Social constructionism and research in marketing and advertising

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Abstract

This paper seeks to present a general case for the use of a broadly social constructionist metatheoretical perspective for qualitative research in marketing. The discussion makes reference to a current empirical study into advertising creativity in order to try to draw out particular methodological and metatheoretical issues. The main primary data gathering method used in the study is the unstructured depth interview and this is supplemented by field notes, informal and secondary sources. Social constructionism broadly defined rests upon several key philosophical assumptions concerning the constitution of social life through language and discourse. Significant themes include the semiotic and illocutionary character of human discourse, the drive for ethnomethodological integrity in social research and the focus on the mutual construction of meaning as the main unit of analysis.

Introduction: the social constructionist viewpoint

The rationale for this paper is the view that social constructionism offers a potentially fruitful theoretical perspective within which to frame qualitative research in marketing. The paper attempts to demonstrate this view with reference to a current empirical research project which investigates creativity in advertising. Social constructionism constitutes a broad church in social research (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1985; Harre and Stearns, 1995; Miller and Hoogstra, 1992; Parker and Burman, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This paper takes, as an organising principle, the view that social constructionist approaches, for all their methodological differences, share one distinctive assumption which collectively, and decisively, distinguishes them from cognitivist approaches to social research. This view resides in the mutualist theory of meaning (e.g. Still and Good, 1992). Mutualism holds that meaning is a social construction as opposed to a purely private cognitive construction. There are clear metatheoretical implications entailed in this view which most famously take the form of debates concerning discursive realism (e.g. Harre, 1986, 1998; Harre and Stearns, 1995). This paper will seek to skirt a deep engagement with this debate in order to focus on the more pragmatic concerns of social researchers who are seeking methods which preserve the quality of the research subjects' experiences. This entails a concern with subjective meanings not purely as the products of private cognitive processing, but as ineluctably social constructions which involve active selection, suppression, and purposiveness. We construct meanings by drawing selectively upon discursive repertoires which are public. This is not to imply that the self reports of research subjects are mistrusted by researchers. Far from it: the view held here is that there is no conclusive version of social events which can lie outside of the discursive production of those events. The social constructionist approach takes subjective reports of events, emotions and cognitions to be multifaceted constructions which can be interpreted on many levels. The things we may say serve an illocutionary purpose in sustaining certain psychologically reassuring versions of our selves or of ideologies and power relations (Billig, 1987; Goffman, 1959). The versions of events we

construct are invariably negotiable and are bound up with constructions of self identity and social relations (Harre, 1998). We may achieve things through the illocutionary force of the words we utter and these achievements may include the maintenance of a sense of meaning to ourselves (e.g. Billig, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Mauss, 1985; Miller and Hoogstra, 1992). The sense of meaning we maintain may entail sustaining a particular social relation, maintaining an ideology upon which we might depend for our reassurance, or creating and re-creating our very sense of self through (unconsciously) selective narratives or stories of self (Harre, 1998; Wetherell, 1996). These stories are not (necessarily) conscious fictions. If social reality is discursively constructed then we must select a version of events over the infinite array of possible alternative versions. Social constructionist qualitative research allows this sense of constructed meaning to be acknowledged in the research.

The business of human communication entails an element of indeterminacy (Cook, 1992). This implies that human communication in the construction of social life is richer and more open than is implied by a cognitive model of words as signifiers of private mental entities. On a social constructionist view, this richness can be brought out in social research which utilises aspects of semiotics, speech act theory and ethnomethodology (Austin, 1962; Barthes, 1964; De Saussure, 1974; Garfinkel, 1974; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) to develop interpretations of social data (primarily, though not exclusively, words) which point to both the structure and the function of constructed meanings in discourse (Banister *et al.*, 1994).

The social constructionist research tradition is, as stated, a broad one and contains many strands which are not necessarily regarded as commensurable by their proponents (for some controversies, see, for example, Parker and Burman, 1993). For example, Potter and Wetherell (1987) distinguish their general metatheoretical position from that of Harre (Harre and Secord, 1972). Notwithstanding these debates and preferences within the social constructionist tradition (in this case, in social constructionist social psychology), this paper takes the view that there is sufficient within the social constructionist approach that is both coherent and generic to offer a broad yet distinctive and fruitful

philosophical framework for qualitative marketing research. The value of this approach for qualitative marketing researchers lies in the emphasis it places on the developing interpretative skills and sensitivity of the researcher, the preservation of the integrity of what is meant by the research subject, and the richness of interpretation it can bring to the research task of making sense of qualitative social data. The arguments in favour of social constructionist qualitative research in marketing will be touched upon again later: the next section develops an empirical research perspective in order to try to sharpen the methodological focus.

Creativity in advertising

Within advertising there is a certain awed regard for high standards of creativity and for the gifted individuals who can apparently deliver it to order. Talk of advertising creativity is part of the lay and practitioner discourse of advertising (Feldwick, 1997; IPA, 1997; Saatchi and Saatchi, 1988). Senior advertising professionals often regard creativity as a byword for excellence in advertising and many popular advertising texts follow this tendency (e.g. Hart, 1990). However, the process of designing an advertising campaign which creatively fulfils the strategic marketing objectives of clients is very much a social one. From the time the agency account manager re-works the client's brief into a stimulating and strategically coherent creative brief, to the awards ceremony at which top "creatives" are lauded by the industry for the creative virtuosity of their campaign, there are complex intra- and extra agency social processes through which the campaign emerges. However, to regard the campaign as purely a social process would be inaccurate: individual plans and intentions are instrumental in the creation of it. A purely sociological level of explanation would eliminate the sense of human agency and creativity which the industry itself regards as a fundamental and distinctive part of creativity in successful advertising.

Theorising advertising communication: theorising creativity

Notwithstanding the professional significance within advertising of the concept of creativity, there is little theorising of it in mainstream marketing communications literature. Popular treatments of marketing communications

predominantly use cognitive information processing frameworks in order to conceptualise the way marketing communications act upon consumers (e.g. Belch and Belch, 1995; Kotler, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 1996; Shimp, 1997). This tendency has been criticised on the grounds that it ignores recent developments in communications science (Buttle, 1995). Theorising marketing communications through the physical metaphor of a message-arrow fired through the ether into a human information processing brain leaves considerations of creativity on the margins since they do not fit into the metaphysic of cognitivism. Linear information processing models of communication are better fitted to the ideologically loaded managerialist rhetoric of encoding and sending a marketing message to "inform", "remind" and "persuade". Marketing communications may seldom inform since most consumers know about brands already: they may never persuade as such but can remind consumers of particular brands (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 1998). Hence the current research study sought to find a theoretical context within which creativity in advertising might be framed in such a way that it could be examined as a feature of professional advertising discourse which is clearly meaningful to practitioners, without recourse to a reductionist machine metaphor of cognition. In this case a social constructionist framework permitted a radical departure to take place in organisational creativity research.

Many approaches to researching and theorising organisational creativity and innovation (see King and Anderson, 1995; West and Farr, 1988) have been premised upon a set of cognitivist assumptions, the basis of which may be challenged. This issue concerns the ontological status of creativity (or innovation). If the metaphor of realism is taken literally, then researchers feel they must establish an operational definition of creativity before moving towards induction and measurement. Implicitly, words are taken to be signifiers of mental events. Creativity is spoken of (by the researcher) as an entity. Regardless of what the work talk of creativity might be doing for organisational workers, the researcher is focussed on a mental, or perhaps material entity, the nature of which may be inferred by inductively satisfying the descriptors of the operational definition. This naive realism is often implicit rather than explicit. Thus creativity operationally defined as, say, the

production of novelty (consensually agreed) is present as a shadowy entity wherever organisational novelty is found. Social constructionism on the other hand allows researchers to see words as constitutive of social events and does away with the need to sustain the fiction that creativity (or whatever) subsists in the universe as an entity. On this view, research into organisational (or personal) creativity need not engage with sterile definitional issues of what creativity "really" is, or what a creative person is "really" doing. Creativity itself is seen as a social construction which cannot subsist apart from the ways people talk about it.

This offers the possibility of a kind of insight cognitivist theories cannot generate: an insight into a social process which is bound up with rather than artificially abstracted from that social process. The ethnographic richness of this kind of data leaves open the possibility of human agency, allows for the indeterminacy of interpretation which in positivist models of research remain closed, and feed into theory building from an explicitly multidisciplinary perspective. Hence, for example, human resources management takes a radical intellectual turn away from naive models of managerial motivation and control by seeking to understand how managerial experience is socially constructed within a specific set of social forces (Watson, 1988). Within innovation research, this trend moves researchers away from the intellectual straightjacket of a realist ontology when it seeks to understand the way managers make socially constructed sense of the organisational innovation process (Coopey *et al.*, 1997). The domain of organisational behaviour takes a radically different philosophical turn from traditional managerialism when seen from a social constructionist perspective (Mangham, 1987). In these cases, the intellectual terms of reference of the researcher are radically different from cognitivist research. Social constructionist researchers are not seeking the deep structure of reality within which lies the key to a material universe of causal (and determined) relationships. Instead, the social constructionist model of research seeks to increase the researcher's understanding of the structure and functions of discourse itself.

An empirical focus

In the current study, dyadic interviews were conducted with advertising agency staff who

are engaged in the creative process. The agency (BMP DDB[1]) is the fourth largest in the UK and the leading winner of industry awards for both advertising creativity and effectiveness. Recent television campaigns include VW, Walkers Crisps, Barclaycard and many more including the UK Labour Party's pre-election campaign. The staff interviewed held roles as account managers, account planners or "creatives". The interviews were recorded (at the agency) and later transcribed in full while the data were supplemented by field notes and secondary sources. The questioning technique was to ask brief, open questions around the theme of creativity in advertising. The interviewees were encouraged to develop their views in full with little interjection from the interviewer.

The interviews would usually begin with a question about how the subject's career in advertising came about. This allowed the interview to begin on a relaxed note with a topic on which any interviewee could be expansive. It also set the interview in a context of a life history which gave a sense of trajectory leading through to the later questions about specific issues of advertising agency practice. It is common for senior advertising agency personnel at this agency (especially account directors and planners) to come from prestigious intellectual backgrounds and this clearly informed and framed their views on certain matters. Most noticeably, the interviewee's talk about the strategic role of advertising was characterised by a sense of intellectual pragmatism: there was no reliance on the orthodoxy of business school marketing discourse. Subjects did not seek to draw on these discourses to give authority or weight to their views, although they were clearly well informed about what business books have to say.

Interpretative issues

The character of talk is such that, when a personal recorded interview is transcribed, the grammatical incoherence of it as written text is usually very noticeable. When we talk to each other, we frequently begin sentences, then re-start them in another way, we say things which have meaning only in the context of the conversation and we employ what psychologists of language call anaphoric reference. That is, we seem to know what the indexical properties of words said by the other

person are, even though it may be far from clear to a third person reading the written text. Here is an example taken from an interview with an experienced account director:

Interviewer question: "So the creative process, whatever it is, doesn't simply reside in the creative section of the agency, does it?"

Interviewee response: "No. The creatives always said to us, you know, we can sit here facing each other and come up with all sorts of brilliant ideas but unless you give the correct brief in the first place we're never going to come up with the idea, not that you want, but one which will sell the product. And it was interesting at the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) seminar the other day John _____ who's taken over from Ronald_____as the key creative man in the whole business he was asked, you know, what is the most important thing about the ads you've created and he would say 'look I just did it to sell things that's what I'm creating for, to sell things but I can only do that when I get a decent brief which comes out of research and planning' and this is what the account manager brings to the account. Unless you brief the team properly, and briefing isn't just a question of coming and saying 'well here's a piece of A4 with all these wonderful words on it and I'll come back in three weeks and give me an ad.' It's being able to go up, you know, you get a phone call within 24 hours of being given the brief and saying 'can you explain this and explain that', what…very brief anecdote: I was asked to explain to the creative team how antiperspirants worked and how you knew they were effective, or more effective than rivals, and apparently the way they do it in Arizona…"

In this brief passage, this interviewee is describing an aspect of his experience as an advertising account director in interpreting and developing the client brief in order to get the best out of the creative team. The creative team in an agency can draw up all sorts of wacky creative work but the account manager or director must set the creative work within parameters which will ensure the fulfilment of the client's strategic marketing objectives. The tone of the narrative betrays an enthusiasm for the business of advertising and a desire to do it well. The discourse is managerial: the interviewee directed the creative process and his judgements underwrote the success of the agency, but the model of management the subject holds seems to be collegiate rather

than overtly directive and power driven. He wants to manage by facilitating the creative team and seeks to utilise consumer research (the agency "planning" function) and an open exchange of information with clients to construct a creative brief which will work for both the "creatives" and, ultimately, for the client. The clear implication here is that effective creative work is both the result of talented individuals (the creatives) and also the result of a process which involves wider groups of people including the client, the agency researchers or planners, the consumers who were the subjects of the planners' focus groups, and, crucially, the person co-ordinating the whole process, the account man or woman.

This short passage is characteristic of advertising experts' articulations of this social process which are often unprepossessing, halting, often inarticulate yet also carry a forceful subtext of managerial and intellectual authority. These people may not articulate the advertising process by drawing on conventional shorthand discourses but they clearly feel that they understand it and know how to manage it. Indeed, it is very noticeable that they are comfortable with the indeterminacy of advertising practice: implicitly, they seem to be saying that there are right and wrong ways to manage creativity in agencies (and they know the difference) but the outcome is never entirely predictable. Experienced, articulate agency people do not appear to live in a realist universe where their agency practice is concerned. Theirs is not a technical discipline. While there is much to know and to learn, there is no single solution. While their talk does not draw on discursive vocabularies of academic marketing, management or social scientific theory, they are nevertheless intellectually authoritative. Their talk carries a subtext which is that they have a sophisticated understanding of a complex process but their use of lay language suggests that they are aware of the limits of explanation. They appear confident with these limits and the sense of intellectual authority in their talk springs partly from the fact that they clearly feel no need to use grandiose forms of explanation or to draw on shared ideologies to justify their point of view by drawing on discourses of scientism. However, this may be misleading: to talk about a complex and socially prestigious professional activity in simple lay language is itself a powerful

rhetorical device. In constructing their professional domain as a simple one, advertising people may be sustaining a rhetoric of expertise which draws on discourses of social status and intellectual authority which have become internalised in the culture of certain advertising agencies, and which can be maintained by the simple device of recruiting staff from liberal intellectual elites. As with any form of discourse, some people may learn it without learning the cognitive skills and accomplishments which are usually thought to underlie it. Thus the prejudiced stereotype of agency people as pretentious but insubstantial might be sustained on one interpretation of this talk. Where is the expert knowledge, the difficulty in what they do? If a person struggles to articulate their professional expertise, is this a index of a struggling professional persona? On the other hand, the use of lay language, quizzical humour and ungrammatical expression may be, taken together, symbolic of a social position which, since it does not reside solely in technical discourses, lies above and apart from the technical classes. The structure of professional talk about creativity in advertising has an ungrammatical, halting, non-technical, middle English, well-educated and socially confident character. The functions this talk serves may include the sustenance of a selected version of self to the interviewer and to the agency, and the rhetorical maintenance of a professional expertise ("this is something I know I'm good at") to the talker.

Evidently the interpretation of a piece of text can go on and on. The interpretations which can be placed upon a piece of text such as the above have their limits but neither are they closed. Other interpretations are possible and the interaction between the researcher and the interviewees is a significant feature of the construction of meanings within the interview setting. The researchers task therefore is not to aspire to an idea of quasi scientific objectivity, but to attain an order of researcher reflexivity. Reflexivity is a necessary feature of qualitative research (Banister *et al.*, 1994, Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991). The social constructionist researcher cannot justify airbrushing him or herself out of the picture but neither can they discard as neutral their own influence on the interview. Nevertheless, this reflexivity consists more in an acknowledgement of the researcher's presence in the research process than in recurring

declarations of prejudice. Interpretation is itself a process which entails an interpreting subject. Reflexivity is woven into the text of the research reporting as a part of the interpretive process. In the case of creativity in advertising, individual interviewees approached the creative process from various personal trajectories but the underlying theme which emerged was of a process which was both organisational and agentive. Individual plans and intentions were instrumental in the creative process but each stage of the process was characterised by a collegiate style of debate, argument and reasoning founded on qualitative and quantitative research data and focussed on the strategic marketing needs of the client. The meanings upheld and sustained through the interviews reflected and reproduced myths and values of the agency, the industry and of the professional, expert, educated, agentive, socially recognised and personally valued, self.

Concluding comments

The social constructionist perspective outlined above is perhaps most notable to traditional management researchers for what it does not do. It does not objectify research subjects: it does not seek to quantify data and it does not apply preconceived categories within which to group data. Neither does it seek to reveal causal relationships nor inductively infer the properties of a quasi physical entity. What it does do is to seek to reveal the structure of meanings as constructed by individuals engaged in a social process. In a literary sense the short passage of interview reproduced above conveys more depth of insight into what it is like to manage creative activity in an agency than any positive research study could hope to do. In terms of theory building it suggests that quasi positive models of prediction are themselves products of a discourse of natural science which serves the interests of management research and practice as a value-free technical science. It would not do to say that a social constructionist model of qualitative social research is politically neutral but nevertheless the goal of seeking to understand the quality of research subjects' experiences clearly serves a different ideological research agenda than the goal of seeking causal models of explanation, prediction and control. Social constructionist research in marketing implies a different

model of managerial intervention than the managerialism entailed in positivistic research since it allows research subjects an element of control over the direction research takes. Within marketing, a social constructionist research agenda would, in focussing on interpretations of the qualitative aspects of practitioner (and consumer) experience within marketing, move marketing theory away from a model of managerialism which presupposes the technical expertise of marketing practitioners and the political neutrality of marketing activity (and management) itself. These partially ethical issues are bound up with epistemological ones concerning the ontolgical status of marketing phenomena and the nature, role and purpose of marketing models which attempt to explain these phenomena. This paper has tried to begin to indicate some of the ways in which social constructionism offers an internally coherent and intellectually rigorous metatheoretical perspective within which qualitative research in marketing can be successfully framed. The precise interpretative frameworks the researcher might employ remain a matter of choice (and perhaps of controversy) but the benefits of social constructionism in moving marketing researchers closer to a meaningful engagement with the social world of marketing meanings is clear. Rigorous and effective theory building in marketing must be founded on a reflexive understanding of how meaning is constructed in the social world in order to be meaningful in and to the social world of marketing.

Note

1 BMP DDP Needham, 12 Bishop's Bridge Road, London: most of the interviews took place at the agency premises during early 1998.

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