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Curiosity Didn't
Kill Any Cats...



CURIOSITY DIDN'T KILL ANY CATS...

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No self-respecting QRC can afford to be blind to neuroscience these days — well, at least in being familiar with the term and, maybe, a couple of key premises about how the human brain optimally works, which is with a good dose of lubricating emotion. Indeed, without the chemistry of emotion, we are literally unable to make decisions.

Famously, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio discovered, via a frontal-lobe brain-damaged patient he was treating in 1982, that although the patient's IQ was unaffected after surgery, he completely lost the ability to make a decision (which, in turn, wreaked havoc on his work, family and social life). In *Descartes' Error*, Damasio describes the effects he found across a number of patients who had brain damage to a similar area (the part often believed to be "the seat of emotions"). Because these people were so dominantly guided

by objective ways of thinking, they vacillated endlessly about choice because there were so many rational, logical, pragmatically supported pros and cons surrounding choices — even with minor choices, like the best time to make a subsequent appointment.

This story, with which many will be familiar (possibly from Jonah Lehrer's excellent account of the neuroscience of decision-making in *How We Decide*), holds some important seeds of learning for us QRCs at this point in time.

Qualitative Is a Thriving Methodology

We are, I have concluded, living through a patch of extreme data-induced indecision. We are becoming collectors, collators and purveyors, at just the point where qualitative methodology should be glorying in its hard-won historical battle against the "physics-envy" brigade and the Cartesian

positivist thinking of the early post-war years. Qualitative thinking should be reveling in a never-had-it-so-good moment where business leaders, academics, politicians, journalists — as well as our research-buying clients — all have a respect for the natural authority and sagacity of the emotional landscapes we should be describing, the analytic wisdom of understanding based on intellectual, methodological and experiential wisdom.

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Out there is a ripe marketplace for true qualitative thinking. Our clients have heard of behavioral economics, they've possibly even read Thaler and Sunstein, and they appreciate that the right brain dominates in choice of partner. Yet, I worry that what is getting repeatedly sold as qualitative research is, instead, text analytics with grammar thrown in.

Finally, the world we operate in is happy with touchy-feely stuff, at ease with metaphors and confident with ideas that aren't numbers. So, why aren't we up and running with them?

Impact of a Broader Array of Qualitative Mediums

Why are we so utterly obsessed with means of transport, rather than destinations?

In particular, why are we so seduced by the can-do possibilities of social-

media scraping and the accumulation of high-volume qualitative material via communities and other web-based sources that we have lost sight of what it is that we have, historically, been so uniquely good at? I am referring to the stuff I would describe as the interrogative, analytical, creative-thinking, leap-making, not-obvious-on-the-surface stuff.

I sense we feel pressurized by a dominant culture of medium adoration where everything internet is lauded because it does, of course, represent a paradigm shift in methodological access for us (as it does for quant researchers and, indeed, for all researchers, journalists and students), and also because there is a kind of social pressure — something about co-creation — in the idea that the online world gives everyone a voice. In the U.K., the government is hard-pushing all to get broad-

band at home as a kind of universal right. Schools send homework via email or school websites/community forums, cc'ing parents so they feel that online communications are somehow educationally worthy and certainly vital for their children's academic success.

We exist in a dominant culture that promotes online-ness as more democratic and more connected (which is a powerful positive word, implying social health). So, obviously, qualitative research must be at this table. And I wouldn't disagree.

Since when, though, was a stream of brief webcam ethnographic films and a barely edited transcript of an online community considered to be findings? These used to be called raw data (acquired through what was described, rather belittlingly, as desk research), and they were certainly materials easily

purveyed by anyone; you do not need qualitative thinking skills to amass the kinds of qualitative data unearthed by much internet-based research. You just need to be able to click.

Managing the Quality of Qualitative

Arguably, as more and more qual research heads online, the abilities associated with understanding, analyzing and reading real people could start to atrophy, too. Neuroscience has recently revealed that the brain is far more plastic than had previously been imagined, and we may be literally filling our brains with the high-speed, reactive, multi-focus, scanning and skimming skills that increasingly equip us online, but that may drive out the deeper, contemplative, analytic activity that once hallmarked qualitative thinking. In the old mantra, we need to use it, so we don't lose it.

QRCs are in danger of “de-skilling” because they are dancing to the tune of the supply-end machine.

So, these are my key concerns:

1. QRCs are in danger of de-skilling because they are dancing to the tune of the online supply-end machine and, along with clients, falling for the superficially seductive idea of qualitative data with quantitative dimensions. Even the most sophisticated sentiment-analysis gizmo can only, ultimately, count.
2. We mistake quantity, and source of data, for authenticity because it smells like findings. And with much of the material sourced from social media, there are all kinds of added dangers. Who was speaking? In what guise? Was it a real person (or, indeed a research bot, mimicking the target group persona)? How much of the approval or opprobrium was ironic? How was the language being used? Was it txt tlk, and are we

sure we get the brevs? Would these people speak in a similar fashion in the pub? Or is this all self-aggrandizement, the old bloggers' disease?

There is, without the sharp instrument of experienced qualitative thinking, a very real danger that what we will get out of the welter of data we can now access is a kind of “brown soup” of rhetoric. We may get the kinds of findings like these examples, which are all real (as in the public domain) and which all emerged from qualitative online enquiry:

- For a global accountancy and consultancy business (you would all know the name), the discovery that “personal recommendation has a big impact on what consumers buy.”
- For a U.K. government department, the edifying discovery that parents would like for their children to be screened from pornographic websites.

- For a well-known music TV channel, the discovery that the most important aspect of the proposed online offering will have to be... content!

Well, when you have recovered from the shock (and by the way, the growing, and annoying, tendency to aggrandize incredibly obvious and bland findings with obscuring terminology, such as *occasional grazing behaviors*, *provisioning platform* and *entertainment parameter metrics*, only adds to the problem), it is worth considering the commercial issue here, too — QRCs are in danger of selling themselves so short that the “anyone can do a focus group” camp has an increasingly strong case. As I write, this is a LinkedIn chat strand:

How long will it be before online community specialists and online panel providers begin a head-to-head compe-

titition for client attention with full-service agencies?

The writing is on the wall.

The Finesse of Human Curiosity

One of the most damaging aspects of the electronically enabled research world is that speed is no longer an extra for times when you are doing a loyal client a special favor. High speed has now become the norm because of the 24-hour speed-of-broadband working lifestyle we are increasingly subjected to. And, listening to the lessons of pretty much all schools of psychological and neuroscientific thinking, what disappear with speed are (obviously) the depth charges, detail and second levels in material analysis, but also the (less obvious) mystical, evolving, equally important incubation process. No nation on earth lacks a proverb that relates to the value of the idea of “sleeping on” a problem in order to reach a more balanced, nuanced, considered and, often, longer-lasting solution.

And, frankly, the analytics gizmo will always beat the average QRC, hands down, in the prize for speed.

So, let's get particular about exactly what I am ruing. In a recent ten-minute interview, John Humphreys — an iconic and long-standing radio news journalist famous in the U.K. for his rather spiky and abrasive, yet insightful, interview style (chiefly on the early morning Radio 4 Today Programme) — when asked if being a good listener was key to his journalistic success in revealing interviews, replied, “Oh, no. For me, it's curiosity. If you're genuinely curious, you always listen well.”

What I like about this is that, for me, it puts the horse back firmly before the cart. Just as we would do well to cut down on the time we spend fretting about the minutiae of sample makeup or the over-rigid and committee-built discussion guide, so we should spend much, much more time caring for, and exercising, the horse. And the horse in question is, in my mind, curiosity: the engine of good, exciting and revelatory qual research.

Curiosity is a word, and idea, that has often been maligned. When we think of curiosity, we might typically imagine something rather ill advised

(in the cat-killing sense) or, equally damning, something slight, faintly malign or inappropriate (in the “nose in other people’s business” sense). This is a shame because I have long held that curiosity is the absolute primeval qualitative instinct.

The Systemic Therapists of the Milan Group

In the middle of the twentieth century, a group of very wise and successful therapists based in Milan (the Milan Group) evolved an approach to working with disturbed and mentally ill patients. This approach focused on looking beyond the individual (because they became frustrated that destructive behavior patterns did not shift by simply addressing the psychopathology of just the one patient) but instead towards the whole family and/or, indeed, the wider social system in which the destructive, damaged or pathological behaviors happened. They termed their work *Systemic*, and the thinking focuses on a number of key tenets, broadly within a Social Constructionist psychological framework.

Their approach holds the now-commonplace view that we do not have a fixed or rigid once-and-for-all psychological repertoire, but that we are highly dependent, both situationally and contextually, and that we style our behavior in relation to others in our system. In a way very similar to the behavioral-economical ideas about heuristics or choice architecture, we are inherently psychologically lazy, and we use short cuts, gravitate to the familiar and, ultimately, choose something only relatively. It is not that prawn madras was our all-time favorite fish meal, but that it was more affordable than the lobster and more exciting than the plaice, and anyway we like the playful shapes of the butterflyed prawn bodies. Circumstance and habit win repeatedly.

Key to these Systemic learnings were:

- The concept of a therapist (read moderator/analyst) state of almost **perpetual curiosity**: not a simplistic nosy state, but a particular thought-through curiosity that was employed to tease out (self-) discoveries through careful listening and even more careful hearing.

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Curiosity is my recommended antidote to the danger of the QRC (and the whole qual world) sleepwalking into a new positivist paradigm.

- The process of almost Socratic-style **circular questioning** of the roots of the behavior systems that the patient (read respondent) was engaged in.

The ideas the Systemic Therapists from Milan promulgated are fabulously relevant and apposite in a qualitative research context. I am repeatedly drawn back to the ideas and writings of Gianfranco Cecchin (one of the key Milan Group players) about both process and thinking.

In the face of the emotion-drained world of data overload and online fetishism, I cannot recommend the *curious* antidote more strongly. It also fits beautifully with behavioral-economics thinking because it takes the focus off the transmission and literal models of question and answer. An observation again supported by neuroscientific thinking from many quarters, we are very poor witnesses to our own motivations. We find it nigh impossible to answer the question “why?” accurately, although we often answer it appropriately or in a genuine attempt to explain ourselves. We simply do not always know — in the forefront, conscious-mind sense — why we do things, like things, choose things, reject things. Our primal brains have already made 90% of all the so-called rational decisions while we were in the thrall of that old favorite drug, emotion. And we often made the decision way before we picked up the product or even selected the shelf, and often for some bizarre and definitely hard-to-describe reason such as “because the color puts me in mind of the smell of my grandmother’s garden in summer when I was a child.”

This is not, basically, stuff that lends itself to the over-engineered discussion-guide question list (left-hand side) with timings (right-hand side).

The Circular Questioning Approach

In the Systemic sense, a curious stance feels slightly meditative and takes some

practice. Ideally, it involves as open a mind as is possible (within the acceptance that we cannot but be subjective, and there is no ultimate objectivity). And the form of questioning that the Milan group developed — and that is wonderful in qualitative practice — is called Circular Questioning.

Circular questioning basically follows the pattern of asking about other events, other significant people, other reactions and other associated occurrences around the “patient” (respondent) and event (product/service/communications). It takes the heat and focus off the “you”/“your actions” and constructs the reality through observations about the system.

As an example, a “you/why” question might be: “So, *then what drove you to shop in the superstore you said you hated?* A circular set of questions might include: “*When you chose to shop in Graveyard Grove, what did your wife say?*” and/or “*Who noticed that you shopped there?*” and/or “*What was their feeling about your shopping in there?*”

Key to this process: always picking up and running with an element, given by the respondent, that is experienced as important in the moment.

In the style of a detective, a circular-questioning approach maintains a kind of pure curiosity, as if there are no value judgments implied, as if any scrap of information might hold the key to behavior and as if the answers are rooted in a respondent’s observations of events and others, not rooted in an attempt to explain himself.

Indeed, the process does, often, reveal something highly significant. For example, in a project on school-curriculum communication for the U.K. Education Department, we used circular questioning to explore children’s stories about what/who were important influences on a positive attitude towards learning for young boys. We noticed a pattern of mentions of other males

(fathers, uncles, older brothers) in stories of best learning experiences, and we were able to highlight the significance, especially for young boys, of “learning-in-the-muscle” through doing and best of all, learning in a partnered experience with a respected mentor or role model. If we had simply asked boys what worked best for them, or focused on them as individuals, we doubt if this kind of valuable additional insight would have emerged.

Curiosity, in the Milan Group’s thinking, as I have suggested, is something quite specific and modal, a way of unearthing the layers and levels of descriptive information that amount to behavior and acted-out attitude. It favors a light touch and is non-prescriptive. It should be playful, happy to mind-wander and open to the (all-important) connection-making. **It works particularly magically, if given time.**

Curiosity is very far from the superficial churn and amalgamation of data predicated on an already-decided-upon term or brand or idea, which characterizes much online qualitative work nowadays.

My favorite elements of Cecchin’s suggested therapeutic questioning (for which, read researching) style are the ideas of:

- Hypothesizing — building, but then holding lightly a hypothesis; mulling it, playing with it, but then being happy to eschew it (usually a process built on circular questioning, with a curious stance).
- Irreverence — derived from the need to retain sanity (literally) in a therapeutic situation and espoused to avoid any unfounded sense of the therapist’s own power, superiority or grandeur. In particular, Cecchin suggests adopting an irreverence towards beliefs, and I take this to include the kind of beliefs that our clients sometimes have, and tell us, about our market or our consumers. Ultimately, they

will thank us for unsettling their sterile and no-longer-helpful belief that “our brand is all about success” or “we strive for perfection” or whatever it is that has been dragging ’round the marketing department’s neck for years now!

The Curious Solution

So, and finally, curiosity is my recommended antidote to what I see as the danger of the QRC (and the whole qual research world of practice) sleep-walking into a new positivist paradigm (what you see is all there is) because we no longer have the time to really analyze, we no longer “expect to find difference,” and anyway we are too overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of possible data that we need to organize, that bureaucracy wins in the end. In this scenario, we will ultimately, also, be very replaceable.

But curiosity is, of course, risky, as the cat well knows. You may lose the odd life — or client — but, hey, you have eight more, and anyway, wasn’t getting beyond the surface why you wanted to be a QRC in the first place?

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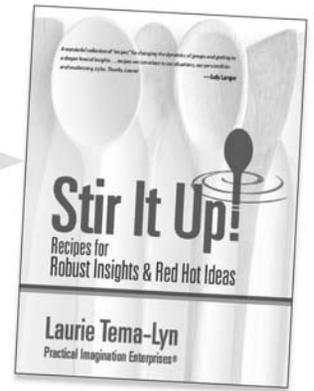
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