Comments

Researcher Introspection as a Method in Consumer Research: Applications, Issues, and Implications

STEPHEN J. GOULD*

Introspection remains a controversial topic in consumer research as evidenced by Wallendorf and Brucks's (1993) critique of it. I find their article very stimulating in its delineation of the ways in which to use researcher introspection, but I strongly disagree with their overall assessment of it. In my view, their prescription for this new method is prematurely limiting. I suggest we take a more open approach to it because of its potential for contributions to understanding both consumer behavior and researcher dynamics. In this regard, I will offer alternative views to theirs on applying and construing introspection in general as well as researcher introspection.

INTROSPECTION IN GENERAL

In their critique of researcher introspection, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) frame much of their discussion in terms of introspection in general. They state that introspection involves the provision of verbal data about one's own experiences that are consciously available only to oneself. I would expand this view of introspection so that it is also seen more fully as an ongoing process of tracking, experiencing, and reflecting on one's own thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations, and behaviors. In this perspective, introspection as internal focusing is one of two basic modes of perceptual awareness along with extrospection, which is a focus on the external world.

In their criticism of the specificity of data collected in introspection, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) cite Nisbett and Wilson (1977) but ignore later refutations of their work. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) suggest that people derive generalized understandings about their own behavior from culturally and experientially derived rules rather than consult their own memories directly. However, others indicate that internal processes are detectable in great detail (e.g., White 1980). For instance, one is not only able to provide the result of a multiplication problem one is doing (i.e., the product of consciousness), but one can also describe the underlying process of how one obtained it.

My own reading of Nisbett and Wilson (1977) suggests that there are additional flaws in applying their work because they operate within a very narrow scope. Therefore, embracing their view as Wallendorf and Brucks do will sharply shackle our insight. First, Nisbett and Wilson (p. 242) chose experimental stimuli that were "as little ego-involving as possible." But under such conditions people will tend not to pay attention to their own internal processes (Hixon and Swann 1993). However, much of my own introspection has been very ego involving, thus allowing me to account for my own internal processing (e.g., Gould 1991). Second, Nisbett and Wilson, in performing isolated experiments on one-time subjects, failed to consider introspective training. With such training (e.g., from meditation), motivation, and focus, I have found I can detect (1) the contents of my consciousness (e.g., my thoughts about coffee; Nisbett and Wilson likely would agree), (2) the processes of my mind in revealing ways, and (3) not only involving processes but also, with attention, many habitual mind patterns (e.g., how and when thoughts arise). Indeed, just as it takes an electron microscope to see atoms, it takes a trained, focused awareness to observe mental processes. I would add that further research is needed to explore the nurturing of such awareness and the modes and conditions that optimize it.

RESEARCHER INTROSPECTION

Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) have characterized researcher introspection as the researcher studying only himself or herself, but they are highly critical of my use

*Stephen J. Gould is associate professor of marketing at Baruch College, The City University of New York, New York, NY 10010. I would like to thank the reviewers for their very helpful and penetrating comments and also both the editors and the associate editor involved in the review process, Kent Monroe, Brian Sternthal, and John Sherry, for their supportive guidance.

of it in an earlier article (Gould 1991). I would like to describe this method as I employed it there and provide a basis for its future use. Applying it as an interpretive technique, I sought to gain an understanding of consumption phenomena from an insider's view (i.e., as both consumer and researcher). It thus differs from other methods in that it relies on the reflexive mediation between one's personal and one's research insights. Much of my own personal theorizing developed in my ongoing energy-conscious praxis. Thus, along with my reported examples, much of my theory was also a coemergent form of introspected "data." I did not "formally" test or "confirm" the covariation between energy and product use but instead observed it in my everyday consumption. However, I monitored my own "lay" theorizing as a researcher studying a consumer and as a result was often driven into further self-analysis. The theory that eventually emerged is an inextricable joining of self and researcher.

The major advantage researcher introspection offers over other techniques lies in its power of mindful self-observation. It is ironic that many regard this as its major weakness because others cannot examine one's inner states. Yet one can never know as much about another's inner states as about one's own (Hixon and Swann 1993). Thus, instead of making mediating inferences about internal states, as one must do in studies of outside subjects, the researcher-introspector is able to directly observe internal states. In applying this method, I have had immediate access to a vast amount of cognitive and sensory data that I could never obtain from other subjects, and I am able to discern clear patterns in my internal phenomena over time.

Methods and Techniques

Based on my personal experiences with introspection, I have learned to examine my thoughts in terms of two aspects (White 1980): content (product) and process. With respect to content, I watch my thoughts for their cognitive content (e.g., "I am thinking about eating") and relate them to emotions, sensations, and behaviors (e.g., "I am thinking about food because I feel hunger pangs"). However, I find that process, which is of special concern to Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), also is readily accessible. For example, by watching how and when certain thoughts arise, I am able to find patterns. Moreover, I also engage my emotions, sensations, mental imagery, and behaviors as subjects of introspection. I observe them, am sensitized to their various aspects, and link them in a network of associations (e.g., noting a feeling and tracing its roots).

Applying these methods in research, I use both concurrent and retrospective introspection. Concurrent introspection involves following consumption while it occurs. Its advantage lies in its capacity for mindful observation. Thus, I observe and relive events many times so that they appear in my mind as vivid sensory data (Gould 1993). The processes of using a product become readily apparent (e.g., eating a food and observing how it makes me feel). Therefore, while Wallendorf and Brucks doubt my ability to find covariation between perceived vital energy (they also overlooked its perceived aspect) and product use, the rigor of my method, my long experience with it, my ability to relive events, and the force of direct observation have demonstrated introspection's efficacy to me. Their claim, in effect, is that I cannot notice any covariation between my being tired and lying down, even if I observe it over and over again during vivid, rigorous introspection and verification.

Retrospection is the introspective process of remembering. While Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) criticize it and suggest studying a cross section of consumers at various stages of consumption rather than one person over time, I would counter that the trajectory of one person's life provides different, more holistic data in terms of particular and interconnected memories. Thus, in retrospecting, I go back to specific memories of early life events by tracing the origins of inner states. I then generate current perspectives on those memories, which form a coherent trajectory, and thus provide myself with a running, systematically updated account of their effects.

Evaluation Issues

The evaluation of researcher introspection studies is not altogether dissimilar from that of other types of interpretive studies. However, in addition, evaluation may be considered in terms of self-evaluation and other-evaluation.

Self-Evaluation. Self-evaluation, largely overlooked by Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), concerns how one assesses one's self-observations. In my use of introspection, I have tried to gauge both my data (i.e., thoughts) and interpretations in two ways. First, I tried to be as honest with myself as I could and examined my observations in terms of what I might be concealing and/or missing. This was enhanced by my being able to look within myself over and over so that what might not have been apparent at first became more so after many such looks (i.e., emergent insight). Second, I examined the logic of my interpretations in light of what I experienced. I let my experiences drive my interpretations and made the latter consistent with the former.

Other-Evaluation. Other-evaluation, which involves the assessment of a researcher introspection study by outside reviewers and readers, poses a major problem for Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) in terms of data recording and analytic stance. They suggest that a major weakness of such a study is that other-evaluators cannot examine its internal data although they can examine artifactual data (e.g., diaries or belongings). However, there are also three types of readers' insight gestalts to consider

(Thompson 1990): (1) conceptual, in which one sees patterns in a study's findings although not relating to them directly, (2) phenomenological, in which one relates to the findings directly, and (3) paradigmatic, in which one's worldview is profoundly changed. At a minimum, an other-evaluator should find meaningful conceptual insights.

However, given the use of the term "energy" in ads and daily life, I thought many readers (other-evaluators) would also empathize with me in their own felt experience of energy. Thus, I expected they would directly relate (i.e., phenomenologically) to at least some of what I wrote. Yet, I also felt that certain examples might be more salient for some consumers than for others (e.g., those on a macrobiotic diet would better relate to my food examples). Still, the possibility remains that should they so choose, all readers could attempt to directly evaluate many of my examples by trying them (e.g., drinking a cup of tea and observing its effects). Furthermore, all readers can assess the insight introspection affords in general by taking one or more of their own consumption processes (e.g., eating or drinking) and following it over time to explore their own practices and feelings. In summary, a reader's other-evaluation of a published text can proceed by (1) extrospective validation of artifacts related to it, (2) conceptual assessment of it, and (3) introspective comparison of his or her own psychodynamics to those discussed in it.

When to Use Research Introspection

Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), in discussing the "topical appropriateness of researcher introspection" stipulate when it should and should not be used. However, I disagree with their restrictive prescription because (1) there are no established theoretical or empirical grounds for prematurely limiting its use, (2) its alleged inability to be generalized would apply to all interpretive studies (Hudson and Ozanne 1988) and would mean restricting them as well, (3) its rich insight, which Wallendorf and Brucks themselves acknowledge, might emerge in any area of consumer research, and (4) it fosters a sensitization that takes advantage of one's dual consumer-researcher role.

My own view on using researcher introspection postulates two necessary conditions: the researcher as instrument-subject must be knowledgeable and motivated with respect to both introspection and the topic of study, and the topic must be susceptible to introspection. For example, prior to writing Gould (1991), I decided to use researcher introspection on these two grounds. I had long been knowledgeably introspective as a result of my training in Buddhist meditation. I had also observed perceived vital energy over a long period of time, an advantage Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) acknowledge for researcher introspection. Moreover, this vivid self-observation made me keenly aware of how my energy psychodynamics were indeed a fit topic for such introspection.

CONCLUSION

I hope the dialogue between Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) and myself can contribute to the future use and practice of researcher introspection, although we sharply disagree on most issues, especially its merits. In particular, they emphasize that such introspection favors a researcher's personal experience and suggest using other approaches. However, from a philosophy of science point of view, there is much value to the case study of a single person. As I have noted (Gould 1991), case studies allow a nomothetic mapping of idiographic research and are widely used in many fields (e.g., medicine). Researcher introspection, as an application of the case method, facilitates probably better than any other approach a direct, extensive focus on the rich and specific aspects of one consumer's life and benefits from the researcher's being an especially "knowing" subject. While it has limits, its potential lies in providing fresh, novel insights for emergent theory building, cross-sectional consumer studies, and analyses of researcher processes.

Science is concerned with both truth and evaluation. The actual "truth" of a consumer's experience cannot be verified by transporting an outside researcher into that consumer's mind. However, without in any way denying the "truth" of that consumer's experience, other-evaluation, a problem for Wallendorf and Brucks in terms of external artifacts (e.g., the impossibility of obtaining full written records of someone's vast inner data), can still proceed quite robustly through conceptual and experiential tests. For instance, when reading consumer research studies, I usually gauge them in terms of their relevance to my own life (e.g., "Do I act this way?"). Thus, I want to underscore the idea that readers of a researcher introspection study very often can resonate with its results empathically in terms of their own direct experience.

What I fear from the view of Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) is that researcher introspection will be killed off virtually before it has begun. My own experience with it has greatly expanded my view of consumer behavior to that of a very colorful living tapestry of interwoven thoughts, sensations, and behaviors. Excluding it would abruptly curtail the use of what is potentially one of the best methods, if not itself the best, for the deepest and most penetrating exploration of such phenomena and would suppress opportunities for those who have a talent and passion for it. Instead, we should seek a diversity of voices that furthers our interdisciplinary mission and increases the overall usefulness of consumer research. It is not the method that counts per se, but it is the insight provided that matters.

[*Received June 1993. Revised May 1994. Kent B. Monroe and Brian Sternthal served as editors and John F. Sherry, Jr., served as associate editor for this article.*]

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