

## **Buddhism 5: towards an ethical qualitative research**

A few days ago, I posted about phenomenology and the importance of the study of Subjective Experience [SE]. In that post I referred to the Buddhist analysis of SE and how valuable it is to me.

There is a story behind this and I want to tell you more, for those interested in finding a perspective on SE that includes values, spiritual elements, self-destructiveness and the less obvious sides of human nature, like aversion and desire. These are important because people make choices from the whole of themselves, even if that whole becomes condensed into an automatic 'System One' pattern and seems simple.

For example, I might buy one brand rather than another because something about its name, history, colour or performance reminds me of my dad. I lost him 40 years ago but remain determined to keep him in my life. That brand helps me do that - and as far as I care - its performance is no better or worse than any of its competitors.

This is a personal tale from my own SE subjected to reflective analysis, the core analytic process of qualitative work. Would I be able to access or share this deep-set reason in a focus group where not more than a minute or two is spent on any question? I doubt it, I would feel vulnerable. So I would keep quiet about it - unless the facilitator made it safe for me. There must be thousands of incidents like this in groups all over the country, where the driving factor in a choice is kept secret or hidden, largely because the topic guide didn't make room for it.

It seemed to me that if I was to spend a working life in marketing, then I could not be content simply to practice it for the benefit of my fee paying masters or 'clients'. My life could not be given over to profiting some people through the seduction of others without conscience - even if that seduction was largely in the form of new information about genuine innovations, there was an imbalance in my clients' level of resources and those of most customers. Lacking resources could make it an easy sell to a family missing open loving relationships, hope, freedom, fun or capacity - as all families do at times. Products and services could easily be positioned to compensate for these lacks, whether they did so or not.

Well, that's just the way the world works, people say. Get over yourself!

Perhaps so, but I became converted to an idea, through my years of close contact with customers that engaging with them - even for the purpose of guiding the creation of a commercial, or understanding the appeal of a product - **could be done in a way that elevated the lives of both client and customer**. This was initiated by a chance remark in the 1980's that became more common after my sessions, made by consumers as they left.

"I don't know if you put something in the coffee, but I feel much better after that, and all we talked about was groceries."

These were rewarding comments and, eager to increase their frequency, I set out to think about what caused them.

The first thing I learned, one of the key principles of Buddhism as it happens though I didn't know it at the time, is that *the causes of any event are multi-factorial*. The kind of linear thinking loved by the West, that A causes B which then causes C is a distortion, an over-simplification. The fact is that A itself arises because of a whole set of influences, including time, place, mood, company, personality, inner events like thoughts and feelings and the influence of others. Another key factor was *volitions* - goals or intentions - even if only intentions to avoid social pain or embarrassment.

As for event A, so too for B and C. We can easily see that the changes in any of these circumstances or all of them will substantially effect what happens next.

Initially, this caused me to question the validity of qualitative research, certainly as expressed in the typical client brief: a variation of which you will have worked on many times:

**'Discover which of these 5 'positionings' will have the best effect on a) our brand image and b) our sales.'**

How could I answer that when the circumstances into which I introduced the positionings were never the same? Apart from the fact that it was different people in a different part of the country at a different time of day in a different room, everyone present had a different history, different current preoccupations and different feelings about me, the product and the others present, they might all have had singularly different motives for turning up and wish for different personal outcomes.

For years I pretended that this didn't matter, it would all even out in the wash and we could aggregate the results and take an average view, informed by the highlights of a few key remarks. In this way a subtle form of quantitative bias creeps into qualitative work. It leads to the famous **Mad Myth question: 'How many of them actually said that?'**

This essentially is generalisation, a process not much different from distortion and deletion but less frowned upon.

Deeper down, I never really believed my own propaganda and was **troubled by the superficiality and generalisations of my 'depth analysis'**.

At first my practice was to ignore, curtail (shorten sessions or each subject of discussion), or standardise to remove this variability or lack of certainty about what was going on. I tried varying order of presentation to compensate for 'order effect', telling people that there was no 'right' answer, lengthening or shortening the introduction, and - my personal favourite - beavering away at projective tests. ***I now see this at epidemic levels in our profession with short sessions, packed topic guides and evaluative briefs.***

It was a huge relief to discover that I was not alone in being troubled and puzzled by this. I had started therapy by this time to help me sort my life out - perplexed as I was by where I had ended up - and was struck by the words of the great German psychoanalyst, Paula Heiman. In the 1950's she had pinpointed my puzzle in her own words: talking about her sessions with her clients - and her own reflective analysis process - she said:

"I ask myself, 'who is talking to whom, about what and why now?'"

This question, and its consideration gave me great relief; it wasn't just me who didn't know what was really going on - although I was being paid to figure that out. This question, gave rise to a complementary question, one that I could ask myself which gave me more insight in directing my inquiries:

"What am I feeling - about what or whom - and why now?"

I could ask myself that as many times as I wanted in any session where I felt bothered or uncertain. I found that being candid about my feeling, sharing it with the group or interviewee, **would invariably increase two things, both of which were useful allies**: inclusion and identification. By including my own feeling of doubt or uncertainty I had unveiled, even if only to a slight degree, my own problem, my own suffering and this made my counterparts able to reveal more of themselves, personally.

Let me summarise these observations now, and pause here before the next part of this account to relate these ideas to Buddhism:

1. The causes of any event, thought or feeling and the outcomes of that same thing are multi-factorial.
2. Access to these factors is the key to a convincing, substantial account of their origins, meaning & effects. Additionally, there is never just one plausible account of causes and effects.
3. Access is increased by sharing from the moderator that promotes inclusion and identification.
4. Sharing that acknowledges vulnerability creates more openness and inclusion than any other type.

It was years later that I came to see the connection between this realisation in my own practice and the first Noble Truth, put forward by the Buddha:

*Suffering is an inevitable part of human life and no account of events that avoids suffering is accurate, convincing or authentic.*

**Most of modern marketing is concerned with portraying the avoidance of suffering, what I call 'the eternal optimism of the advertising mind'** - usually through acquisition of the product or

service on offer - and is correspondingly deemed inauthentic and biased by those who it targets. This problem is transmitted to each new generation of marketers, advertisers and market researchers to convince them that to succeed they must **'accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative and don't mess with mister in-between'**

Can I remind you that this is a line from a song...written in 1944, when the world was locked in war and cheery messages might have been prompted by the need to relieve suffering. As I said, to understand you need to ask: **'who was talking to whom, about what and why then?'**

Is it really too much to suggest that, in its own little ways, modern advertising is also about the relief of suffering, albeit the kind that emanates from a moment of frustration or unfavourable comparison between myself and my neighbour? I think that is exactly what it is about and the Buddha would agree...but what would he suggest is the solution?

See my next piece for more. We will introduce the second noble truth, and look at its implications for marketing.