Projective and enabling techniques explored

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Explores the rationale for, and value of, using projective and enabling techniques in qualitative market research and in particular their application to researching “sensitive” issues. Defines these techniques and illustrates their usage through a case study of research conducted by the Centre for Social Marketing, University of Strathclyde. Concludes with a discussion focusing on the relevance, suitability and level of applicability of projective and enabling techniques to market research.

Definition
The first step in understanding why and how projective and enabling techniques help contribute to understanding is to appreciate what they actually are. How can projective and enabling techniques be defined?

Projective techniques provide verbal or visual stimuli which, through their indirectness and concealed intent, encourage respondents to reveal their unconscious feelings and attitudes without being aware that they are doing so (Dichter, 1960).

Projective and enabling techniques are ways of exploring people’s thoughts, feelings and experiences and helping respondents to discuss private issues or “motives of which the respondent may not be explicitly conscious himself” (Haire, 1950) without them feeling threatened by direct questioning because:

When we approach a consumer directly with questions about his reaction to a product we often get false and misleading answers to our questions (Haire, 1950).

The key point about projective and enabling techniques is that “respondents are asked to interpret the behaviour of others, rather than directly asking them to report their beliefs and feelings. In interpreting the behaviour of others, the respondents are indirectly projecting their own beliefs and feelings into the situation” (Kinnear and Taylor, 1991). Therefore, the rationale for using projective and enabling techniques is that respondents are not threatened in any way by direct questioning, they are relaxed and they reveal their true feelings, opinions or attitudes. They are enabled to contribute to the research:

Projective techniques have the advantage of allowing the researcher to “get below the surface” and to overcome several barriers to communication. ... Because subjects are allowed to project their perceptions and feelings on to some other person or object – or in some other way are allowed to “depersonalise” their responses – they feel freer to express their thoughts and feelings (Day, 1989).

The terms projective and enabling techniques are frequently combined because they have many similarities. It is well documented (Day, 1989; Gordon and Langmaid, 1988; Kinnear and Taylor, 1991) that projective techniques involve ascribing behaviour to a third party and thus the respondent’s own behaviour is revealed. Enabling techniques in the authors’ view are more simple. These are techniques which may simply help the respondents to discuss issues or products by, for example, using objects to focus their minds. Thus all projective techniques may be enabling techniques, but not all enabling techniques necessarily involve projection.

Importance in market research
“Marketing research is concerned with the collection, analysis, interpretation and use of data” (Kent, 1993). The researcher in quantitative research is often concerned with how many people think or act in particular ways but ultimately he or she, especially if conducting qualitative research, must be concerned to explore why people think or behave in different ways:

Quantitative data normally indicate only what occurred and fail to tap into the more emotional and subjective side of the consumer... (Day, 1989).

Using projective and enabling techniques will allow the researcher to generate accurate information which is undistorted by interviewing problems or psychological barriers such as those cited by Oppenheim (1992). The first barrier is that of awareness:

People are frequently unaware of their own motives and attitudes and cannot give us the answers we need, even with the best will in the world (Oppenheim, 1992).

Respondents may not, for example, be able to report their perceptions of HP Baked Beans compared with Heinz Baked Beans, but through the use of an appropriate projective or enabling technique, researchers may well
be able to generate information about perceptions and buying behaviour.
Second, through using projective and enabling techniques, problems of irrationality can be overcome. People may fear being seen to be irrational or "stupid" and may therefore be reluctant to admit to certain types of (purchasing) behaviour. However, again it is argued that, if they are allowed to project their feelings or behaviour onto a third party, then this reluctance may be alleviated.

Similarly, some behaviour may be perceived as inadmissible:
Ideally, we ought always to pay our fare on the bus, share our sweets, never buy pornography, tell only innocent jokes and drop our litter in litter-baskets - yet we sometimes fall short of these ideals, and this produces guilt feelings and a desire to "cover up" (Oppenheim, 1992).

If a researcher wants to find out about behaviour or attitudes which may be perceived as being inadmissible, it would be imperative to use a suitable projective or enabling technique.

Oppenheim states that the fourth barrier, self-incrimination, "is really a variant of inadmissibility" (Oppenheim, 1992) because respondents are reluctant to admit that they indulge in behaviours or hold beliefs which are not admissible. Consequently, it is important to allow a forum which opens discussion in a non-threatening way:
... they are afraid to make themselves look silly, childish, deficient or prejudiced, but projective techniques can often help us to uncover such feelings, attitudes or emotions (Oppenheim, 1992).

Finally, there are certain social conventions which may constrain expression of feelings and reporting of behaviours. Many people may avoid saying exactly what they think because it may be impolite or even offensive. Appropriate usage of projective or enabling techniques, it is claimed, allows respondents to express their feelings without offending others and thus transcends the barrier of politeness.

Projective and enabling techniques, then, are important tools used in market research to attempt to establish what people truly think about a product/topic.

### Kinds of projective and enabling technique
Projective and enabling techniques can be used not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. This paper, as stated above, discusses their use in qualitative focus group research. They can be discussed under five main headings:

1. Association
2. Completion
3. Construction
4. Choice ordering
5. Expression

There are several techniques which can be discussed under the "association" umbrella. "Association techniques require the subject to respond to the presentation of a stimulus with the first thing or things that come to mind" (Tull and Hawkins, 1993). In effect, these are games the respondents play using their association skills. For example, in the case of word association, the moderator might say, "Tell me the first thing you think of when I say 'X' Brand". Word associations are useful for eliciting information about "consumer vocabulary associated with a brand or product" (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988).

Second, with completion procedures, the respondent is "required to complete sentences, stories, arguments or conversations" (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). This type of technique is useful for finding out about underlying feelings and attitudes towards a particular product or brand. Story completion can, for example, centre on a long and involved story which means that ideally respondents reveal more and more of their own attitudes and feelings as they complete the story. Brand mapping is also classed as a completion technique. This involves a variety of brands or products being physically presented to respondents for them to discuss (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988).

The third type of procedure which can be used in market research is the construction procedure. Most commonly this involves projective questioning and bubble drawings. Projective questioning requires respondents to give their opinions of other people's actions, feelings or attitudes. This technique allows people to respond freely because they are not stating explicitly how they personally act, believe or think. They are "let off the hook" because they are allowed to hold an opinion which they might fear to be unusual or atypical. The benefit for the researcher is that answers to the questions will usually mirror respondents' own feelings (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Bubble drawings give respondents the opportunity to fill in the thought or speech bubbles in a cartoon drawing. Again, the idea is that they project their own opinions on to the thoughts or words of the person in the cartoon.

The use of choice ordering techniques is most often acknowledged in quantitative research, but the techniques are employed informally in qualitative research where respondents are frequently asked to explain...
which items under discussion are “most important” or “least important” (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988).

Expressive procedures are the final type of technique to mention. One expressive technique is role playing, where the respondent is asked to adopt the role or behaviour of a brand or product (Tull and Hawkins, 1993).

**Case study**

The authors have extensive experience of conducting research into “sensitive issues”; that is, issues which people may be reluctant to discuss because of, for example, lack of knowledge, fear of self-incrimination or sheer embarrassment. With these types of issues, it is of considerable importance that the research team creates an appropriate forum for respondents to discuss the issues without fear: they are charged with the responsibility of enabling respondents to overcome any barriers to effective discussion.

The remainder of this paper discusses one such project and shows which projective and enabling techniques were used and discusses why they were used. The techniques were developed specifically for the project.

The research aimed to explore users’ and potential users’ perceptions of family planning and well woman services within a particular area in Scotland. It was crucial to find out whether users were satisfied with the services provided and to explore the barriers or reasons which existed for non-attendance among people in the target groups. In particular, the following issues were to be addressed:

- perceptions of factors affecting health;
- awareness and knowledge of contraceptive and well woman services;
- attitudes, feelings and experiences of these services;
- barriers to use;
- knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in relation to contraception.

The research was conducted using a qualitative focus group methodology to allow the collection of “deeper” information than is possible with quantitative research. The question could be asked, why, if self-incrimination was an issue, should focus groups be used? Indeed, self-incrimination may have been a concern for respondents, but the research team felt that focus groups were preferable to individual depth interviews (where it could be argued that respondents would be less susceptible to the barrier of self-incrimination with their peers) because the interaction and stimulation between focus group respondents was most desirable. Often respondents are interested in one another and will question one another and the moderator can take a “back seat”. Conversely, it could be suggested that, although a respondent would clearly not fear self-incrimination with other respondents in an individual interview situation, the barrier may still exist purely because – of necessity – there is an interviewer, who may be perceived by the interviewee to be in some way judgemental. Thus the interviewee is reluctant to speak because of the barrier of self-incrimination. It may also be the case that the respondent feels under greater pressure in an individual situation than in a focus group: in a group there is the possibility that one can “hide”.

Fourteen focus groups were conducted among an all-female sample. Ages ranged from 16 years to over 40 years and all socio-economic groups were included, but the groups were subdivided by age and socio-economic group in order to promote homogeneity within the focus groups. In practice, this meant that the younger respondents (those aged 16 to 21 years) were in one set of groups, while the older respondents were in other groups; and ABC1 (middle class) respondents were interviewed separately from C2DE (working class) respondents. Experience indicates that, when people are to share feelings and experiences in relation to personal behaviour, homogeneity rather than division and conflict is important, although it is acknowledged that conflict groups may be useful in some kinds of market research, for example when exploring the effects of smoking and passive smoking. User status was also taken into account, so that women who were currently using the service(s) were interviewed, as were those who had previously (but no longer) used the service(s) and those who had never attended were also included in the sample.

It should be noted that the group moderator had a discussion brief which outlined the areas to be covered in the group. The first question to respondents was designed to be easy to answer in order to encourage everyone to say something so that the difficulties associated with speaking in front of a group of strangers was, at least to a degree, alleviated. In addition, the “first question” helps to establish homogeneity and build up a good rapport: respondents realize that they all come from a similar area and background. The critical question was then simply, “What is this area like to live in?” Having asked this question and several related supplementary questions to ensure a free-flowing discussion, it was then appropriate to introduce the projective and enabling techniques devised for the group.
The first technique was a word association technique. It had three objectives:
1. To continue the free flowing discussion already established;
2. To open the next area for discussion;
3. To focus respondents’ minds on the topics.
This was used to encourage respondents to think about factors affecting their health. Questions like: “So, what factors affect your health?” may be difficult for some to answer because, in the absence of any very obvious factors like damp housing, respondents may lack awareness. This point is illustrated as follows:

Consumers may have difficulty responding to direct, open-ended questions regarding how they feel... in part because they are rarely called upon to articulate such feelings (Zikmund, 1982).

The potential list of factors affecting health identified in advance by the researchers included:
- family
- contraception
- job
- husband/boyfriend/partner
- smoking
- weather.

In practice the factors were written individually on pieces of card and were placed one at a time in front of respondents for discussion. The order in which they were discussed varied at each focus group. This technique is not only useful initially for stimulating discussions, it also allows the moderator to ensure that the respondents remain focused on the research topics as the group progresses: the moderator can ask them to refocus their minds on the topic simply by pointing to the card under discussion and saying something like, “OK, so what about this factor here; how important did you think it was?”

Many useful points emerged from this discussion stimulant. For example, in response to the husband/boyfriend/partner card, respondents said things like:

My husband affects my health - he just annoys me 24 hours a day. I don’t like the way he sits in the chair, eats his dinner and leaves me to do the dishes. He’s just a pure lazy, fat pig. I feel angry at times. Sometimes I just lift his plate and fire it... Getting away for a while helps.

In response to the job card, respondents said for example:

If you’ve got a lot of pressure, you don’t sleep. I was like that for a fortnight recently: how am I going to meet the targets; how am I going to get more money in?

Using an association technique with prompt cards also allowed the moderator to use a choice ordering technique. Having discussed each issue fully, the moderator would then ask respondents to rank the factors: which were most important for, or had the biggest effect on, health; and which were least important?

This technique can involve respondents moving around to place cards in piles and can introduce some lighthearted debate (for example, how important is the weather to health). It allows a break from what may have been heavy, emotionally demanding discussions (as can be seen from some of the quotes given above). Generally speaking, if respondents have been discussing issues which are detailed, complex or emotionally demanding for some time, they may become, for example, tired, worried, sad or bored (if the issues are not directly relevant to them). The moderator must be able to help alleviate these feelings because if he or she does not do so, respondents may dwell on the feelings and therefore, at best, not contribute to the rest of the focus group, or, at worst, go home feeling miserable. Allowing this to happen would not be responsible market research practice. Employing a technique which attempts to distract the respondent from these feelings is useful because, although it still allows the respondent to think about the issues, it encourages a gentle reorientation of the thoughts from possibly emotional to more lighthearted.

Ultimately, this means that respondent fatigue, anxiety or emotion is reduced; respondents are refreshed and they can proceed to the next phase in the discussion.

This next phase involved asking respondents to consider their knowledge, feelings and experiences in relation to services offering contraception and women’s health checks. Sentence completion and projective questioning techniques were used at this stage. Sentence completion served as a useful and gentle introduction to the rest of the discussion. It involved asking respondents to say how someone else might complete a sentence like the following: “I like going to my family doctor because...”. Sentences like these were included because they reflected the research objectives (for example, the above sentence was related to the desire to find out about experiences of contraception and well woman services) and allowed exploration of the issues. When the group had offered ideas about how the sentence would be completed, respondents were then asked why the other person would complete the sentence in this way.

When using projective questioning, group members were asked to comment on “other people’s” experiences. Sentences about “other people’s” experiences were written on
a card and were placed in front of respondents. They were then asked questions like:
- What was happening here?
- What kind of person said this; what were they like?
- How common might this experience be?

Again these questions and stimulants were designed to explore issues derived from the research objectives. It was important to find out women's perceptions of how they had been treated when seeking contraceptive or well woman services. With projective questioning, the plan was that the women would be able to distance themselves from the issues and, although they would be discussing their own experiences, they would be projecting these experiences on to a third party. This would avoid embarrassment (for example, if they had not behaved assertively with a belligerent medic) or self-incrimination (if, for example, they felt they were too young to have requested the Pill).

Respondents reacted favourably to these "quotes" and began to discuss their own experiences openly (which, although not necessarily expected, was a welcome development of the technique). For example, two of the stimulant sentences are given below, followed by examples of comments made:

1. Stimulant (a): They gave me the Pill – they didn’t even discuss what options there might be. “When you’re going for contraception it’s the Pill you ask for and maybe they assume that you know all about these things. They don’t discuss anything else.”

2. Stimulant (b): I prefer to talk to a woman about these things. “I just couldn’t have a smear done by a man.”

This type of technique again focused respondents’ minds but allowed them the flexibility to discuss their own experiences if they felt that they wanted to do so.

The final technique used was an adaptation of an element of brand mapping. It has been stated “that it is useful to use actual products if the group is required to discuss the merits or demerits of these products as it would be extremely difficult for people to do a brand mapping exercise verbally, without physical product props” (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Respondents, asked to categorize particular products as high, medium or poor quality, therefore actually have the products in front of them so that they can see and handle them. Not only is this more interesting for respondents, it also allows deeper discussions to take place.

In this project, respondents were required to discuss their knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in relation to a range of contraceptive options. The research team felt that respondents’ knowledge would largely be limited to the methods of contraception of which they had direct experience. If this was the case then the discussion may well have been brief, rather shallow and not very satisfactory. In addition, it was thought to be important to gather feedback about perceptions of other types of contraception available.

Consequently, at an appropriate point in the focus groups, the moderator produced a tray displaying a range of contraceptives, including:
- the Pill;
- an intra-uterine device (coil);
- a female condom;
- a male condom;
- a diaphragm;
- a sponge;
- spermicide.

Respondents were encouraged to examine and discuss the items, which resulted in considerable feedback. It is difficult to imagine that the resulting comments would have emanated from a discussion without visual stimulants because respondents often had no experience and little knowledge of contraceptives other than the Pill and condoms.

On the diaphragm and female condom, comments included:
- That’s the Cap. Imagine trying to put that inside you.
- You’re meant to leave it in for six hours: I don’t know whether it works its way down an’ then you take it out.
- How would you know if the female condom or cap was in right?

A comment on the intra-uterine device was:
- That Coil, it goes right up and roon’ your fallopian tubes so that there’s nothing – they’re blocked right.

Examining contraceptives was interesting for respondents; as with the other techniques it helped to focus the discussion and also combat respondent fatigue. More importantly, however, it allowed the research team to gather interesting insights into respondents’ awareness and perceptions of different contraceptives. This would have been difficult to generate through a more direct questioning approach without the use of visual aids to facilitate discussion.

Discussion

Employing projective and enabling techniques in this project was useful. They certainly helped to stimulate discussions; they allowed thoughtful consideration of the issues and enabled the groups to focus on the exploration of certain aspects of the topics. In
addition, they helped to combat respondent fatigue and they provided some lighthearted relief when that was appropriate.

However, the research team feel that, while the techniques were useful, there are other factors which must be acknowledged as contributing to successful focus groups. First, a skilled moderator is crucial. Projective and enabling techniques would be virtually useless if the moderator did not have the key attributes of being warm, friendly, interested and relaxed, and the skills of being able to establish rapport and exert an appropriate degree of control. In addition, the moderator must be able to respond to the cues that the groups give and probe gently and thoroughly (Colwell, 1990). Second, the moderator must ensure that he or she is adequately prepared for the group. This is transmitted to the group and they relax, settle in and enjoy talking. Third, the moderator must ensure that the first question to the group is appropriate for them. It should be interesting to them and easy to answer so that it stimulates discussion. Fourth, the groups themselves should be recruited so that they are homogeneous. In the case discussed, homogeneity was important: people would perhaps be reluctant to reveal feelings about sensitive topics with others who would be unlikely to empathize.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated how projective and enabling techniques can be extremely useful for opening up discussion and debate on issues which are socially sensitive and where respondents may be embarrassed, lack knowledge or fear self-incrimination. In this sense, their application is not restricted to social cause issues; they are also of value to those involved in commercial marketing who are seeking to understand how a product might successfully overcome certain social barriers to entry.

Whether concerned with commercial or social applications, our experience suggests that the main value of projective and enabling techniques to the market researcher is as a form of indirect questioning. The ability of the techniques to tap into the consumer’s subconscious remains unproven. For this reason, we place greater emphasis on their function as enabling devices, capable of creating environments conducive to open and uninhibited discussion rather than as techniques capable of independent measurement. Viewed from this perspective, their value to the research practitioner must be set within the wider context of factors which promote productive focus groups, such as careful recruitment and skilful moderation. From a theoretical standpoint, their value could perhaps be empirically tested by comparing the data generated by these techniques with those employing more direct questioning. Further advances could also be made by a closer examination of how the data generated by indirect questioning techniques can be systematically and effectively analysed and interpreted.

References