at another location. The formal rules they have made are apparently aimed at safeguarding profits (e.g., limits on the wattage to be consumed by a vendor's lights) and keeping the meet attractive for shoppers (e.g., no dogs allowed). Yet, for each of these rules we saw several violations. And rule enforcement was not always viewed as desirable: one vendor who had been forced to stop selling bongos (for smoking marijuana) saw this action as an ironic contradiction of the free enterprise promise of one of the billboards marking the location of the meet.

The vendors extended the pervasive individualistic freedom ethos of the meet by wearing sidearms or knives in many cases and making clear that they were ready and willing to defend themselves and their merchandise (see Figure A, Photograph #5). A mother we accompanied bought her son a used toy gun to entertain him while she shopped. Real guns, bows, and self-defense equipment were sold by several dealers. One large display offered knives, swords, brass knuckles, and other paramilitary weapons. Military camouflage clothing, a popular teenage fashion, was present in several other large displays. Posters for the movie "Rambo: First Blood, Part II" and others featuring marijuana leaves and motorcycle club insignia were sold by several vendors. Others offered plaster statuary with skulls and crossbones and Nazi helmets, rebel flags, t-shirts and hats with obscene sayings, and similar tattoos. Such merchandise was prominent enough to reinforce an atmosphere of defiance of traditional rules.

The flea market folklore that we heard also frequently concerned rule-breaking. Common rumors suggested

the presence (although not pervasiveness) of illegal aliens, tax evasion, stolen merchandise, and conflict with government authorities who were reluctant to come on the swap meet property or to work weekends. Another common rumor concerned a forthcoming change in location of the meet, and even this was attributed by some to pressure from the city, which did not want the swap meet activity within city limits.

In a variety of ways, therefore, there was an outward emphasis on rules, but an actual disregard and flouting of these rules. Although perspectives on swap meet rules varied, to many the swap meet was not only a bastion of free enterprise, but also a symbol of the wild west and a place where rules are minimal and are more of an interpersonal matter than a matter for external, more formal authorities. Not only was the swap meet described as a "thieves' market" (like the old thieves' market in Hong Kong), but patrons and sellers alike seemed to revel in sustaining the image that this was a thieves' hideout where all are safe from the mainstream rules and law.

2. Boundaries versus Transitions. A second emergent theme at Red Mesa is the significance of various types of boundaries. Another way in which order is imposed upon participants' emic understandings of the swap meet is through the recognition of a series of structural and perceptual boundaries that impede, but do not necessarily prohibit, transitions. Boundaries are important in structuring participants' understandings of (1) geographic areas, (2) types of people, and (3) types of businesses. These three types of boundaries are interdependent in that certain types of people and types of businesses are to be found in certain geographic areas.

People boundaries by race and sex were significant. For example, the differences in the activities of each gender within a seller group served as a boundary separating them from each other. Males were typically workers who set up booths and displays, while females were more prevalent as clerks and salespersons.

The other people boundaries encountered were based primarily on degree and regularity of swap meet participation. For vendors, this was partly determined by whether the vendor occupied a permanent space. Those who did were primarily full-time professional vendors whose livelihood depended upon the swap meet. They were all located in the regular selling space rather than in the overflow lot and were primarily clustered in the center of the regular selling space and thus had access to electricity, lights, and more permanent display facilities (see Figure A, Photograph #6 of a permanent display facility). For the most part, they knew the other regular sellers who were located near them, but because of their physical separation from the spaces assigned to the other vendors, they did not get to know them. Another category of full-time professional vendor was the itinerant seller who sells at a variety of other meets around the country. These sellers are also unlikely to

hold another job, but may travel thousands of miles to meets. Those who travel part-time (rather than full-time) are most likely to be retired. Most, but not all full-time professional vendors sell new rather than used merchandise. Those who do sell used merchandise make use of auctions, garage sales, and estate sales rather than their personal inventories of goods to secure saleable used items.

Personal inventories of used goods were the primary supply source for remaining categories of sellers, who can all be described as amateurs rather than professional full-time vendors. Some of these were reasonably frequent sellers at the meet, but they lacked the time, money, or commitment to develop better (at least in the strictly economic sense) sources of supply and display facilities. The frequent amateurs tend to have favorite locations, however, and these were normally in the "inside" regular selling area.

On Saturday and Sunday, a large number of "one-timers" and "first-timers"—infrequent amateur sellers who are selling excess personal goods to clear out space at home and earn a little money—come to the meet. Although the entire selling area is out of doors, the infrequent amateur sellers cluster in the overflow area referred to as the "outside" area, even though some set up in the "inside" regular selling area. Perhaps the distinction refers not only to whether one is inside or outside the fenced boundary, but also to the common practice of regular sellers building wooden stands with roofs or setting up frames to support a canvas or tarp roof. Such roofs allow regular sellers and their merchandise to be "inside" and out of the strong sun. The lowest rung of the seller hierarchy is the one-time seller in the overflow area with merchandise displayed on a blanket or directly on the ground. However, unlike rural markets in Papua, New Guinea where this is the modal type of display (Mackay and Weeks 1984), most infrequent amateur sellers have card tables, pickup truck tail gates, or other makeshift waist height displays. The social hierarchy of swap meet sellers described here appears closer to that observed in the Chinese city of Taishan (Schell 1984).

Both buyers and sellers recognize these spatial and functional seller distinctions, and the buyers are often sensitive to them and expect to find better prices and greater willingness to bargain among the one-timers and first-timers in the overflow area. As a result, some regular sellers also set up in the overflow area on weekends to take advantage of the greater flow of buyers present there during the daytime.

Another firm boundary exists in sellers' and buyers' perception of a distinction between swap meet selling and "going retail." This seems to relate to the air of lawlessness and transience that attaches to the swap meet versus the seeming lawfulness and permanence of retail establishments. The outdoor/indoor boundary seems conterminous with this distinction. A number of sellers talked of "going retail" some day or of returning

to a shop. They seemed to associate this possibility with gaining an element of permanence and legitimacy, but also with losing an element of freedom and flexibility. An establishment/anti-establishment division also seemed to be an integral part of these distinctions and may account for the ambivalence many sellers attached to the prospect of opening a retail store.

Another perceptual boundary exists in the distinction between art versus crafts. Almost no one who created something saw their trade as an art. They often believed that there was an element of art involved in their work or that occasionally it was good enough to be regarded as art, but they did not regard themselves as artists. One Hispanic vendor of Seri Indian carvings did regard them as works of art, but complained that people did not appreciate them as art and expected them to be cheap like the other merchandise at the swap meet. Thus, the art versus craft distinction was an important pricing boundary as well. Art festivals would be expected to provide a better and very different setting in which to sell items seen as art works, while swap meets are perceived to exist more for common goods and the common man. Swap meets attract buyers and sellers of "profane" goods rather than "sacred" art (a theme discussed below).

Red Mesa Swap Meet also has several other interesting spatial features that reflect boundaries. Its location within the surrounding city was often mentioned in terms of boundaries. The swap meet exists on the outskirts of town; as some informants report, this may have been the result of its having been gradually forced to the periphery by established retailers. The clear boundaries of the Red Mesa grounds are reflected in similar differentiations made concerning the merchandise at core and periphery: new and commercial articles are "inside" while used articles and junk is "outside."

Several temporal cycles are apparent as well. Traffic flow varies by season, by day of the week, and by hour of the day. Certain periodicities between consumption and time may also occur, as with increased beer sales (or increased sheltered-booth shopping) as temperature climbs. A macro cycle may be perceived in the 15-year history of Red Mesa as the meet has been pushed gradually to the periphery of the city. It may become institutionalized ("malled") in the next move (Kowinski 1985).

Red Mesa is also touched by certain liminal characteristics (Agnew 1979; Turner 1967, 1969, 1974); it is "betwixt and between" categories in a number of interesting ways. It is neither shopping mall nor rummage sale, hypermarket nor neighborhood store; yet, it shares features in common with each of these institutions. Its patrons are not just shoppers; nor are they just sight-seers. A tension between legal and illegal activities appears to exist. Red Mesa's many vendors tout the joys of asynchrony (of time), and blur the distinction between work and leisure. Conventional social rules (whether legal, technical, economic, or merely custom-

ary) are formally acknowledged, yet consistently flouted: posted rules are violated; conventionally passive buyers "chisel" or "dicker"; street justice or self-policing is espoused; buyers form personal relationships with sellers. A particular *communitas* (Turner 1974) emerges at the meet. Outlawhood and rugged individualism are extolled in word, deed, and in product offerings.

Liminal characteristics are also evident in role fluidity at the meet. Social roles shift, intergrade, and accrete as events at Red Mesa unfold. Sellers become buyers, as dealers are often each others' own best customers. Buyers become sellers, as goods are offered for immediate resale; over time, many Red Mesa patrons rent booth space of their own. Both buyers and sellers become spectators (or "lookers"), as people-watching is an avowed pastime. Sellers may be producers who have created their own wares or who are in the process of creating or finishing them onsite. Production, distribution, and consumption may all be witnessed at Red Mesa.

3. Competition versus Cooperation. A third emergent theme at Red Mesa, shared by the society in which the swap meet is embedded, is the complex interplay between competition and cooperation. While interdealer competition was noted, competition is perhaps more applicable to buyer-seller relationships and negotiations. Geertz (1963) has noted similar competitive forms in the bargaining-dominated markets of Bali. Sellers at Red Mesa warned of expert buyers who knew well the value of merchandise and knew equally well how to bargain. Stories were common of first-time sellers who were initially swarmed over by other sellers seeking to buy underpriced merchandise to sell at higher prices themselves. Buyers also warned of overpriced merchandise that would sell simply because buyers assumed that all swap meet merchandise represented a good value. Support for this contention comes from Trinkaus (1980), who found that at busy times, answering flea market price inquiries with "\$1.50 for one or three for \$5.00" resulted in more multiple unit sales by a ratio of 4 to 1. Geertz (1963) suggests that most charges of sellers' unethical practices result from role asymmetry involving amateur buyers and more expert sellers. An hypothesis for further investigation is that the presence of a number of expert buyers and amateur sellers at Red Mesa (versus amateur buyers and expert sellers in most retail settings) makes the perception of unethical seller behavior less common at this and perhaps other swap meets.

The competition that occurs among sellers is manifested in a number of ways. The lineup for seller admission to nonreserved spaces that is said by meet management to begin at 5:30 A.M. Friday really begins the night before. One informant who drove to the meet from several hundred miles away arrived at 2:00 A.M. to find himself 10th in line. By an hour before opening time (8:30 A.M.), there were two dozen vendors in line

awaiting admission. Early arrival assured a choice of locations. Different sellers had different ideas about what constituted a good location, but choosing a good one was seen to be a key strategic decision.

Location planning can be seen as one part of a broader competitive pattern of seeking a secret formula, inside information, or a magical solution to making people buy. For some, the secret formula is a long stepwise procedure for personal selling that might have come out of a selling manual. For others, it is hoped that the secret lies in the right display rack, knowing local tastes (e.g., Hispanic men prefer pastel underwear), being liked, the right weather, or the right swap meet. The competition among sellers was also evident in the great deal of secrecy that surrounded sources of supply. For many of the part-time sellers and even full-time dealers who didn't want to identify themselves by obtaining a business license, buying at retail for resale is the only viable alternative. Others feel that they are able to buy at lower prices or locate more unique merchandise that gives them a competitive advantage and are loath to disclose their sources to others. Two itinerant sellers who were befriended by another seller and stayed for awhile with their van parked in the seller's back yard were surprised that their visit was allowed because they could read the UPS labels on their new friend's merchandise deliveries and thereby discover her sources of supply. An Hispanic dealer in Indian art discouraged competitors by disclosing the tribe from whom he bought but indicating that they were unfriendly former cannibals who liked him because he had been dealing with them since he was a child. The stories of dealers flocking to buy underpriced merchandise from first-time sellers also reflect this supply mystique.

Yet seller cooperation existed concurrently, as evidenced by the two kinds of information that circulate among sellers at Red Mesa. The first kind is technical and deals chiefly with market surveillance. Red Mesa management edicts, existence and nature of competition, pricing issues, traffic flows (volume, frequency, pass-by, and so forth), conditions at other swap meets, and availability of swap meet labor are a few of the technical items. The second kind of information can be labelled gossip. This type includes general folklore (e.g., deals and treasures, specific products) and rumor (e.g., Red Mesa's impending move, illegal activity, suspicions that the research team was a news team that might provide free publicity). Another supply-related rumor held that an interlinked group of Korean-American sellers obtained merchandise from Korean relatives as "gifts" so that they could resell without paying any import duties. The same rumor also alleged that the various Korean vendors were all supported by a "big Korean boss" who established members of his extended family in such business ventures. This form of information then maintains the boundaries between racial groups noted earlier while facilitating cooperation within the defined groups.

As with the "Korean connection" rumors, several sellers disparaged Hispanic sellers as illegal immigrants, legal immigrants, or visitors not having a work permit, or simply (as with Korean sellers) as selling "cheap junk" that was not up to the quality standards of other merchandise. This was a criticism heard from both sellers of competing merchandise and other sellers who expressed concern that such low quality merchandise would lower the reputation of the entire swap meet. Clearly, there were some subsurface racial tensions, and one seller referred to a group of Oriental sellers at another meet as congregating in an area of the meet dubbed Ho Chi Minh Village.

In contrast, the same reference to Oriental sellers suggested that the swap meet was a big happy family with the exception of the ostracized Ho Chi Minh Village. Indeed, the family metaphor was a common one at the swap meet, implying a form of cooperative collectivism. The meet was described as a "family swap meet" (a reason cited for banning bongos). The majority of buyers and sellers attended the meet as families, and often as extended families. From the buyer perspective, the perception of the recreational nature of swap meet buying is reflected in the fact that a number of shoppers saw it as an appropriate place to bring visiting relatives. As reported earlier, one family regarded shopping at the meet as a part of their regular budgeted entertainment and one that they found preferable to going to a movie.

But the family metaphor exists at a broader level for sellers and emphasizes the cooperative counterpart to the competitive spirit just described. This is observed first in the frequent mention of the social interaction pleasures offered to regular sellers (both local and itinerant). While older European fairs and outdoor markets have been described as social events where *buyers* from the local village renew acquaintances and exchange gossip (Braudel 1982), in the contemporary big city swap meet, it seems to be *sellers* for whom these social events occur. Although this meet was described to us by sellers as less social than many others, there were frequent interseller friendships with gossip and get-togethers after closing, and other acts of friendship were not unusual. Similar observations have been made by McCree (1984).

4. *Sacred versus Profane.* A final etic theme seen at the swap meet is that of transforming sacred resources into profane or secular resources. Sacred items are those imbued with special meaning and therefore set apart from the everyday, ordinary world of profane commodities. The transformation from the sacred to the profane is exemplified by the one-time sellers' conversion of their used personal goods into marketable wares. That is, we can interpret their primary activity as that of transforming sacred personal possessions into profane commercial wares.

Malinowski (1922) posited a gift-trade good contin-

uum that can be seen as comparable to the sacred/profane distinction (Belk 1987a). The important distinction between a pure gift in this scheme and "trade pure and simple" is that when pure gifts are given, there is no expectation of reciprocity, either directly or indirectly.

While not all personal goods sold at the swap meet are originally gifts, much less pure gifts, they move from the sacred gift side of the continuum to the profane trade side of the continuum when they are removed from one's experiential sphere of living and are instead offered for sale. Unlike sellers of new manufactured goods or resellers of used goods acquired for resale, sellers of personally used items are selling (or separating themselves from) the part of themselves that still adheres to the object that has been a part of their lives (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Goffman 1971; O'Reilly et al. 1984). The previously mentioned selling of an ex-husband's golf clubs as a way of completing the process of "getting rid of him" is a vivid example of the residual part of self that adheres to possessions.

Another example of the sacred/profane distinction comes from an interaction with a woman who was moving and was selling some of her possessions.

I talked to one young woman who was selling household items in the regular area. She moved to New York about a year ago and had flown back into town for the weekend to sort through the things that she had left here. She was trying to sell some of them at the swap meet. Other things she had packed up in boxes to ship to New York. Mostly she had packed up the things that her grandmother gave her from Norway. The things that she would use frequently she had already taken with her a year ago when she moved. These were just the things that she had left behind. A woman friend was with her helping her sell her things. She said the things that were sentimental she was shipping to New York. These things that she was selling were just things that could be used. I asked about an old round waffle maker. She said that if she didn't sell that, she would take it with her because her grandmother gave it to her. But she said she felt okay about selling it. It appeared to be a U.S.-made waffle maker rather than one that had come from Norway. It was however fairly old (1950s) and was probably given to her used. [MW]

Thus, her earlier decisions had separated the sacred family heirlooms from the country of origin from objects that are considered to be profane commodities that can just be used. The waffle maker, however, is problematic because it lies somewhere between the two categories. It is a sacred artifact because it belonged to her grandmother, but was not as sacred as the items grandmother brought from the sacred native land. It was also problematic because it had now been placed in the profane world of commercial trade. While we undertake various cleansing rituals when a profane purchased good is to be given as a gift (Waits 1978), it seems likely that various divestment rituals will accompany the transformation of sacred personal items into profane goods of sale (McCracken 1986). This is an issue to be addressed in future research.

The impact of selling personal used goods rather than keeping them sacred by giving them to others or donating them to charity may act to keep used goods within the same social class rather than passing them on to a lower and more needy social class (Gordon 1985). While systematic data on the social class of swap meet sellers and buyers was not gathered, it seems clear that the flow of merchandise was lateral or even somewhat upward. Several charitable organizations did collect used merchandise that they sold at the swap meet in order to apply the funds to their charitable ventures (e.g., abused children, Boy Scouts). Nevertheless, these were only occasional efforts, and the more dominant pattern was for individuals to sell their personal goods for profit. Little evidence was gathered to reveal the full impact of these conversions of resources, but it would seem to be a rich theme for further investigation.

Synopsis

The Red Mesa Swap Meet is a local market, although it appears to be part of a circuit of regional markets as well. It is a forum for the exchange of goods, services, and ideas. As a marketplace, it is the site of lateral cycling, retailing activity, some wholesaling activity in which vendors buy close-out lots from other vendors for resale, and fencing. It also serves as a campsite, becoming a temporary residential area for sellers with its own particular *communitas* (Turner 1974). For some itinerant vendors, this residence has a moving structure with some resemblance to the social structure of such groups as the Irish Tinkers (Gmelch 1977).

Red Mesa is also a species of festival or fair. Some vendors describe it as a form of advertising, while others view it as an alternative to a garage sale. In addition to selling items, some vendors use it as a religious pulpit from which to do evangelical work. Red Mesa is an example of a primary marketing system (with a formal owner, management, and support staff, as well as some professional vendors), in which the principal product is a secondary marketing system serving a variety of functions for disparate publics.

HYPOTHESIS GENERATION AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING VIA QUALITATIVE METHODS

Given the philosophical, conceptual, and methodological approach taken in this pilot project, the themes just discussed were generated more than tested. Semi-structured and adaptive qualitative methods have an advantage over most quantitative techniques in hypothesis generation. However, it should not be inferred that qualitative methods are less appropriate for hypothesis testing or that the tasks of hypothesis generation and testing are entirely separate. Because qualitative field research is a process that evolves over time, there is an opportunity to derive and subsequently test

preliminary insights. As indicated earlier, in the effort to improve the quality of data and insights gathered, the two processes blend into one another. Further, the constant comparative method that synthesizes data collection and analysis and dictates emergent design compels researchers to be reflexive.

Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest 12 strategies for improving qualitative data quality:

1. Check for sampling bias
2. Check for researcher bias
3. Triangulate across data sources and methods
4. Weight the evidence according to data trustworthiness
5. Examine contrasts and comparisons
6. Examine outliers
7. Seek extreme cases
8. Rule out spurious explanations
9. Replicate findings
10. Check out rival explanations
11. Look for negative evidence
12. Obtain feedback from informants

While the pilot study utilized most of these methods, both time and budget constraints precluded systematic verification of the hypotheses generated.

Two methods that were employed systematically to enhance verisimilitude—the member check and the audit—warrant some additional discussion. While checking and cross-checking of observations and interpretations are routine fieldwork procedures, researchers on this pilot project implemented these procedures in a formal way. Several informants were provided with copies of field notes, photographs, and analyst interpretations, and were asked to react to these documents. These reactions were then incorporated into the project data corpus and used to confirm, temper, and correct perceptions of swap meet phenomena developed by the researchers. Similarly, three consumer researchers (one trained as a psychologist, one trained in utilizing a psychoanalytic tradition, and one trained as a ethnographic sociologist) were enlisted to audit the entire data corpus and resulting analyses in keeping with recommendations made by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Thus, a form of triangulation was observed in the study.

The truth value of these hypotheses and themes—a relative concept negotiated between analysts and informants—will be examined more intensively in the follow-up project in which triangulation across sites and a larger set of informants will also be employed. In these follow-ups, triangulation will determine if the themes presented here (and in Belk et al. 1986) are also found by other researchers, with other informants, and at other sites. What the pilot does suggest beyond substantive findings is that the traditional categorizations of exploratory, descriptive, and causal research are artificially compartmentalized. Research, especially within the naturalistic paradigm, is ongoing, evolving, iterative, and recursive. It simultaneously seeks, tests, and refines ideas with the mutually supportive objectives of better

ideas and stronger tests of these ideas. Rather than seeking to confirm a priori hypotheses, in keeping with the constant comparative method, we attempted to empirically challenge and conceptually question our ideas as they emerged, before they had been solidified by the psychological process of commitment. While some conventionally trained consumer researchers may see the lack of a priori hypotheses as a weakness of this style of research, we see its strengths as emanating from this very feature.

CONCLUSION

Taking consumer behavior as its focal domain, this investigation has employed a postpositivist research paradigm of significant interpretive power to explore an underresearched although pervasive type of consumption venue. Both the naturalistic paradigm and the alternative marketing system studied have been curiously neglected by consumer researchers. Through a substantive field study, the authors have drawn attention to the need both for alternative explanatory vehicles and for expanded notions of consumption venues. This is the first documented attempt by consumer researchers to apply the naturalistic paradigm in a rigorous fashion, from design through execution to evaluation. By illustrating technique and substance, the authors hope to stimulate additional naturalistic research concerning both buyer and seller activities.

Based on our use of the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, we believe that it offers the following major advantages to more traditional positivist methods:

1. Richer description of consumer behavior phenomena
2. Better opportunity for generating original theoretical insights grounded in naturally occurring behavioral contexts
3. Constructive recognition of the impossibility of value-free inquiry
4. Lesser disruption of naturally occurring consumer behaviors and greater freedom from artificial and contrived behavioral tasks
5. Greater openness to the insights of consumers themselves
6. Greater access to consumers as they become interested and involved in multiple phases of the research process
7. Firmer researcher certainty that the findings correspond to the consumption reality experienced by consumers
8. Findings that explicitly take into account the complexity of people's lives and experiences, rather than attempting to isolate elements of those experiences "holding everything else constant"
9. Greater use of multiple methods of data collection and data analysis within one project
10. A more intrinsically enjoyable research process (perhaps arguable, but certainly true for the authors)

There are also several ways in which the present methods are comparable to more traditional research approaches. They are at least as replicable, systematic, and capable of intersubjective certifiability. And, it should be recognized, there are several ways in which the present methods are at a disadvantage to positivist methods.

1. Greater time is required for data collection
2. The presence of a team of researchers is essential
3. Data analysis is more time consuming and does not commonly offer the familiar refuge of statistics with their illusion of correspondence to a singular, verifiable, external, objective reality
4. Greater sensitivity is needed in obtaining informed consent and in safeguarding informant anonymity
5. Such methods have not yet received substantial use or scrutiny in consumer research

Weighing these advantages, parities, and disadvantages, we strongly endorse naturalistic inquiry as a means of developing and testing more faithful understandings of consumer behavior. These methods should not be regarded as a panacea for every research problem and certainly do not represent a quickly learned paradigm. Nevertheless, we have found our initial learning efforts to be well rewarded. We urge care and the careful attention to the rigorous criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in applying these methods, but we also urge that these methods be considered and applied by other scholars.

More than 20 years ago, William T. (Tom) Tucker (1967) suggested ethnography as a viable consumer research method. The idea seems to have been overwhelmed by the rush to quantify consumer research in order to gain some appearance of positivist legitimacy. The past 20 years of consumer research have been incomplete as a result. The field has attained some elegance and precision, but lacks soul, feeling, and sensitivity to natural consumption contexts. We believe that naturalistic inquiry offers a bridge between positivist and postpositivist research methods. Because it does not reject intersubjective certifiability and strives for the equivalents of reliability and validity, it should seem at least partly familiar to those who use positivist research methods. But because naturalistic inquiry studies consumers in situ and provides thick qualitative insights, it can potentially inject the richness that Tucker saw as missing in our research. Because the printed word can only go part way in presenting thick description, we also urge interested readers to see the videotape, "Deep Meaning in Possessions," (Wallendorf and Belk 1987) for further demonstration of the naturalistic inquiry paradigm and its results.

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