



Me-search? Search me! A new twist in the tale of introspection

Brown, S., & Patterson, A. (2021). Me-search? Search me! A new twist in the tale of introspection. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37(13-14), 1343-1373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2021.1928268>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Journal of Marketing Management

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2021

DOI:
[10.1080/0267257x.2021.1928268](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2021.1928268)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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Me-search? Search Me!
A New Twist in the Tale of Introspection

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Abstract

According to James Lovelock of Gaia hypothesis fame, it takes thirty years for innovative ideas to gain acceptance and forty before the heterodox becomes orthodox, all proper and correct and enshrined in textbooks. Thirty years after Stephen J. Gould's heretical article on Introspection and the best part of forty years since Morris B. Holbrook took up his pen, the time is right to evaluate their original ideas. Less a rigorous investigation than an irreverent reflection on a reflective research method, this paper summarises the state of the art of introspection – and some of its many permutations – in an appropriately artistic manner.

Keywords: Me-search; Introspection; Autoethnography; Autonethnography; Methodology

Contribution

A contribution to JMM's occasional series of state-of-the-art literature reviews, this paper considers the controversial marketing research technique, Subjective Personal Introspection. Closely related to Autoethnography, and recently rebranded as 'Me-search', SPI has generated much discussion down the years. More of a literary review than a review of the literature, this article argues that thirty years after Stephen Gould's inaugural article, it's time to abandon the antipathy and induct Me-search into the marketing research hall of fame.

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Modern culture warriors aren't the progressives they think they are. They are merely going round in fruitless, exhausted circles refighting the battles of their parents.

—Marriott (2020, p.32)

New developments of art have routinely been dismissed as absurd, the speculation of chancers or the ravings of the deranged.

—Eastham (2020, p.6)

In the middle of May 2017, the BBC reports breaking news of an exciting scientific discovery, a discovery so stupendous that distinguished scholars are divided on its veracity (Pickles, 2017). One considers it a game-changer that, if not exactly on a par with Newton's plummeting apple, much less Einstein's theory of relativity, has the potential to open up whole new vistas of research endeavour. Another regards it as a disgrace, an affront to Science which is closer to the cold fusion scandal – or the shameful story of MMR (Deer, 2020) – than Crick and Watson's spiralling DNA.

This breakthrough, however, has nothing to do with a new, hitherto undiscovered planet, let alone life on Mars. Nor is it the outcome of Herculean struggles by a crack team of Nobel prizewinning, God particle seekers at CERN's ginormous underground laboratory. It's a social science discovery, a research method, no less. But a method that is momentous in its own way, a potential paradigm shift on how esteemed academics understand the social world that surrounds each and every one of the 7.8 billion inhabitants on this beautiful blue planet of ours.

That method is Me-search. It's a research method that eschews the objective, rigorous, dispassionate, socially distanced, unfailingly falsifiable approach to experimental social

science – the gold standard approach that’s on a direct line of descent from Newton, Darwin, Einstein and Franklin (Hunt, 1976) – for the subjective sensations, feelings, interpretations and personal opinions of the individual doing the research. It embraces, incorporates, foregrounds and furthermore celebrates the emotional responses of those living, breathing human beings behind the work and reporting their introspective reflections on the page, in a PPT presentation, between the covers of a book, or by means of learned academic articles (Brown, 2005). Hence the moniker me-search, hence the affronted reaction, hence the admonitory words of Vincent F. Hendricks, a leading philosopher of science, who casts doubt on the method’s ability to meet ‘the standard criteria for science...and other conditions securing reliable scientific enquiry’. And hence its vociferous defence by Carolyn Ellis, an eminent sociologist, who argues that me-search ‘has given a voice to people from working class, ethnic minority and indigenous backgrounds who would not have written otherwise in more traditional social science prose’ (Pickles, 2017).

An Eye for an I

Marketing and consumer researchers will be forgiven if they feel a frisson of *déjà-vu*. The me-search controversy sounds suspiciously like the disruptive debate that erupted in the aftermath of the infamous ‘paradigm wars’ of the 1980s (Gould, 2012; Hackley 2016, 2020; Tadajewski, 2014). The same issues arise; the same arguments are made, the same positions are taken by those involved in the rumpus around ‘introspection’ (Holbrook, 1995). More than that, it is the same methodology that’s at the crux of the quarrel, albeit one that’s been rebranded in all but name. In nothing but name.

Arguably.

Tempting as it is to ignore this rebrand or dismiss it with a been there, done that, so what scholarly shrug, the very fact that the exact same concerns are being expressed, and the exact same insults are being exchanged, is intriguing in itself. As is the appearance of yet another new name for an old research methodology, a ‘selfie culture’ coinage that’s attracting academic attention and not a little notoriety (Rees, 2015). It’s also gaining a certain amount of momentum, if only on account of the BBC’s coverage (Pickles, 2017). The fracas, we believe, is sufficiently intriguing to warrant reconsideration of the post-paradigm war contretemps that convulses our own discipline when Stephen J. Gould’s (1991) infamous article about introspection appears in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR).

Our aim in undertaking this retrospective exercise is not to review the literature on introspection-as-research-method, nor that of the method’s main forms and variants. Several excellent analyses of ‘Autoethnography’, ‘Subjective Personal Introspection’ (SPI), ‘Personal Narratives’ and, latterly, ‘Autonetnography’, already exist (Hackley, 2020; Kozinets et al, 2018; Patterson, 2010). And they are well worth reading. Our purpose rather is to consider me-search and the cultural penumbra that surrounds the methodology from a literary perspective. Introspections, autoethnographies and all the rest are nothing if not literary artefacts – as is the vast majority of academic output – and we seek to place them within the wider context of latter-day developments in the world of literature and cultural criticism (Wohlfeil, 2018), what Hackley (2013) in another context calls the *mise-en-scène* (a theatrical term meaning ‘the scenery and properties of an acted play, the surroundings of an event’). We are interested in the avant-garde art, not the scrupulous social science, of SPIs.

More than that, we intend to recount our reflections in a manner that better matches the method than the linear, this-then-that, point-by-point, from-objectives-to-findings-to-implications format of orthodox academic articles. We offer, rather, a stream of scholarly consciousness that eddies round and round, swirls back and forth, meanders from micro-scale textual analysis to macro-scale cultural commentary and, in so doing, raises questions about customary writing practices, much as introspection cast doubt on established research methods (Brown, 2019). Our aim is not just to retell a tale that has been told many times before (Holbrook, 1995), but to contextualise and critically interrogate that narrative, to reflect on a reflective research methodology and to supplement the ‘official history’ of the introspective altercation with some ‘history from below’, the hearsay, the scuttlebutt, the water-cooler conversations concerning ‘the backstage behaviours of the academy’ (Tadajewski, 2014, p.304).

This article, in other words, isn’t so much a literature review as a literary overview, a state-of-the-art statement where the art part is emphasised. It doesn’t seek to be complete or indeed compete with prior studies of the subject. It is contemplative rather than comprehensive. It is less a straightforward chronology than a series of what romantic poet William Wordsworth calls ‘spots in time’, disconnected moments of illumination. Jump cuts, if you will. The context, not just the content, is our primary concern.¹

Ready, Get Set, Gould!

Having commenced, as literary epics usually do, in the middle of the action with a mighty clash of symbolic cymbals (Sutherland, 2010), let us turn the clock back to the beginning.²

That is, to marketing and consumer research in the immediate aftermath of the paradigm wars

of the 1980s, when realism and relativism, positivism and post-positivism, marketing science and the art of marketing face off, snarling, then fight each other to a standstill. The wounds are still raw, a lasting truce looks unlikely and the iconic Consumer Odyssey, a transcontinental trek by the discipline's 'qualitative SWAT team' (Sherry, 1987, p.371) has opened up new territory. Stephen J. Gould is an early settler. A junior colleague of Elizabeth C Hirschman, one of the most prominent players in paradigmageddon, Steve lit out for the territory like Huckleberry Finn of legend (Gould, 2008). Where he propagates a groundbreaking, scorched-earth article entitled, 'The Self-Manipulation of My Pervasive Perceived Vital Energy Through Product Use: An Introspective-Praxis Perspective' (Gould, 1991).

Much as the world changes irrevocably for Virginia Woolf 'in or about' December 1910, when she attends an exhibition of post-impressionist art (Lee, 1997), so too the world is transformed for Stephen J. Gould, and marketing's interpretive research community, in September 1991, when his landmark paper appears in JCR. The piece is published a couple of weeks before the annual ACR conference (Gould, 1992). And not unlike Lord Byron, who awakes to find himself famous after the appearance of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Gould touches down in Chicago to find himself infamous. If not quite the Al Capone of consumer research, Stephen's regarded as one of his henchmen, the dark star of the show, the guy responsible for 'that' article, the article everyone is talking about.³

Collaring Gould at coffeetime, some attendees politely remark that they'd 'read' his article, which is a diplomatic way of saying 'it stinks'. Others, equally politely, say they'd enjoyed 'parts' of it, the parts about his private parts perhaps. And yet others, rather more pointedly, state that he should have waited until he'd got tenure before publishing such a provocative

paper. In the euphemistic language of higher education, that's another way of saying, 'What were you thinking of? What on earth possessed you? Your career is over before it's begun.'

What Gould (1991) is really thinking of, as the first sentence of the offending paper makes perfectly clear, is that the consumer research articles and books he'd been reading as a graduate student are neither relevant to, nor help account for, his own consumer behaviour. The abundant theories and models and frameworks forged by previous generations of eminent scholars are castles in the sand, cloud cuckoo land, pseudo-scientific claptrap, as far as Stephen is concerned. So he'd set out to better understand how he really behaves – *in reality* – rather than in the boxes-and-arrows abstractions of his academic elders and betters. Drawing upon his studies of eastern mysticism and the meditative skills he'd acquired along the way, he meditates on his own perceived vital energy and his corporeal, carnal, concupiscent self (Gould, 1991). He thinks especially deeply about Tantric sex (as well as making a splash, we suspect, as the coming man of marketing and consumer research).

Go for Gould

If, as is often said, shock sells, sex sells and shocking sex sells best of all (Brown, 2016), then 'Self-manipulation' is surely a contender for the most read article in the consumer research canon. Not the most cited, of course, for fear of being tarred by association. But the most avidly read, if only to see what all the fuss is about. After the initial chorus of WTFs, OMGs and LOLs – not that anyone uses such acronyms back then – a formal response to Steve's sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll article appears. Surprisingly, it doesn't come from an affronted aficionado of old-school, hypothesis-testing, number-crunching consumer research, or the indefatigable champion of marketing science, Shelby D. Hunt, but from two fellow travellers

in the interpretive research tradition, one of whom had organised the pioneering Consumer Odyssey five years beforehand and both of whom presumably feared Steve's phallic, in-your-face foolhardiness would inflame the anti-interpretive majority.

Concentrating not on the content but the methodology of Gould's article, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) don't spare Steve's blushes. Introspection, they argue, referring to the procedure's contemptible scientific shortcomings, less than illustrious intellectual credentials and lack of support within psychology's scholarly community, is fatally flawed and therefore Stephen's "Introspective-praxis perspective" is equally fatally flawed, as are several broadly similar, if less high profile, papers by sadly misguided marketing and consumer researchers (Hirschman, 1990; Lehmann, 1987; Pollay, 1987; Scammon, 1987).

Among other things, their rebuttal identifies introspection's most flagrant failings including the ill-defined time period it covers, the reprehensible absence of supporting evidence, the researcher's neglect of social distancing from his data and the method's reliance on a sample-of-one that isn't so much unrepresentative as misrepresentative. Gould's article, they go on, contains inadmissible evidence, evidence which invites ridicule from scientific marketing mainstream and, lacking rigour, does nothing to further the agenda of naturalistic consumer research. With hard work and due diligence – shades of Shelby on marketing science – the introspective method may one day earn a place in the pantheon. But most definitely not in the form being promulgated by the false prophet from Rutgers. As it stands, Steve's introspective-praxis approach possesses 'severely limited potential' (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p.339).

Read today, Wallendorf and Brucks' article is a curious, hybrid creature, the Chimera of marketing and consumer research. Although some consider it a systematic take-down of Stephen's introspective research – as he wryly observes, they're 'joined at the hip' (Gould 2010, p. 417) – it quite clearly isn't a formal 'comment' that's published alongside the original. And although Gould (1995) is given the right of reply in JCR, his rejoinder doesn't appear, as academic etiquette ordinarily demands, alongside the comment. But five whole issues later. We're in a strange situation, therefore, where Wallendorf and Brucks' comment isn't a comment, as such. And if that *is* the case, he should never have been given the right of reply. And if *that* is the case, Gould's rejoinder is, in a formal sense, a comment on his critics' article. And if that is the *case*, then they should have had the right of reply to his comment or rejoinder or whatever the hell it is.

Curiouser and curiouser, conspiracy theorists might conclude. Not us, obviously...

As if the above isn't enough, it's evident that Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) are employing the essentially 'scientific' criteria of rigour, reliability, replicability, etc. to evaluate a paper that doesn't claim to be scientific, much less a contribution to Marketing Science. Their rebuttal is riddled with seriously scientific, ideologically correct, white lab coat-wearing buzzwords such as correlation, covariation, validity, veridical, specificity, systematic, isomorphism and, after drawing breath, accuse the author of 'bias' (p.344), that unspeakable sin against Big Science.⁴ Not only do they recommend the use of SPSS, the number-crunching software package, but their disingenuous remarks about the thickness of Gould's 'thick' description are straight out of Shelby Hunt's playbook, where hairs are split to infinity and beyond. On rereading, it's clear that Gould doesn't claim his description is 'thick', *à la* Geertz. What he actually says is 'the best way I could most "thickly" describe' (p.201). That

is, it is thick-ish not thick-with-a-capital-T (note the qualifying quotation marks around ‘thickly’). Undaunted, Wallendorf and Brooks (1993, p.355) conclude their summary dismissal with the commendably conciliatory words ‘scholars cannot summarily dismiss other research programs because they fail to adhere to the tenets of their own research programs’.

On top of that, their take down of an easy target lets Morris Holbrook off scot-free, even though he is introspection’s most ardent advocate at the time. True, he does get a passing mention, as do Bristor (1992), Williams (1992) and several other early exponents of the introspective art. But the bulk of Wallendorf and Brucks’ ire is directed at Gould, reputedly because his candid confessional contribution is ‘the single article published in a major consumer research journal’ (p.340). Their quarrel, they insist, is with introspections not individuals. However Holbrook, a dissenting participant in the Odyssey, not only thinks otherwise but thanks his lucky stars he’s dodged Wallendorf and Brucks’ silver bullet. Given the ‘relentlessness’ of the ‘attack’ on Gould, he says, ‘I should feel grateful that my own earlier work is largely ignored’ (Holbrook, 1995, p.251).

Oddest of all when reread today, is Sherry’s (1987) eye-opening revelation in an earlier ‘impressionistic essay’ – i.e. an introspective account – of the 1986 Consumer Odyssey, an account which is written immediately after the fieldwork finishes and its three leading lights, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry himself, are getting ready to analyse the data. Their picaresque quest, he confesses, was characterised by a freewheeling, overwhelmingly ludic spirit of ‘ragamuffin barefoot irreverence’ (p.370) with ‘fine disregard for the rules’ (ibid.) and, quoting Holbrook, an ecumenical spirit of openness to ‘new approaches’ (ibid). That openness is absent by the time Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) are laying down the law on

introspection. The overall tone of their critique is akin to stern parents chastising an errant child and placing them on the naughty step. Ragamuffin research be damned. Do as I say, not as I do!⁵

Ancient history it assuredly is. A storm in a teacup, arguably. Considered in retrospect, however, it's hard not to conclude that Gould is hung out to dry. He is the chosen sacrificial victim of the Odysseans' burning desire to have their naturalistic research approach accepted – or tolerated, at any rate – by the scientific mainstream, the modellers, the experimentalists, the quants jocks and, not least, the gatekeepers of the leading journals, whose citadels they are determined to capture (Belk, 2014; Sherry, 2014). Hence the strenuous efforts they make to demonstrate, and defend, the rigour, the reliability, the trustworthiness, the veracity (via audits, member checks, triangulation and the like) of their rather more robust use of qualitative research methods. Gould is chaff under their chariot wheels, roadkill en route, an RTA caused by reckless (auto)driving. Or something like that.⁶

At the same time, it's incontestable that the in-fighting raises the profile of interpretive research methods more generally and tempers the reception of less contentious strains of the post-positivist paradigm: phenomenology, critical theory, literary criticism et al. As Tadjewski (2014, p.304), paraphrasing Bagozzi (1992), points out, 'tensions can be productive in the sense that they alert the wider academic community to important debates'.

Once, Twice, Three Times a Scapegoat

History may not repeat itself but, according to Mark Twain, it occasionally rhymes.⁷ And so it is a decade after the foregoing fisticuffs, when Stephen Gould becomes a sacrificial victim

for the second time. In their eagerness to rebrand interpretive consumer research as Consumer Culture Theory, Arnould and Thompson (1995) throw introspection's whipping boy under the bus. In an unfair and arguably unnecessary aside about 'voyeurism' and 'sonorous introspection' (p.870), they caricature his iconic JCR article as an inconsequential irrelevance, an eccentric contribution to consumer research that is more talked about than acted upon. Granted, this disparagement is tempered by a qualifying footnote,⁸ but there's no doubt that Stephen Gould gets the burnt offering treatment once more. And as before, it's an attempt to propitiate the gods of quantitative methods, the deities of managerial relevance and, not least, longer-established academic disciplines who consider marketing and consumer research a cesspit of egregious empiricism (Arnould and Thompson, 2007).

The irony, though, is that the hostility repeatedly heaped on Gould in particular and introspection more broadly has only served to increase its appeal. In much the same way as avant-garde movements in the arts – modernist literature, atonal music, free-verse poetry, the post-impressionists – gain traction through notoriety (Schroeder, 2000), so too Stephen's advocacy of introspection and academic witchfinders' desire to burn him at the stake, haven't succeeded. On the contrary, they have given a 'forbidden fruit' frisson to introspective research methods, which makes them more appealing not less, especially to the excluded, the overlooked, the voiceless, those denied access to the levers of power (Brown, 2005). As Chris Hackley (2020, p.170) rightly observes, summarising the substantial published literature on introspection and related research techniques, they 'have considerable critical potential since they can offer deeply personal accounts that are sometimes written with emotional force, giving voice to the marginalised'. Denial increases desire. Denigration delights those who'd rather *not* do what they're told, the activists, the reformers, the protesters, the teenage rebels of thought, the Holden Caulfields of marketing methodology (Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter,

2004). Or, to translate it into appropriate academese, the advocates of Critical Praxis Research (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Kress, 2011).

A cynic of course might conclude that the whole thing's a set-up. Much as Madonna makes 'strategic use of scandal' at crucial moments in her career – ditto Damien Hirst, Andy Warhol, William Burroughs, James Joyce, Joe Orton, Oasis – our infamous introspection irruption helps make the academic reputations of everyone involved (Schroeder, 2000). Gould (2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2012) has published a string of papers on the scholarly spat. Wallendorf and Brucks' critique has long since qualified as a 'citation classic' (Emile, 2011). CCT's inaugural article likewise triggers an attention-grabbing furore.⁹ Just as Vance Packard's condemnation of motivation research is the best thing that ever happens to Ernest Dichter (Tadajewski, 2010); just as Shelby Hunt's attack on postpositivism does wonders for interpretive marketing research (Holbrook, 1995); and just as Stanley Hollander's critique of Malcolm McNair's wheel of retailing sets the conceptualisation in motion (Brown, 1991), Arnould and Thompson's acidic aside inadvertently serves to reinvigorate the introspection faction. Today's me-searchers must be rubbing their hands with glee at critics' knee-jerk reaction to the rebrand. Getting coverage on the BBC is a pretty good place to start.¹⁰

JMM's not too shabby either...

New York State of Mine

Not unlike Billy Joel, Stephen J. Gould didn't start the fire, the desire to better understand consumer behaviour through self-reflection, recollection, retrospection. Like so many innovators in the literature and the arts – and, furthermore, in science, business, technology,

et al (Poole, 2016) – the person or persons who get credit for the breakthrough aren't those who create it in the first place. It is Edouard Dujardin not James Joyce who develops the 'interior monologue'; it is Margaret Cavendish not Mary Shelley who invents science fiction; it is Thomas Malory not Daniel Defoe who writes the earliest English novel; it's I.A. Richards who first invites student readers to write reflective essays on works of literature, not the reader-response theorists of the 1980s (Sutherland, 2014). Stephen Gould too is beaten to the punch, though he has since rolled with the punches for his predecessors' provocations. He is a latecomer to the party he ends up paying for, albeit he benefits further down the line as a living legend, a hero from zero, introspection-praxis's poster boy.¹¹

Tempting as it is to apply Ted Levitt's (1992) timeless trappist principle, 'the second mouse gets the cheese' to the prehistory of me-search, it is sufficient to note that Steve's snappy article is anticipated – foreshadowed, rather – by a series of puckish, provocative, practically piratical pieces of prose that are (a) autobiographical, (b) introspective, and (c) written by our discipline's foremost literary stylist. The first of these, as far as the author is concerned, is 'I'm Hip', an elegiac essay about Morris B. Holbrook's unfulfilled musical ambitions. For MoHo (as Richard Elliott later describes him), it represents the piece that establishes his signature style, a literary form he calls Subjective Personal Introspection, a literary form that 'attempts to achieve a deep probing of the human condition and possesses broad suggestiveness, as opposed to narrow empiricism' (Holbrook, 1995, p.211).

MoHo in fact is selling himself short, since he has previously published several proto-SPI essays. These include an autobiographical account of his abiding love for the late great jazz legend Charlie Parker, 'Bird Lives' (Holbrook, 1984); another on an evening out in New York's Radio City Music Hall, 'Dancing in the Dark' (Holbrook, 1985a); and a third about

his less than reverential participation in the AMA Task Force on the Development of Marketing Thought, 'I Hate When That Happens' (Holbrook 1986a). 'I'm Hip', however, is his first official SPI (Holbrook, 1986b), and it is swiftly followed by a sequence of personal reflections on collecting vinyl albums, which threaten to swamp his apartment on the Upper West Side (Holbrook 1987a), as does the ample animal art therein (Holbrook 1987b), and which is breeding like crazy in his other abode high in the hills of Pennsylvania (Holbrook 1988a). Taken together, he terms them his 'ACR Trilogy' and, in Morris's mind at least, they comprise the apotheosis of his introspective achievements (Holbrook, 1995, 2017).

Having perfected the form, MoHo pens plenty of SPIs thereafter. Ranging from his passion for baseball (1986c), his adoration of the Big Apple (1994) and his abhorrence of standing in line at airport taxi ranks (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992), to lengthy critical essays on his favourite movies, books, TV shows, jazz musicians, record shops, companion animals and down-time pastimes, including a decade spent in therapy (Holbrook 1988b, 1993, 2011) these all pertain, as far as the author is concerned, to 'consumption' of one kind or another. MoHo also experiments with the form. In addition to extended autobiographical essays in the vein of 'I'm Hip', he incorporates visual material, such as stereographic photographs (Holbrook, 1997); archival material, such as his grandfather's logbook about life in backwoods Wisconsin (Holbrook 2003); and other authors' material, such as the 'Millennium Quartet', a collection of lengthy book reviews that are more about Morris than the works themselves (Holbrook, 2002). Given a platform to publish – *Consumption Markets & Culture* in its early days, for instance – Riverside Drive's writing machine fills it to overflowing with his ruminative reflections. Indefatigable, he covers all four categories of Northrop Frye's fabled classification of literary archetypes: *tragedy*, *comedy*, *romance* and *satire* (Stern, 1995) though the autobiographical coming-of-age tale is his go-to genre. Admirably industrious,

brilliantly versatile, occasionally cranky yet never less than readable, Morris ‘the Cat’ Holbrook has done more than anyone to make the case for introspective research methods. He has led by example and continues to cast a huge shadow over the field. Scientific analogy notwithstanding, the simple fact is as follows: if Stephen Gould is the Galileo of consumer research, a pioneer who paid the price for his heresy, Morris Holbrook is Copernicus and Tycho Brahe combined.

Although it is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer scale and scope of Holbrook’s academic achievements, and while some might wonder why he called it Subjective Personal Introspection when plain and simple ‘introspection’ would’ve worked just as well, the evolution of his oeuvre is even more wondrous.¹² MoHo’s very first SPIs, the ones that preceded the ACR Trilogy are arch, irreverent, tongue-in-cheek contributions to the paradigm wars of the 1980s, when the big beasts of marketing were duking it out over profound philosophical, ontological, epistemological and axiological issues. Characteristically, Morris injects a much-needed element of frivolity, mockery and impudence into the great debate by comparing it to ‘Goldilocks and The Three Bears’ (Holbrook, 1985b). At the very end of his career, by contrast, when Holbrook’s Ivy League employers organise an official, formal, best-bib-and-tucker retirement bash on the hallowed Columbia University campus (Gallarza, 2015), one ‘Morrisfest’ attendee reports as follows:

When the great man’s introspective achievements were mentioned in passing, they were dismissed as ‘dark side’ aberrations that accompanied his astonishing productivity. They weren’t important. They weren’t worth celebrating. They weren’t milestones in marketing and consumer research. They were regarded, by and large, as

an asinine side-line, an excusable eccentricity, a quirky signifier of Professor Holbrook's indisputable genius (Brown, 2012, p.464).

Such views, sadly, are still extant in certain science-or-bust schools of marketing and consumer research. Some scholars, we suspect, will never move beyond the belief that SPIs are 'fun reading' at most (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p.356) and, at worst, unspeakably abhorrent 'paroxysms of self-expression' (Calder and Tybout, 1987, p.139). And while many might well believe that marketing and consumer research sorely needs fun-filled paroxysms, since it takes itself far too seriously, the toxic gas lingers and is difficult to dispel.

The good news is that consumer research is not exactly rocket science, though it's not for want of trying. And now that space travel is a commercial proposition, private flights for paying passengers will soon be available. Astral consumers' orbital experiences will surely be on someone's research agenda before long. Perhaps ACR should commission Morris B. Holbrook, whose nickname at high school was Ziggy, to boldly go where no business school professor has gone before, in return for an SPI that's truly out of this world. And if Morris won't go, Stevie G will surely accept the challenge, provided his perceived vital energy is sufficiently topped up and Barberellaesque encounters with tantric sex-crazed aliens are part of the package...

Such impudence is no doubt deeply offensive to some readers of a nervous disposition. But it is nothing compared to the scorn, contempt and career-wrecking/making hostility that Stephen 'outer limits' Gould has experienced. Yet thirty years on from the double-barrelled shotgun blast, it's clear that he has kept the faith, flown the flag and shouldered the burden of opprobrium for those who follow in his footsteps. Once cancelled now celebrated, his

advocation of, and practical guidelines for, reflexive meditation, researcher self-scrutiny and eastern rather than western philosophies (Gould, 1992, 2006a) – as well as his putative alternative to CCT, Consumer Introspection Theory (Gould, 2012) – is not just commendable, it's both pioneering and prescient.

The All-Seeing I

Whether CIT supplants CCT remains to be seen. But Steve Gould's approach is very much in keeping with the third major tradition of me-search in marketing and consumer research: autoethnography. Autoethnography may have come late to the introspective party, but the method has more than made up for lost time. Although it is similar to Holbrook-style SPIs in practice, it is the terminology of choice for academics with an anthropological background – John Sherry, Barbara Olsen, Eric Arnould, Janeen Costa, Richard Wilks, Annama Joy, Grant McCracken and many more. The rationale for this nomenclatural preference has never been explained, though it seems reasonable to assume that it's a signifier of continuing attachment to their home discipline. Plus it avoids the antagonism that Gouldian approaches have attracted, and no doubt helps differentiate the autoethnographic elite from the introspective hoi-polloi.

Whatever the reason for the rebrand, it bursts on to the scene in the mid-90s when Dan Rose, a professor of anthropology at U Penn, publishes a 'personal essay' about Head & Shoulders shampoo in *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behaviour*, an anthology edited by John Sherry (1995). Based upon a 1992 working paper that Rose road-tested around the social anthropology conference circuit, 'Active Ingredients' is written in an offbeat echo of modernist prose and is formally identified as an autoethnography by the editor of the

collection (Rose, 1995). Granted, John Sherry (1991) has previously advocated a very similar technique called ‘intrceptive intuition’, a research procedure sourced from Murray (1943). Some of his early published poems, what is more, are versified introspections of a sort, akin to Holbrook’s (1995) twenty-two-stanza ‘rejoinder’ to Wallendorf and Brucks.¹³ And then there’s Sherry’s (1987) ‘impressionistic essay’ previously mentioned of his crew member experiences as a participant on the Consumer Odyssey, which is an autoethnography *avant la lettre* (Sherry, 2014).

Be that as it may, the term’s origins predate our Odyssey (Hayano, 1979). As originally formulated, it refers to ethnographies of the ethnographer’s own culture, as opposed to far-flung, fieldwork-reliant, other-orientated anthropological studies in the Raymond Firth, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict tradition (Geertz, 1988). Several of the contributions to *Highways and Buyways*, a post-Odyssey collection of outtakes, offcuts, reminiscences and war stories (Belk, 1991), are autoethnographies in their aboriginal, Hyanoid form, though none make use of the A-word.

Autoethnography has since morphed into a methodology that not only co-exists alongside Introspection and SPI but is widely considered synonymous. Reimagined and embraced by a sociologist, Carolyn Ellis (1991), it is initially applied to her anguished personal circumstances. Thereafter, she is relentless in making the case for, and tireless in spreading the good word about, autoethnography. Not only has she written several books on the subject, a couple of novels included, but frequently serves as its unofficial spokesperson (Ellis, 1995, 2003, 2008). It is Ellis who defends me-search when the inquisitive BBC reporter sniffs a shock-horror story in the selfie culture-inspired research procedure, and she does likewise when disgruntled academics attack (Denzin, 2013). It is Ellis, more than

anyone else, who legitimises the method and sets out the criteria for evaluating autoethnographic essays (Ellis, 2007; Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Nowadays, it is employed by scholars in all sorts of disciplines including archaeology, geography, philosophy, theology, sports studies, media studies, women's studies and economics, the entire archipelago of the human sciences, in short (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2016). Some 600 books about autoethnography are currently listed on Amazon, which is a stunning statistic for such an allegedly inadequate research method, proof positive that it has come of age. At least one specialist journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*, is largely devoted to the art of autoethnography.

Although we haven't read all six hundred texts inspired by Ellis's evangelical endeavours, her recommended approach differs somewhat from the autoethnographies typically found in marketing and consumer research. Those in the latter discipline – unsurprisingly given its principal focus – mainly pertain to commodities, objects, things, stuff: brands, products, theme parks, retail stores, advertisements and so on. Those in the former fields are more to do with personal and professional circumstances: coping with career setbacks, dealing with sexual discrimination, sudden deaths, chronic diseases, coming out, racial slurs, completing a doctorate (e.g. Chin, 2016; Custer, 2014; Lunceford, 2015; Sparkes 2000; Wall, 2006). They allow marginalised individuals to tell their story, express themselves and seek solidarity with the similarly stricken. They primarily serve a remedial, therapeutic, ameliorative purpose and act as an 'important corrective and antidote to prevailing scientific ideologies' (Hackley, 2020, p.170).

Despite such obvious differences in emphasis, the genre broadly accords with Stephen Gould's (1991) mindful, meditative mode of solo-authored researcher introspection.

Disparaged at the time, he has been vindicated by the turning of the tide. Not unlike a long line of radical, revolutionary, *épater la bourgeoisie* literati – Ballard, Bukowski, Burroughs, Beckett, etc. – marketing’s methodological martyr is gradually moving from sinner to saint (Cottingham, 2013). Or, as has often been said about the off-piste ideas of disruptive innovators, they evolve through four stages of acceptance: worthless nonsense; interesting but perverse; true yet unimportant; I always said so (Ormerod, 2006). Tim Waterstone (2019, p.240), the founder of the eponymous retail chain, which revolutionised British bookselling in the 1980s, puts it another way: first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win...

Winning, though, has less to do with the ideas themselves – significant though they are – than the reception of said ideas by the relevant community. And society at large. According to Parks’ (2019, p.64) introspective study of the competing theories of consciousness, a particularly contentious sphere of neuroscience where incommensurable interpretations, academic reputations, research resources and Nobel Prizes are at stake:

The truth is that it is not the person who is right who is really right, if you see what I mean, it is the person who *convinces* everybody he is right. At least to all intents and purposes. Meaning reputations and research funds. It is no good being right *on your own*. No one will give you money till you convince the others.

All sorts of others, it seems, are coming around to Introspection, Autoethnography and Me-search. As the emphatic title of Ten Elshof’s (2005) intellectual genealogy announces:

Introspection Vindicated!

That is Then, This is Now

Shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, winner of the Somerset Maugham, Italo Calvino and Betty Trask awards, Tim Parks is a novelist by profession. *Out of My Head* is a meditative attempt, using the tools he has acquired as a creative writer, to better comprehend consciousness, introspection included. Consciousness, as cutting-edge, show-me-the-data marketing scholars well know, is perhaps the fastest growing and extravagantly funded field of the physical sciences. Neuromarketing is one of its many offshoots (Agarwal and Dutta, 2015). It's a field that didn't exist when Gould was making the case for self-conscious consumer research. Its arrival indicates that the world, the context, the culture, the intellectual climate is very different today than it was back then, when our hero's intellectual innovations were at the 'worthless nonsense' stage of acceptance. The times they are a-changin', both within and without our discipline's domain.

So different are things nowadays, in fact, it is easy to forget that when Steve's scandalous article suddenly appears in JCR, interpretative approaches to marketing and consumer research are still new and different and radical and risky and widely regarded as an unnecessary distraction at best or dangerous drivel at worst. They emerge in the immediate aftermath of a paradigmatic apocalypse that tears the field asunder (Peter, 1991). Those who espouse them are risking their reputations, their livelihoods, their careers. There is a very real possibility that they might never get published again, much less win the glittering prizes (Belk, 2014; Sherry, 2014). A massive literature review of 'alternative' research approaches, published at approximately the same time as Gould's sensational paper, rightly concludes that the divisive social drama will only be resolved when a degree of community consensus is

reached on the 'introspective disciplinary climate' (Sherry 1991, p.572). Back then, Gould (1991) is both benchmark and bellwether, a test case for consumer research.

Fifteen years later, when the codifiers of CCT are trying to clean up the interpretives' mess, untangle their conceptual knots and impose some order on the profusion of 'postmodern alternatives', Steve's research remains radioactive. For Arnould and Thompson (2005), his paper is the Chernobyl of consumer research. Or Three Mile Island at least. Fifteen years further on, it's safe to visit, not unlike the Chernobyl reactor itself (Hooper, 2019). Today, introspection's the dark tourism of thought, thrilling, titillating, tantalising unquestionably, but ultimately unthreatening. If Wallendorf and Brucks were invited to revisit their classic critique, they'd likely write an introspection about their dislike of introspections, a duoautoautoethnography, so to speak. 'Sometimes,' Eastham (2020, p.60) observes, 'you can't help being attracted to something even though you find it repellent, and vice-versa'.

Another thing that has changed is the surrounding intellectual climate. When, to return to Sherry's (1991) metaphor, the thunderstorm of perceived vital energy crashes over the parched landscape of marketing and consumer research, postmodernism is the prevailing weather system (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). A notoriously foggy mass of hot air, the mustard gas of thought, PoMo hews to the idea that there is nothing outside the text, that the author is dead, that there is no such thing as a stable signifier, that the idiosyncratic biographical background of the novelist, poet, scholar or whomever is immaterial, since what he or she writes or thinks or understands or assumes is always already written by the pre-existing structures of language, which are themselves unstable, inconsistent, precarious, labile. True, the emergence of autoethnography is often portrayed as part and parcel of the postmodern moment – Ellis (1991) and Wall (2006) insist on it – particularly the *Writing*

Culture-precipitated ‘crisis of representation’ that assails the practices of anthropological fieldwork and the ways in which empirical findings are reported (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In the literary sphere, however, the postmodern dispensation is characterised by erasure of the author even as it idolises the authors, principally Derrida, Barthes and Foucault, who authoritatively deny authorial authority.¹⁴

These days, the literary and cultural worlds are post-postmodern (Cova, Maclaran and Bradshaw, 2013). They operate in an ‘After Theory’ context, a milieu where developments in the Digital Humanities, such as ‘Stylometrics’, are more than welcome and the so-called ‘Biographical Fallacy’ is consigned to the trashcan of history (Archer and Jockers, 2016; Moretti, 2013; Patai and Corral, 2005). Temporarily at least. The presiding premise, according to prominent critic John Sutherland (2011, p.xii), is that ‘literary life and work are inseparable and mutually illuminating’. Bestselling biographies pour from the presses, those of celebrity brand mascots among them (Morgan, 2020), as do all sorts of essentially autobiographical subgenres, such as misery-lit (sad stories of the author’s addictions), up-lit (happy stories of triumph over the odds) and autofiction, where bestselling novelists like Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner and Karl Ove Knausgaard, rework their life-world experiences in lightly fictionalised form (Bouraoui, 2020; Clark, 2018; Freeman, 2018; Lowden, 2018; Morrison, 2019).¹⁵ Non-fiction too has taken a biographical turn insofar as the topic is framed as a heroic quest undertaken by indefatigable authors, such as Malcolm Gladwell, Matt Haig, Naomi Klein and Eula Biss, to uncover the secret lives of, say, introverts, incest victims, doomsday preppers, drugged-up athletes, malevolent multinational brands, the alluring obscenities of consumer culture (Merritt, 2018). Tim Parks’ quixotic quest to comprehend consciousness is an exemplar of this CNF (creative non-fiction) approach, described by Gutkind (1997, p.8) as ‘the most important and popular genre in the literary world today’.

This trend has been abetted by, or is possibly the result of, developments in social media. We may or may not live in a self-obsessed, irredeemably narcissistic society but Me-Me-Me, Look-at-Me is a leitmotif of 21st century life. Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn and so forth, to say nothing of crowdfunding, flashmobs, discussion forums and weblogs beyond number are testament to the prevalence, place and power of SDL, Selfie Dominant Logic (Iqani and Schroeder, 2016; Kedzior, Allen and Schroeder, 2016; Murray, 2020). The tectonic plates of techno-socio-cultural sensibility – a belief system where hard facts are subordinate to post-truth and Science has lost its god-like lustre – are shifting marketing scholarship in the general direction of introspective methodologies. Whether it be the emergence of the experiential economy, where SPIs brilliantly encapsulate the fantasies, feelings and fun that Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) famously espoused, or the advent and rapid acceptance of netnography which, among other things, fracks the often introspective reflections, recollections, ruminations, real-time reactions of brand communities, consumer tribes and social media mavens (Kozinets, 2015), it's clear that contextual conditions are increasingly conducive to what Wallendorf and Brucks (1993, p.353) dismiss as 'a form of exhibitionism or narcissism'. We are all narcissists now.

Many social media influencers, furthermore, are narcissistic about their narcissism. As Ashman et al (2018, p.475) show in a netnographic study of 'autopreneurs', there is a confessional element to influencers' online activities, whereby they readily divulge some of their most intimate thoughts, worries, fears, failings. Alongside the poised, posed, polished stream of posted content, a subterranean torrent of angst, anxiety and deeply personal autobiographical revelation cascades through the Instagram Stories platform. The me-

generation, Ashman et al (2018, p.480) conclude, 'is inherently fascinated by the shifting contours of its own selfhood'.

The scholarly sphere is not dissimilar, or so the emergence of 'autonetnography' suggests (Villegas, 2018). Yet another neologism to add to our ever-expanding inventory, autonetnography is an important extension of netnography's remit, inasmuch as the netnographer reflects on their netnography then incorporates these reflexive ruminations and retrospections into the narrative (Kozinets, et al, 2018). Since netnographers must immerse themselves in – and engage with – the online community, context or culture they're studying, the baptismal experiences they enjoy/endure as part of the learning process are integral to the outcomes of the investigation. That is, their success or failure in the 'field behind the screen' (Kozinets, 2002). Defined as 'first-person narratives that make their way into the final representation carried in the netnographic text' (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009, p.8), autonetnography foregrounds the progress of the researcher's pilgrimage towards enlightenment. Akin to the heroic questing of CFN writers, it not only enriches the resultant account, but shapes the findings themselves.¹⁶

Little wonder, then, that an increasingly exuberant case is being made for me-search. Affronted 'hard' scientists can huff and puff all they like, but the social, cultural, intellectual and intradisciplinary conditions are rather more receptive than before. At the risk of repeating ourselves – though the point is worth reiterating – that wasn't the case when Gould (1991) went out on a limb for introspection and, in all likelihood, with the intention of furthering his academic reputation.

Regardless of the reasons, the wider world is increasingly adopting Steve's stance. His emphasis on meditation, contemplation, deliberation, et al is singularly apposite in an epoch where mindfulness matters, where wellbeing is welcomed, where inclusivity is in, empathy is all and the coronavirus pandemic is instilling ever-more self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-scrutiny, as well as a revaluation of all values, a revaluation that is surely destined to transform the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) faction of our field.¹⁷ An unacknowledged pioneer of TCR, Gould (1995, 2006a, 2008) has consistently stressed the meditative, potentially transformative essence of his iconic article, something that got overlooked by its early critics and later commentators, the two of us among them (to our embarrassment and regret). The corporeal side of his JCR – Steve's sexual energy – has often been referred to, most notably by Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), who seemed determined at the time to outdo his discussion of bodily matters (when they wax lyrical about constipation, menstruation, haemorrhoidal tribulation and more). But its spiritual lessons have hitherto failed to convert non-believers.

How different things might have been if Meditative Marketing had been embraced instead of the Odysseans' no-nonsense naturalism or CCT's utopian TomorrowLand...

Alternative history aside, and the road not taken notwithstanding, Gould's basic approach is endorsed in Parks' book on consciousness, mentioned above. Recalling an interview with a neuroscientist bent on measuring the brainwaves of people while they were in meditative states, the questing author – himself a meditator – remarks as follows (Parks, 2019, p.78):

I talked to a scientist after a conference. He had been measuring brainwaves in meditators, and said the results were interesting. There was definitely an alteration in

the gamma waves. I asked him if he'd ever meditated himself, and he said, no. So I suggested that maybe he would know more about meditation if he meditated, than if he measured brainwaves while other people meditated. He would feel the benefits, or otherwise, himself...He would know what meditation was, at least as he had experienced it, even though he wouldn't be able to publish a paper about it.

The autoethnographers, introspectors and me-searchers of consumer research would surely endorse Parks' position, apart from the 'don't publish' sentiments in his concluding clause.

Brand New Déjà-Vu

Before reflecting on the future of self-reflective forms of marketing and consumer research, a moment of retrospection is necessary, if only to catch our collective breath, if only because retrospection is the one aspect of introspection that escaped Wallendorf and Brucks' (1991) censure, if only on account of the fact that Morris B. Holbrook's (1995) book-length defence of SPI is an exercise in retrospection and celebrates its silver anniversary as we write...

Four decades before MoHo's eloquent attempt to make the case for introspective methods – an attempt that relies on the Humanities in general and Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* in particular – Europe lies in ruins. The Second World War has turned the continent into a wasteland and the best way to rebuild is up for discussion. In France, Charles de Gaulle's right-hand man is André Malraux, a writer, a novelist, an authorpreneur of rare talent who has published a string of introspective, semi-autobiographical stories that are surrealist in style, Gaullist in content and stand four-square against the then fashionable, left-wing views of Sartre, de Beauvoir and the Existentialists (Todd, 2005).

Appointed Minister of Cultural Affairs by de Gaulle, Malraux goes to formidable lengths to promote the Fifth Republic and places the country's incomparable cultural riches front and centre of his strategy. He sells France around the world as the fountainhead of fashion, style, art, design, drama, cinema, architecture, literature, libraries, museums, gastronomy, philosophy, the humanities, culture with a capital C. He pours resources into refurbishing historic monuments and establishing a nationwide network of *maisons de la culture*. An outstanding example of the exercise of soft power, Malraux helps shape the image of France that obtains to this day and underpins the luxury goods industry where LVMH and Kering rule the roost (Lebovics, 1999).

For all his faults, not least a penchant for post-truth retellings of his wartime achievements, the Culture Minister is an energetic and incessant self-publicist who uses his remarkable marketing skills to sell the nation state and its sagacious leader, Charles de Gaulle.¹⁸ He does much to restore national pride and contributes greatly to the *Trente Glorieuses*, a remarkable thirty-year spell of renaissance and recovery. He even walks the talk by publishing numerous bestselling books while in office, a multi-volume introspective autobiography included.

Malraux's macro-marketing achievements are remarkable in themselves. But they also contain lessons for those who toil in the coils of CCT. Preferring to take the road less travelled, he zigs while others zag and, detested by the Existentialists, reaps the profile-raising rewards of their antipathy (Poirier, 2018). Unusually for a French intellectual, he has comparatively little time for theoretical speculation, preferring to emphasise the artworks themselves (Hazareesingh, 2016). His credo is that 'life is like a market where one buys values not with cash but with acts', artistic acts (McAuliffe, 2018, p.114). As a firm believer

in the 'great man' school of history, furthermore, Malraux spurns the notion of deep structures then in vogue. His stump speech for cultural revival, recycled at the opening of each *maison de la culture*, runs as follows:

University is there to teach people. We are here to teach people to love. Nobody in the world ever understood music just because he had the Ninth Symphony explained to him. Nobody in the world ever understood poetry because he had Victor Hugo explained to him. A *maison de la culture* does not explain, it animates in an atmosphere of liberty and versatility. Each time we replace this revelation with an explanation, we will be doing something perfectly useful, but we will be creating an essential misunderstanding (Todd, 2005, p.353).

At a time of uncertainty and change, when 'the science' is in the dock (Poole, 2020), when the future is up for grabs, when societal introspection is in the ascendant, we have a coronavirus-created opportunity, however unwelcome, to change the methodological script. But how do introspectors feel about introspection, right here, right now, write or wrong?

Painful Pleasures, Pleasurable Pains

In order to answer this question, we invite four long-term users of the method to write an auto-autoethnography. That is, to reflect on their past experiences of the reflective perspective and report how they feel about it at present. All are familiar with introspection's foibles, with more than twenty years' experience of the procedure. However, they have taken the technique in different directions down the decades. One specialises in large-scale introspections involving scores of consumer informants and focuses on their reactions to, and

feelings about, brands and branding. Another has moved online for the most part and tends to concentrate on all things netnographic, autonetnography included. The third and fourth have broadened their palettes by embracing mixed methods, where introspection is part of a package of qualitative research procedures. They tend to use their findings in different ways, furthermore, one conceptually the other critically. For the most part.

Three of our invitations are accepted, despite pressing professional demands during the present Covidian circumstances. The resultant essays range from 990 to 1,229 words, with an average of 1,120. Inevitably, perhaps, there is consensus and dissensus among all three. They concur on the creativity that characterises SPIs. Writing free-form reflections that are unconstrained by conceptual shackles or the need to swaddle every observation, comment, aside with suitably academic references gives them permission to go off-piste, to write about what really moves them, what they really think, what gives their lives meaning, than more mainstream research approaches, which are becoming ever more circumscribed, conventional, conservative...

It was a joy to discover that, contrary to my prior impression,, academic writing didn't have to be dry, detached, worthy, rigorous, knowledgeable and formulaic. My first SPI projects were freeing, as they enabled me to combine my desire to write reflectively and creatively with my desire to make a feminist, intellectual contribution; to take a stand; to debate and perhaps others to question the taken for granted, to be more reflective in turn. (HC)

I really enjoy writing autoethnographies once I get into them...They're so different from the normal academic plod. Journal articles are so constraining these days, more

and more so I find. Also, I always get new insights about things – mainly about myself I suppose – when I do one. Some of the things in this one even surprised me a bit because I hadn't necessarily thought of them before. (JK)

Occasional qualms notwithstanding, I get nothing but joy from subjective personal introspections. On a personal level, they're a pleasure to write, a wonderful change from the standard fare, from writing stuff to satisfy reviewers, from having to reign things in, tone things down and tick the boxes that editors insist on. Emerald's structured abstracts, for example. (AA)

The same freedom is found, what's more, among third-party informants, the people they've partnered with as part of the research process. For HC, 'seeing their obvious glee in being given free rein to write as humorously, outrageously, passionately and lyrically as they like, is a pleasure to behold'. The work of PhD students in particular is enhanced by self-reflective autoethnographies, which 'enrich their understanding, insights and interpretations'. So much so, they are encouraged to incorporate SPIs into their doctoral dissertations.

AA likewise observes that introspectors benefit from their introspections: 'The experience is good for them, since it's a creative writing exercise that'll stand them in good stead come exams time, when doing assignments, dissertations, placement reports and, not least, when applying for jobs later on. It's all writing, after all.

JK, by contrast, concedes that autoethnographies can be challenging for some. On the one hand, 'introspecting inspires a creative stream of consciousness in those who can let their thoughts flow freely and without censorship.' On the other hand, 'going on a creative roll, as

it were, is a hard thing to do'. She adds, though, that the introspective state can be attained by allowing the brain, *à la* Gould's guidelines, to relax, drift, submerge into the self:

Getting in touch with your inner creativity is easy, I tell them, if you take your time, suppress any temptation to be overly analytic and hide your marketing textbooks for a while. Go freewheel on a slipstream of experiences. Tell me about your feelings, emotions, and random thoughts. Whatever comes into your head about the past or the future is equally fascinating. Just go for it, I urge them. But sometimes their introspections fall flat. It's so hard to let go!

If freedom is one end of the spectrum, the other end is coercion. That is, the challenges that accompany attempts to persuade other people to produce autoethnographies in the first instance. Undergraduate student informants in particular have to be 'gently encouraged' (AA) to participate. And while coercion is not unusual in marketing and consumer research exercises – consider the experiment-based studies of sizeable student samples by exponents of Behavioural Decision Theory, whose participants are rewarded by 'course credit' of one kind or another – JK worries about the element of arm-twisting that accompanies informant engagement and fears that this might adversely affect research outcomes. Albeit not in the obvious way of disinterest or apathy. Of savvy student informants gaming the system, rather, to their personal advantage:

Sometimes [it] feels like cheating. Why? I ask myself. Well, it's that Foucauldian thing I suppose, that the students are will be trying to please me and will be super-conscious of what they're writing, to the extent that they may exaggerate their feelings in creative flourishes that they surely know will gain a distinction.

This can be circumvented, though, by dangling a carrot instead of brandishing a stick. And having tried it in a study of themed restaurants – where informants were given a slap-up meal in return for their voluntary participation – JK concludes that ‘most of the accounts brought wonderful insights with vivid descriptions of their impressions’.

Set against this, AA considers informant reluctance/resistance to be a strength of the research method rather than a weakness, insofar as some rebel against the formal rules of autoethnographic writing and break free, in effect, from the researcher’s strictures, much as the researcher is doing in the scholarly sphere:

I especially like it when a student goes rogue and rants about the introspective exercise I’ve set. One year, Primark was my chosen brand and, oh boy, did that decision get a reaction. An informant who loathed the store and had done so since childhood, called it ‘Skidmark’ throughout, which is not just irreverently amusing but strangely apt. Another took a pop at the reprobate who’d set the assignment, accusing the perpetrator of crimes against humanity, cruel and unusual punishment beatings, and similar offenses to be taken into consideration when the case comes to court.

Aside from the difficulties of ‘getting them to engage in the first place’ (JK), an additional issue arises when participation is secured, not least the protocols of presenting informants’ accounts. Whereas the processes and procedures of reporting the findings of, say, depth interviews are well established, there’s an ethical dilemma when working from written accounts, a dilemma that also applies to netnographies:

The convention in qualitative research is to quote the informant verbatim, with their ‘ums’, ‘ahs’, ‘ers’, stutters and swear words included. This conveys an air of authenticity and adds that necessary tincture of verisimilitude. But when it comes to grammatical mistakes, poor punctuation and choosing the ‘wrong’ word in a written document, is it fair to quote the essay as written? It makes the informant look bad and inserting a string of ‘sics’ – which basically means, ‘I know it’s wrong, gentle reader, but that’s what’s on the page’ – only adds insult to injury, especially when I’m mining their essays for professional gain. (AA)

Although workbench issues like the above loom large in all three auto-autoethnographies, there is a notable omission throughout. Namely, the validity of the method itself. The tempestuous history of the introspective approach – Holbrook and Gould on one side and Wallendorf and Brucks on the other – isn’t referred to by anyone. Introspection’s place in the pantheon has ceased to stir the blood. Nowadays, it’s just one well-established, much-used technique among many, with strengths and weaknesses like any other. As a metaphorical police officer in the methodological flying squad might say, ‘Move right along folks, there’s nothing to see here’.

Indeed, as a comparative latecomer to the research method, HC is much less exercised by introspection’s controversial past than its very existence, which resonates on a personal and professional level. ‘When I began my academic career, I was delighted to discover that Subjective Personal Introspection was a recognised research technique within the interpretive school of thought. Reading the work of Stephen Gould, Morris Holbrook and Elizabeth Hirschman inspired me to return to my own creative past when I first discovered the pleasures of creative writing and imaginative literature with an introspective, reflective bent.’

HC is not alone. Both JK and AA refer repeatedly to the sheer pleasure, the deep personal satisfaction, they get from pulling their introspective thoughts together and writing them up in narrative form. Penning an autoethnography, putting their ideas down on paper, expressing themselves. Whatever you want to call it, it's joyful, it's fun, it's therapeutic, it's meditative in the Gouldian manner:

As I think back to all the personal subjective introspections I've undertaken, the principal pleasure that springs to mind is the surprise factor, those elements of a particular phenomenon [that I'd] never thought about or expected to pop up. There's no Foucauldian eye about to weep with despair at what I'm writing. I can have an inner dialogue with my multiple selves, that polyphonic chorus in my head: one voice saying 'that's crap'; one voice saying 'be bit more poetic, use a thesaurus; and one that says, 'just get on with it'. (JK)

For me, the act of writing an SPI is like flying a kite – getting it up there, trying to keep it aloft and soaring, watching it dip and weave, feeling it responding to its wrestling handler who attempts to prevent a premature stall and fall into the trashcan, be it icon or actual. For me, it's a form of escape, it's freedom, it's therapy. For me, it's when my heart sings. (AA)

Of late, much has been written about 'bibliotherapy' (Cleeves, 2020; Rentzenbrink, 2020; Scutts, 2020; Wood, 2020). That is, reading books to raise the spirits, to escape clinical depression, to cope with pandemic-precipitated self-isolation by 'rereading the classics' (see Miller, 2014). But writing too can be therapeutic. In the third volume of his autobiography,

Graham Greene (1980) considers it one of the most important ‘ways of escape’.¹⁹ And Samuel Beckett, no less, calls it ‘the writing cure’. When he despaired, as he often did, during the 1930s – his literary career was going nowhere, he’d been banished by former mentor James Joyce, his beloved father died suddenly – Sam found succour in the physical act of writing, writing for himself, writing to improve his mental health. He got more from autobiographical writing than he did from three-years in psychoanalysis. Publishing came second, for a while least, to his personal wellbeing. He was heavily influenced, appropriately enough, by the works of André Malraux, whose introspective philosophy provided an epigraph for *Murphy*, his first full-force comic novel.²⁰

Marketing and consumer researchers, our auto-autoethnographies indicate, don’t need to surf (Canniford and Shankar, 2013) or skydive (Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993) or tackle a Tough Mudder (Scott, Cayla and Cova, 2017) or rave the night away in drugs and dance-induced euphoria (Goulding et al., 2009) to cope with and conquer the travails of academic life. There’s a cheap and cheerful alternative that’s available to everyone. Introspection can heal the soul and help mend the body, which is no bad thing in our current Covid-cursed circumstances.

And nowhere is this better illustrated than in Andrea Prothero’s (2017) heart-stopping autoethnography on the personal and professional consequences of a chronic medical condition. Life-changing doesn’t begin to describe it...

The AIM of the Game

So, where do autoethnography, introspection and me-search – the AIM method, as it were – currently stand in the great marketing scheme of things? Thirty years after Gould’s landmark article, it’s still in the dock to a certain degree. Its status remains unsettled, unclear, undecided. And until such times as Science ceases to be the evaluative gold standard its credentials as a creative contribution to the Humanities are unlikely to be appreciated. On a positive note, it has not only survived but thrived. Despite two dramatic attempts to kill it off, aficionados of AIM have refused to take the hint, let alone resign themselves to its fate. On the contrary, such tactless attacks have backfired rather than succeeded, much as the mainstream’s earlier, infuriated reaction to relativist interpretivism makes it more attractive to rising generations of researchers. Just as Shelby Hunt was post-positivism’s best recruiting sergeant, so too Wallendorf and Brucks’ root-and-branch critique plants seeds in newcomers’ minds (Tadajewski, 2014).

The simple, irrefutable fact of the matter is that scores of introspections and SPIs, have been published since Steve Gould took one for the team. Two for the team, to be precise. And if autoethnographies are included in the count – as they should be since the terms and techniques are all-but one and the same in our specialism – then the current total, in our estimation, is somewhere around one hundred.²¹ Particularly noteworthy studies include Avi Shankar’s (2000) ruminations on rock music, Markus Wohlfeil’s observations of cinema’s star factory (Wohlfeil, Patterson and Gould, 2019), Hope Schau’s (2003) elegy for her despoiled home town, Pauline Maclaran’s (2003) paean to the grand piano in a festival mall, Barbara Olsen’s (2016) arresting account of her ad agency’s growing pains, Vikram Kapoor’s desire to come to terms with his sexuality through dance (Kapoor, Patterson and O’Malley, 2018), and Hackley’s (2013) book on *mise en scène* mentioned earlier, which is written introspectively in its entirety. There’s gold in them thar Goulds.

A second positive outcome is the proliferation of variations on the original, one-story-single storyteller approach (Hackley, 2016). That is, where a single author, the researcher, recounts their personal experiences of the matter in hand, much like Hirschman (1990), Rook (1991), Pollay (1987), et al. End of story. It's an approach, admittedly, that still dominates Ellis-esque autoethnographies, where they often serve as vehicles for authors' critical reflections on personal or political circumstances. In marketing and consumer research, by contrast, it's not unusual to come across co-authored introspections, as well as multi-participant SPIs, to say nothing of papers where AIMs are embedded in formal academic articles or excerpted from several, sometimes hundreds, of individual accounts (Gaviria and Blumelhuber, 2010; Patterson, Hodgson and Shi, 2010). On top of these, there are manifold mixed-method manifestations, where introspection forms part of a package of interpretive research procedures alongside depth interviews, focus groups, diary records, archival analyses and the like (Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Hart, Kerrigan and vom Lehn, 2016; Hartmann and Brunk, 2019). Although Gould (2012) distinguishes between *single researcher* introspections, *joint researcher* introspections and *informant* introspections, there are many hybrid forms in addition, not least 'xenoheteroglossic autoethnography' (Minowa, Visconti and Maclaran, 2012). A typology wouldn't go amiss, if only to show the world that the AIM approach is flexible, diversified, open to all.

The third thing in its favour is that, for the most part, introspections are pleasurable to read. At a time when reading is losing its former allure, especially among young people, and academic articles are becoming increasingly incomprehensible – for the general public and businesspeople both – there is much to be said for readable writing. John Sutherland (2011, p.713), the leading literary critic cited previously, regards his theory-preoccupied colleagues

as ‘an elite of in-group hierophants speaking a dialect the outside world (including the undergraduate community) cannot understand’. Luke Johnston (2020, p.3) concurs. A prominent management commentator, he contends that academics ‘sit in their ivory towers and peddle theoretical papers in obscure journals that provide almost no practical clues about stimulating business and job creation’. Introspections, as even their harshest critics concede, are ‘fun reading’ (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p.356). Readability may strike some as a trivial thing, yet it’s of paramount importance when conveying our ideas to others, a signifier of interpretive researchers’ repudiation of scientific norms and expectations.

We are what we write.²²

Set against this, there is a trio of shortfalls that continue to thwart the aims of the introspectively inclined. The first of these is the air of apology that’s attached to the whole enterprise. Almost everyone who makes use of the method feels obliged to beg the pardon of the reader, the reviewer, the academic community at large. And remind them of SPI’s spotted history, dodgy reputation, inglorious charge sheet, whatever you want to call it. Wallendorf and Brucks’ (1993) ‘hatchet job’ unfailingly gets an honourable mention (e.g. Emile, 2010; Gaviria and Bluemelhuber, 2010; Villegas, 2018), even though it was predicted on a false premise and, even if their accusations were true, most axe-murderers are released from captivity after thirty years. With time off for good behaviour. Then integrated back into society. Ancient allegations are irrelevant. Making unnecessary excuses is counter-productive. Much as the initial attacks increased AIM’s appeal, so too abject apologies undermine its academic credibility. The simple fact of the matter is that autoethnography has been accepted in, and is employed by, academics from every corner, nook and cranny of the social sciences. And let us not forget that question marks are increasingly being raised about

allegedly rigorous, purportedly robust, statistically verified, scientifically proven findings, as well as experimental research methods more broadly (Bergstrom and West, 2020; Blauw, 2020; Richie, 2020; Poole, 2020). In such unsavoury company, introspectors are the archangels of academia. Once seen as a sinner, Stephen Gould is, if not exactly a saint, a successful, high-profile scholar, someone to admire and emulate.

He paid us to say that.

A rather more serious matter is that AIM suffers from a severe case of onomastic overkill. It is saddled with, and blighted by, a multiplicity of names for much the same thing: introspection, autoethnography and me-search, for starters. Twenty years ago, Ellis and Boucher (2000) listed more than forty alternative names for autoethnography, and the total hasn't diminished in the interim. The manifold variations-on-a-theme mentioned earlier are likewise lumbered with all manner of monikers. Thus Patterson (2012) and Brown (2012), when discussing introspective exercises involving large numbers of informants, call the variants meta-introspections and multiple SPIs respectively, even though they're referring to the exact same thing. AIM, in short, is beset by nomenclatural issues, similar to those that surround CCT before the rebrand, when 'nebulous epithets' like relativist, naturalistic, humanistic and post-positivist swirl around sewing confusion (Arnould and Thompson, 1995, p.868). Although the article caused offence at the time, not least among European consumer researchers who felt they'd been slighted by the accompanying US-centric literature review (Arnould and Thompson, 2007), there's no doubt that it was a sensible onomastic move. Autoethnography, Introspection, and Me-search should aim for something similar.²³ Stephen Gould's CIT also remains an option.

The third shortcoming is closely related, since the extant names are politically and rhetorically problematic. They carry unwelcome connotations that hold them back. The word ‘introspection’ is tainted by the practice’s place in the history of psychology. Once dominant, introspection was cast aside by the behaviourist school of thought, which was overthrown in turn by cognitive approaches to psychological understanding. Introspection, in other words, is damaged goods, demonstrably false, a dead end for marketing and consumer research (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). However, as Brock’s (2013) genealogy of introspection reveals, the foregoing narrative is a convenient myth peddled by the conquistadors of cognitive psychology. Autoethnography similarly suffers from its attachment to ethnography, since it elevates those trained in that procedure to positions of authority. By nominative default they comprise the supreme court of appeal. However, ethnographers didn’t invent autoethnography as it’s currently understood – and practised – in marketing and consumer research. The word originally meant something quite different in anthropological circles. It was a sociologist, Carolyn Ellis, who released autoethnography from its intradisciplinary shackles. Ethnographers don’t have the final word on any autoethnographic essay’s veracity. Nor should they. In our neck of the woods, the emphasis is very much on the *auto* and *graphy* parts of the compound noun, not the *ethno*.

Good as Gould?

In such circumstances, there is much to be said for me-search. The new name is untainted by any prehistory of academic infighting and is incontestably catchy, clever and current, thanks to its onomastic association with today’s ‘me’ generation. It was coined by a pair of higher education administrators, Robert J. Nash and Demethra LaSha Bradley (2011), when they rebranded an earlier appellation, ‘Scholarly Personal Narrative’ (Nash, 2004), with something

that's easier on the ear. Their neologism, admittedly, appears to have been independently invented by assorted others including Nguyen (2015), Williams (2016) and Wiklund (2017). But it's a cute, arguably corny, catchword that's catching on (Rees, 2015).

The founders, furthermore, maintain that me-search is blessed with considerable brand extension potential in the form of 'pre-search' and 'we-search' (Nash and Bradley, 2012), to say nothing of you-search, they-search, our-search, he-, she- or it-search and, presumably, IT-search for autonethnographies. See-me-search is also available for visual variants on the introspective theme (Holbrook, 2003). Yet for all that, me-search faces three main impediments. First, getting scholars to buy into the rebrand. Contra the case with corporate name changes, the academic community is under no obligation to change. Inertia is likely to prevail. Second, the 'me' prefix presupposes the original one-story-single-storyteller format. AIM has expanded far beyond that, in marketing and consumer research at any rate. Third, personal pronouns are in a state of flux right now on account of the inclusivity agenda and activists' concerns about gender stereotyping. Me-search might turn out to be more of an onomastic millstone than a welcome release from brand name bondage. It also means revisiting the old is-it-a-science-or-not debate that dogged introspection and autoethnography for decades. But as these kerfuffles furthered rather than finished off both methods, a few rounds of 'Me-search? Search Me!' wouldn't be a bad thing.

Regardless of whether me-search is best described by the first or second of our epigraphs, Steve Gould was prescient in one important respect. Thirty years on from his innovative article, it's clear that, whatever else happens in times to come, his introspective method provides an important and necessary corrective to conventional investigative approaches. Never forget that the act of writing an introspective essay is not only enormously enjoyable

but wonderfully therapeutic as well (Prothero, 2017). Everyone in academia is a writer and autobiographical writing exercises our literary muscles. It provides a vigorous workout that isn't constrained by standard article structure or customary scholarly clichés like 'tentative steps', 'gaps in the literature' and the 'need for further research', more of which is always necessary.

Fun reading, in sum, is good for us (we tentatively aver). More marketing me-search is necessary (because there's a yawning gap in the literature).

Just sayin'.

Notes

1. This paper is written in the first person, present tense, for the most part, as opposed to the third person, past tense that tends to predominate in works of marketing scholarship. We've also opted, as much as possible, for the active rather than the passive voice. 'Just saying' instead of 'Things were said'.
2. *In media res* is the technical term for beginning in the middle of the story. It's the norm in epic poems like the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost* and so forth. Introspection's battle for acceptance in our field is nothing if not 'epic'.
3. Presumably, they were also talking about the presentation he made at the conference itself, which was entitled 'A model of the scripting of consumer lovemaps: the human sexual behaviour sequence' (Gould, 1992). The words 'red rag' and 'bull' spring to mind.
4. In fairness to Wallendorf and Brucks, Gould doesn't do himself any favours with some of the language in 'Perceived Vital Energy'. Expressions like 'rigorous self-knowledge', 'objective stream of consciousness', 'experiential experiments' and 'theoretical reasoning' pepper his prose, though these were included, no doubt, to keep Steve's reviewers onside. They certainly smack of editorial insistence. That said, the word 'bias' appears sixteen times in W&B's article, which comes pretty close to overkill.
5. Another curiosity is the silence surrounding 'praxis'. Although the word appears in the title of Gould's article, and although he positions his contribution, predicated on eastern philosophies, in relation to the practicalities of introspection, Wallendorf and Brucks make no mention of praxis, much less eastern philosophies. Equally oddly, Gould doesn't use his praxiological objectives to defend himself from their attack. Rhetorically, this must go down as a missed opportunity. Where's Shelby when Steve needs him?
6. Although we are casting Wallendorf and Brucks as the antagonists of our twisty tale about introspection, let us be clear. Given the academic politics of that time, during the fall out from the paradigm wars, it proves necessary to indicate the 'outer limits' of permissible post-positivism. Members of a self-certified 'swat team', Wallendorf and Brucks are the riot cops of interpretive consumer research, with theoretical Tasers to hand (see Tadajewski 2014).
7. Although this quip is often attributed to Mark Twain, there's no record of him making it. Seamus Heaney gets credited with it as well, as no doubt do many others.
8. Everybody knows nobody reads footnotes...

9. Note, we're so not dissing, let alone belittling, the CCT rebrand. It has brought many benefits to a formerly fragmented field, most notably a degree of coherence and greater sense of direction than before. We object to the authors' disparagement of introspection in general and Steve Gould's paper in particular.
10. We are, of course, ready, willing and able to launch a vociferous attack on the me-search brigade or, come to think of it, any marketing scholar with a publication to promote. We offer a sliding scale of abuse, from minor cavils, through 'serious concerns' to the full Shelby D. For a small consideration. A brochure outlining our range of rage is available on request, as is our gold standard, satisfaction guaranteed Wallendorf and Brucks bespoke service for select subscribers. Check out our website: HateForHire.com.
11. Wanted poster, that is. For some, Stephen Gould is the Carlo Gambino of consumer research. For others, like we two, he's the Robin Hood, the Dick Turpin, the Jesse James of marketing scholarship.
12. As he frequently refers to the technique as 'introspective essays' – not least in the subtitle and first chapter of his greatest hits package – the addition of 'personal' and 'subjective' seems excessive. Maybe it's just Morris being Morris, a more, more, more, so-not minimalist kinda guy. Perhaps it an ostentatious display of 'literariness' to prove that his work represents a contribution to the humanities, not the social sciences. But then again, it could be a canny strategic move, a stylistic smokescreen, an injection of necessary ambiguity that'll give him semantic wriggle room if and when he's attacked by an anti-introspection-inclined psychologist.
13. We're thinking in particular of 'Under den Linden, Madison and Mine: Meditation on a Fragment of the Berlin Wall'.
14. The paradox of this position isn't a problem, by the way, because paradox is a defining feature of PoMo as well...
15. Martin Amis (2020) has also got into the autofictional spirit, even though he denounced the 'Higher Autobiography' in *Experience* (Amis, 2001, pp.176-7), where he states, 'One of the assumptions behind HA, I think, went as follows: in a world becoming more and more this and more and more that, but above all becoming more and more mediated, the direct line to your own experience was the only thing you could trust. So the focus moved inward, with that slow zoom a writer feels when he switches from the third person to the first.' That said, autofiction isn't a latter-day literary development. The term dates from the 1970s and, not unlike introspection, has been much debated. Some dismiss it as a 'marketing tool', others contend that 'autofiction is to the writing self what science fiction is to science' (Jones, 2010, p.179). Most agree, though, that it 'can be defined by one clear thing: everything is written in the present' (ibid.).
16. Coincidentally, it also curls back to Hayano's (1979) original conception of autoethnography, where the researcher studies the culture they're part of, and apart from. Anyone for 'retroautonetnography'?
17. The prime mover of TCR is David Glen Mick, an occasional contributor to the introspection conversation, where he vouches for a variant of Gould's researcher-introspection called 'self-observation' (Mick, 2005).
18. With his Napoleon fixation, Nietzschean inspiration and genius for exaggeration, Malraux is a pioneer of post-truth, the Descartes of dissimulation. He is to Donald Trump what Derrida is to Dilbert.
19. Specifically, Greene (1980, p.9) remarks as follows: 'Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation'.
20. Taken from *La Condition Humaine* (Malraux, 1933), '*la possession complete de soi-même*' means 'the complete possession of the self.' Introspection, in other words.
21. Make that 101, of this piece gets published.
22. Introspections are also compatible with 'alternative' forms of representation, reporting research findings in unconventional ways such as poetry, videography, artworks, drama, dance, music, photo-essays, short stories, creative non-fiction and full-on fiction alike (Sherry, 1991). Full-on is introspection's default setting.

23. If Me-search doesn't catch on, our AIM acronym is of no use to anyone. We could always revert to ASPIRE, where the acronym stands for an Autoethnographic Subjective Personal Introspective Research Exercise. Just sayin'.

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