ABSTRACT

The nature of the client-researcher relationship and the psychology of problem-definition as a personal interpretative process is examined. It is argued that researchers who work within norms of rational-science objectivity and do not pay attention to learning about their clients' particular, subjective problem-definitions do so at the potential cost of their own recommendations being ignored. An explicit modeling technique for facilitating problem definition is presented.

Problem-Definition In Marketing Research: Facilitating Dialog Between Clients and Researchers

Sue Jones

It is an accepted wisdom that the stage within a marketing research project of defining the problem is critical; the solution to the research design problem is derived from a full understanding of the marketing problem. Still, it is not uncommon for initial discussions about a research project to involve relatively superficial dialog between clients and researchers; particularly if the latter are not members of the client organization. Clients provide summary background data, with statements of objectives, from which researchers develop their own models of the situation as the basis for their research proposals. Further discussion can take place, but this often concentrates upon the details of the proposals, rather than reference to the original context from which the details are derived.

Researchers may require detailed, accurate, information about the "real" or "right" marketing problem; but they need something else as well. They need to focus on the nature of the client-researcher relationship; this need to recognize the importance of paying attention to problem-definition as a personal, interpretive process involving the clients' subjective, qualitative, and often idiosyncratic beliefs. If researchers wish to play an influential role in the decision-making processes, they need to learn about these features of their clients' problem-definitions. This paper will discuss one possible approach to such a process, involving the explicit modeling of clients' problem-definitions. It is not the 'only' suitable approach to problem-definition; our intention is to discuss one orientation to the problem-definition process which we and our clients find useful.

THE CLIENT-RESEARCHER RELATIONSHIP

We can suggest a number of reasons why the initial dialog between researchers and clients about a research project can be a relatively superficial affair.

Whose Problem Is it Anyway?

Parochial claims to the right to define the problem is one reason. For example, there are clients who believe the researcher's role should be limited to offering ideas about implementation. This is the point made by Kotler (1982, pp. 609–610) when he comments on the narrow view of marketing research held by many executives, as:

> ". . . only a fact-finding operation. The marketing researcher is supposed to design a questionnaire, choose a sample, carry out interviews, and report results; often without being given a careful definition of the problem or the decision alternatives before management".

However, researchers may also contribute to this state of affairs, by defining their own role in limited terms. Thus, Connell, Morris, and Whitten (1982, p. 1995) criticize practitioners who often hide "behind a false modesty. I can't suggest action, I am a researcher". At the other extreme, some researchers see themselves as the experts to define the research problem, analogous to a doctor-patient relationship. (Joselyn, 1977)

Whether or not clients and researchers adopt these somewhat extreme positions, there are frequently discrepant perceptions about respective roles in the decision-making processes that precede and follow a marketing research project (Treasure, 1976). Where this is the case, it is not surprising if mutual, in-depth exploration of the marketing context to a research project does not take place.

Norms of Objectivity

The lack of in-depth exploration may also come from some important similarities between clients and researchers. It is part of the professional heritage of many marketing researchers that they should be the "guardians of rationality and science", in the acquisition of objective knowledge. Marketers, on the other hand, are often seen as emphasizing the subjective, intuitive, gut-feel aspects of decision-making. Thus, Rogers (1970) and Small and Rosenberg (1975), have discussed some of the dilemmas experienced by researchers within the pragmatics of business life (see also Crawford 1977, Channon, 1982). However, it's also true that many clients also work within norms about rationality and objectivity. The idea that proper and effective decision-making depends on working with "the facts of the matter," is a pervasive one (Allison, 1971; Pfeffer, 1981). Thus, it is not unusual, for managers to avoid providing researchers with too much prior data about their own theories for fear of biasing the researchers' findings. Because this sentiment may conform with the researcher's own professional viewpoint, both parties may collude to examine the client's problem definition in a cursory way.

Hidden Agendas

The third factor we wish to draw attention to is the existence of any research purposes which clients may not wish to reveal to researchers. For example, most of us would acknowledge that research has sometimes been used for purposes other than those given to researchers. Over the past decade, a growing body of literature has been concerned with describing and analysing the phenomena of organizational politics (eg, Pettigrew, 1973, Bacharach and Lawler, 1980, Pfeffer, 1981). Within this context, the information provided through marketing research, can play a significant role as the basis for defining reality for others, and to legitimate a particular position by appeal to the, "self-evident, objective, facts" (May, 1981; Piercy, 1983). Since internal politics is typically regarded as illegitimate, clients may wish to avoid lengthy discussions that could reveal to researchers any such ulterior motives.

In addition to internal politics there are other possible hidden agendas in a research situation. For example, clients may not have a clear conception of what their marketing and marketing research problems are. This may be reflected in the vagueness of the briefing, or a reluctance to become involved in a full discussion about the situation. The hidden agenda here is a desire for the marketing research to produce magical answers in the absence of specific questions. Alternatively, self-presentational concerns may hinder the process of freely exchanging ideas; and either the researcher or the client may succumb to a need to "look good" or "appear expert."

Problems as Personal Constructions

The barriers are clearly *not* inherent to all client-researcher relationships. Still, these barriers have concerned both academicians and practitioners in marketing research for a considerable time. How can researchers overcome such barriers? One important starting point is to pay explicit attention to the subjectivity and individuality inherent in the commissioning, interpretation, and evaluation of research.

Despite the widespread notion that there can be such things as real or right problems, discoverable by examining the facts of the matter, the position to be developed here is that problems are not things inherent objectively in situations. Rather, they are the *personal constructions* individuals place on events when they perceive some disquieting discrepancy between the situation as it is now, and might be in the future versus some conception of a preferred state of affairs (Eden, Jones, and Sims, 1979). Theoretically, this perspective comes from the phenomenological tradition which sees human beings as selectively and subjectively constructing their realities, by bringing to bear personal mental frameworks of beliefs and values which they have developed over their lives to characterize, categorize, explain, and predict the events in their worlds. (Kelly, 1955; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; McHugh, 1972; Neisser, 1976).

The view expressed above may seen heretical when considering a marketing research situation. After all, if a product is failing to maintain sales, then there is indeed a real problem; the objective causes of which it is the task of a research project to discover. Yet within this broad label there will inevitably be a host of factors which can be explored in deciding about the direction of the research. The process of designing a marketing research program is inevitably selective of the "right problem." The clients will inevitably draw upon their theories about its markets, and many of these theories will be subjective, qualitative, and perhaps highly idiosyncratic. Yet, these theories affect not only decisions about what data is useful to gather, but also the conclusions drawn from the data and the evaluation made of the relevance and usefulness of the researchers' findings.

The point may seem trivially obvious. And yet, as previously suggested, there is within both the problem-solving and marketing research literatures a continuing emphasis upon the need for objectivity. The implication is frequently that every effort should be made to remove the 'bias' of subjectivity and individuality, rather than accepting and working with these as not only inevitable, but also important and valuable dimensions of the research and problem-solving process.

Does attending carefully to the clients' personal problem-definitions mean that researchers should only produce what they think their clients want to hear? No. Rather the point is that marketing researchers should play a more influential role in the decision-making processes involved in a marketing research project; persuasion and negotiation are most often successful when based on an understanding of the other person's perspective. This careful attention can help the researcher decide whether he or she wishes to undertake the research project at all. What are the objectives of the research project? What kind of role is the researcher prepared to play?

Capturing and Managing Complexity

One approach we have found helpful for learning about our clients' personal problem definitions, involves explicitly modeling our clients' explanatory and predictive beliefs about their research issues. There are a number of reasons for using such an approach. Most importantly, we are concerned with capturing and managing complexity. The personal theories individuals have about the interactions between an organization, and its markets are typically rich, and complexly interrelated. They are difficult to capture and analyse without some kind of aid. Our interest is in a tool which can capture considerably more richness than a few summary notes while being more manageable than the mass of verbiage which would come from, transcript of a meeting. Furthermore, we are interested not simply in a tool to assist researchers privately understand their clients' thinking, but one which clients can also examine and use. A model as a record and representation of the clients' theories in an accessible and manageable form, becomes a focus for shared examination, discussion and reflection by client, and researcher alike. Additionally, an explicit model can facilitate the process of explication and consideration, and becomes the basis for further elaboration by the clients. Not all clients are sure about why they want research and what their data will be used for. Through the model they are provided with a stimulus with which they can internally 'dialog.'

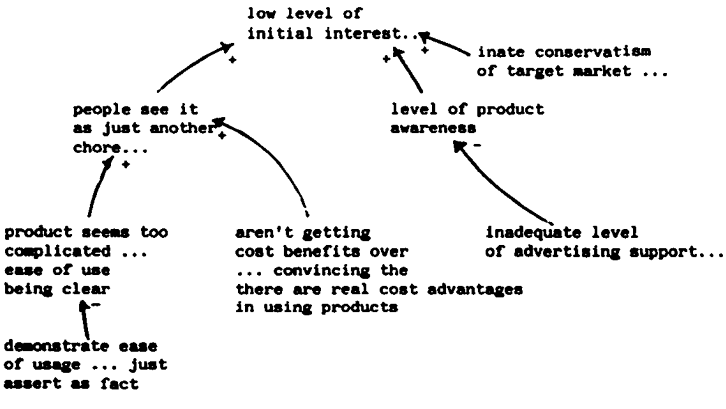
The Technique of Cognitive Mapping in Problem Definition

The particular modeling method to be described is the technique of cognitive mapping (Jones and Eden, 1981; Jones, 1981.) Cognitive maps are not attempts to model the underlying structure of some objective reality; they seek rather to represent, in *their own language*, persons' particular constructions of situations. Producing a cognitive map involves listening to, and coding clients' explanatory and predictive beliefs about their situation in the form of bipolar belief constructs, as descriptions of relevant events and entities, and theories about the relationships between them. Causal relationships, such that one event leads to or affects another, are represented by an arrow, while non-causal, connotative links are indicated by a simple line. The coding of bipolar constructs takes account of the way in which the meaning of a concept for a person is typically elaborated through its contrast with some explicit or implicit psychological alternative as, for example, in the statements, "we seem to be working continually under pressure, rather than having time to think,'' or ''the price is far too high''. To illustrate, consider the following statements:

> ''I think one of the reasons for the low level of initial interest may be that the product seems too complicated, instead of the ease of use being clear. People could see it as just another chore, and this could also be because we aren't getting the cost benefits over, convincing them that there are real cost advantages in using the product. I suppose that if we demonstrated the ease of usage rather than just asserting it as a fact, this would improve matters. Another factor is the level of product awareness. The level of advertising support is probably inadequate. And there is the innate conservatism of the target market, anyway''

Here we see the person expresses a number of beliefs about the possible causes of a ''low level of initial interest'', and a theory about how one aspect of the situation might be improved. A number of explicit contrasts between aspects of the current situation, and some preferred alternatives, were also expressed, with other opposite poles left implicit.

We can code the expressed chains of beliefs as follows, remembering that any doubts about bipolarity and relationships between constructs can readily be handled by checking with the client. The client is unlikely to be sitting passively while the researcher is coding; the process involves a *dialog*, facilitated through the explication, representation, and exploration of the client's beliefs.



Note: Arrows should be read as expressing the belief that one thing leads to (or is explained by) another. Dots separate discrete opposite poles of bipolar constructs, or indicate void poles where an alternative has not been made explicit. We would expect the researcher to ask for explication of what seem to be the most important of these, for example those which seem likely to offer ideas about preferred alternatives to current unsatisfactory events. Where the alternatives are not discrete, but involve more or less of some state; the opposite poles are inferred as, ''an increase/decrease in''. A plus sign on an arrow between constructs A1-A2 and B1-B2 indicates a relationship between similar sided poles (A1 leads to B1, A2 leads to B2); (a minus sign would indicate a relationship *across* poles (A1 leads to B2, A2 leads to B1) and where the client expresses some relationship between ideas which cannot be expressed in causal terms, this is indicated by a straight line).

In these ways mapping seeks to represent clients' *personal* constructions of a situation, using their own language and expressed belief relationships. Theoretically, the approach derives most from Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs. The most obvious relationship to Kelly's theory is in the attention to bipolar constructs. Kelly proposed that individuals make sense of their world through construing similarities and contrasts, noting features in a series of elements which characterize some of the elements, that are particularly uncharacteristic of others. He argued that without attention to similarities the world would represent a "chaotic particularized heterogeneity"; without awareness of contrasts, it would be a "chaotic undifferentiated homogeneity," (p 51). For example, the notion of "being bored," only makes sense because there is some implied opposite notion, such as "being interested," or "excited," or "happy"; which may be different for different people, and different for the same person in different contexts. Thus, asking for the clients 'opposite poles' elaborates understanding of the particular meaning they give to an event.

In form, cognitive mapping may be seen to have some relationship with the decision trees of decision theory and there may also be some similarities of purpose. For example, Churchill (1983) argues that a decision tree helps focus upon the interrelationships of the decisions that need to be made, illuminates the role of research in the decision and encourages communication between the researcher and decision-maker. However, there are critical differences between decision trees and cognitive maps. Decision trees focus on the solution phase of problem-construction, whereas cognitive maps are additionally concerned with facilitating processes of problem construction and problem definition from which choice of options derives. Decision trees can sometimes be used in conjunction with cognitive maps, when clients have come to conclusions about certain options which they would like to evaluate in a more structured fashion. Mapping can also be used with other decision-aiding tools, for example, with a critical path analysis as a precursor to, or outcome of, exploring an issue in depth through mapping.

Similar points can be made about the relationship between cognitive mapping and the various perceptual mapping methods used in marketing research, to explore and map consumers perceptions (Hauser and Koppelman, 1979). In these methods, consumers are typically asked to respond to a structured set of questions to elicit, for example, their similarity-dissimilarity judgements and/or attribute ratings; or preference rankings, of particular items. Important and useful as these techniques are, they again lack a provision for explicitly eliciting the consumers' contextual elaborations which explain, qualify, and otherwise give rich, personal, meaning to the summary judgements and ratings which have been gathered.

Facilitating Problem-Definition

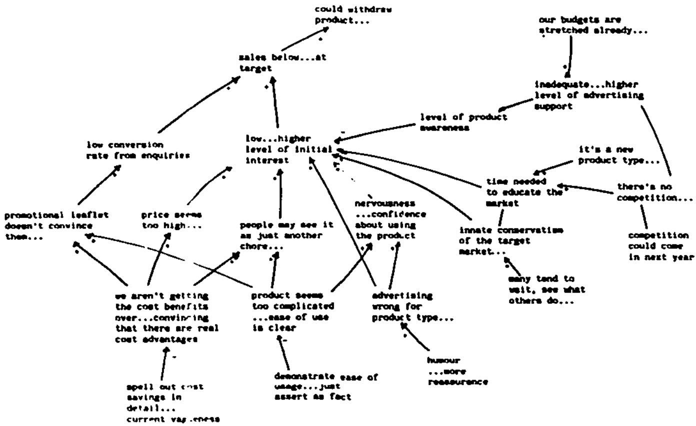
To give an example of the use of the approach, we shall describe work with a client considering his problem of the poor performance of a new product, and the need for appropriate research to discover the causes of this. The researcher in this case was concerned, in the initial meeting, to explore in some depth such issues as: exactly why the client wanted research; how he thought research would help; what marketing decisions might be affected by the research; what ideas the client had about the kind of research that should be undertaken, the specific data to be collected, and why; what theories the client had about the causes of the current poor performance; and how committed the client was to his beliefs. The researcher also wanted to know about the organizational political context to the research: were others needed to give approval to the research?; what would their involvement be with respect to the final report?; who else would be interested in the research, and why?; what were the expectations of these various others about the research outcomes and what theories did they have about the product's current performance?

The starting point for exploring these questions was simply to ask the client to explain the background of the product's situation and the decision to commission research. This also provided the researcher with the opportunity to ask about who else was interested in the research. The discussion moved naturally to considering why the client wanted research, the kinds of marketing decisions that might be affected by it, and then about the researcher's request for the client to explain what ideas he had, and why the product was performing unsatisfactorily.

At this point the researcher suggested that it might be useful to get some of these ideas down on paper. As the client articulated his theories, the researcher coded these on a flip-chart in the form of a map; using the map as the basis for further elicitation. Thus, the client was encouraged to elaborate his beliefs through giving further explanations and consequences of particular ideas and to discuss the relationships between ideas mentioned at different times in the discussion, to considering any apparent contradictions. The researcher also asked questions about those aspects of the product that the client did not mention, such as, whether the price of the product was perceived to be too high. Although the client initially believed that price was not a problem, after some discussion he agreed that price might be a possible factor, and this was entered onto the map.

When the discussion had proceeded some way, the researcher also felt able to ask the client whether his own ideas were shared by others in the organization. This elicited the information that there was currently a debate about the style of the existing advertising. The client felt reasonably happy with its humorous approach, but his boss felt that this might be inappropriate. As a potential explanation, this too was entered on the map. After about an hour and a half there was a map, (of which Figure 1 is a small part) which was examined by both researcher and client in coming to an agreement about the nature of the research; in this case a first stage of qualitative research among users and non-users. Unlike the situation where a researcher is simply making personal notes on the discussion, the model

FIGURE 1
Example of a Cognitive Map



became, in effect, a 'working document' which both the researcher and client could develop and explore together.

Later on, the map provided an important reference point for the kinds of issues the researcher needed to take account of in the analyses and recommendations. In the final presentation the map was used again to remind the client of the original discussions and compare the points made in that discussion with the findings.

CONCLUSION

The approach described herein has been used with a wide variety of clients, addressing a wide variety of different research situations, and resulting in a range of different research projects. These have included exploratory market studies. (to explore the parameters of a market, to identify opportunities for new product development, and to assess the potential for an existing new product idea), concept testing; evaluating new advertising treatments for existing brands; and store, company and brand image research. The approach focuses on aiding *processes* of problem definition; helping researchers access and address the subjectivity, individuality, and complexity of their clients' problem definitions while helping clients think through and evaluate their own theorizing. Additionally, it facilitates dialog and negotiation between clients and researchers.

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Sue Jones is a professor of Management in the School of Management at the University of Bath—England.