

# **Understanding Consumption: Contributions from a Narrative Perspective**

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## **Biographies**

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After graduating with a degree in psychology from the University of Bristol, he wandered the globe hoping that he would find out how he wanted to spend the rest of his life. He's still looking. In the meantime, he is writing articles on advertising and consumer behaviour and conducting PhD research into popular music consumption.

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## **Understanding Consumption: Contributions from a Narrative Perspective**

### **Abstract**

*In this paper we outline the contribution of a narrative perspective for theory and method in consumer researcher. Narratives are considered to be a fundamental way by which we structure and therefore make sense of our lives. Accordingly, narratives have the potential to contribute to our understanding of how consumers structure and make sense of their consumption experiences. We also develop a narrative paradigm and demonstrate how an understanding of narrative can underpin the three paradigmatic questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our perspective for consumer research and marketing in general.*

## Understanding Consumption: Contributions from a Narrative Perspective

### Introduction

Narratives are stories. Polkinghorne (1988) has suggested that narratives are *the* most important means by which our experiences are made meaningful. In other words stories and storytelling help us to make sense of our lives. In this paper we will attempt to show, therefore, how an understanding of narrative has fundamental implications for both theory and method in consumer research. The first part of the paper highlights the importance of a narrative perspective as a fruitful way to explore and understand how our consumption experiences are made meaningful. In order to locate the narrative perspective, we start with a very brief overview of the emergence of ‘new’ ways of understanding consumer behaviour before describing how an understanding of narrative can help in the interpretation of consumers’ consumption experiences. Mishler’s (1995) narrative typology indicates a number of issues that we suggest need to be considered by consumer researchers. First, we critically evaluate ~~Second, we argue that a narrative perspective has already used in previous research in~~ ~~highly developed interpretation of consumers’ social theory.~~ We will suggest that a narrative perspective also has implications for consumer researchers beyond its use as an interpretive tool. Our aim in the second part of this paper is therefore to develop a narrative paradigm that addresses some of the representational issues highlighted by Mishler (1995). We also discuss some of the implications of our paradigmatic position for future generations of consumer researchers who may adopt it. This part of the paper is also a direct response to Mardsen & Littler (1999), whereby we attempt to highlight the ‘basic assumptions’ that underpin our narrative perspective.

In the third part of the paper, our aim is to draw together some of the issues that we have raised with a discussion of what Mishler (1995) calls ‘the narrativization of experience’. For consumer researchers we see this as the relationship between consumption, identity and narrative. We shall argue that a narrative perspective has much to offer consumer researchers now that consumption is being conceptualised as part of the on-going, productive and creative process of identity management that characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer.

Finally, we address some of the issues and discuss some of the implications that arise from the narrative perspective we have outlined whilst also suggesting some directions for future research.

### **A (very) short history of consumer research**

Consumer research, as an interdisciplinary academic subject has always synthesised ideas from other, related subject areas especially the human sciences. However, the paradigmatic dominance of positivism within consumer research that it inherited from these allied subject areas has increasingly been supplemented with interpretive and postmodern perspectives (Marsden & Littler, 1999). As a result, we are seeing the increasing utilisation of methodologies whose traditional ‘home’ has been the humanities. After all, the human condition is not the sole preserve of the human sciences. Rather, philosophers, historians, theologians, novelists, playwrights and poets have all explored the human condition extensively for thousands of years (Sarbin, 1986), whilst the human sciences have been tackling the same issues for little more than one hundred years.

Since the emergence of interpretive approaches we have witnessed a 'spirited debate' (Hunt, 1991) between its proponents and opponents (see for example, Hunt, 1991; Calder & Tybout, 1987; Anderson, 1986). However, in spite of these philosophical disagreements, we are increasingly seeing the development of a variety of innovative interpretive consumer research techniques. Researchers, drawing from developments in related academic disciplines, are continually enriching consumer research. For example, the philosophy and methods of existential-phenomenology (Thompson *et al*, 1989), post-structuralism (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Holt, 1997), postmodernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), hermeneutics (Thompson *et al*, 1994), introspection (Gould, 1991; Brown & Reid, 1997), semiotics (Mick, 1986), critical theory (Murray & Ozanne, 1991), literary theory (Stern, 1989), to name but a few, have either been proposed or used in recent times to illuminate studies of consumption.

Increasingly, consumer researchers are turning to the humanities as a source for both theory and method to study aspects of consumption. Hermeneutics, with its theological origins, is increasingly being used in consumer research (see O'Shaughnessy & Holbrook, 1988; Thompson *et al*, 1994; Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). Stern (1989, 1994) has utilised techniques from literary theory, to illuminate our understanding of advertising texts. Brown (1998) too has extensively reviewed and critically evaluated the use of various literary techniques (see also Brown and Reid, 1997). And whilst the focus of most of these studies is to generate a greater understanding of consumption experiences, they can also provide strategic managerially relevant insights (e.g. Thompson, 1997). Recently, the importance of a narrative perspective and its potential contribution to consumer research has been

explored as a result of a 'narrative turn' in the human sciences, and this is the subject of the next section.

### **Once upon a time...**

Narratives are stories, accounts, tales or descriptions. Bennett & Royle (1999) defined narrative as 'a series of events in a specific order – with a beginning, a middle and an end' (p.55). It is inconceivable to think of our lives without stories either, listening, watching or reading them, or telling them (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). As soon as we enter the world our parents begin to tell us stories and so we become socially and culturally conditioned into understanding the narrative form. Bruner (1986) even suggested that we might be genetically programmed to understand the narrative form. Our lives too, exhibit the basic feature of all narratives: they have a beginning, middle and an end. And so as we grow up we learn about whom we are, our history and our culture through stories and by telling stories. As Fischer (1985) suggested we are in effect *Homo Narrans*. Stories therefore, make our lives and ourselves intelligible to us and to others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Schiffrin (1996: p.167) commented,

The stories that we tell about our own and others' lives are a pervasive form of text through which we construct interpret and share experience: we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.

Given the pervasiveness of narratives at an individual, social and cultural level, it is hardly a surprise to see that narrative has attracted considerable attention from subjects outside the humanities its 'traditional domain'. These include: psychology (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1991, 1996; Gergen & Gergen, 1988, McAdams, 1996), sociology (e.g. Ezzy, 1996; Somers, 1994), anthropology

(e.g. Ochs & Capps, 1996), socio-linguistics (e.g. especially Labov & Waletzky, 1997/originally published in 1967) and many other academic/ professional subjects including law, medicine, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, social work and education (Riessman, 1993). Moreover as Brown and Reid (1997) ironically commentated, even natural scientists adopt a lay narrative style when they wish to communicate their ideas to a wider audience unfamiliar with 'scientific discourse'.

Marketing and management researchers have also been examining the potential contribution of narratives. For example, a narrative perspective is increasingly being seen in the services marketing literature (e.g. Stern *et al*, 1998; Bush *et al*, 1997), where a narrative understanding of the service experience allows for the subsequent development of consumer based perceptions of the service encounter. Narrative too has also occupied the attention of a significant number of organisational studies researchers. Corporate strategy and new product development processes, for example, have been re-conceptualised as organisational stories (e.g. Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Deuten & Rip, 2000; Dunford & Jones, 2000). The value of a narrative approach in these studies is that it highlights the importance of conceptualising management rhetoric as a story. These studies have shown that the success, or otherwise, of an organisation as it attempts to introduce new products or negotiate its way through environmental change can be, in part, attributed to how well it narrates its own story.

Narrative has also attracted the attention of a limited number of consumer researchers (e.g. Brown, 1997; Brown and Reid, 1997; Grayson, 1997; Hirschman, 1988; Stern, 1995; Stern *et al* 1998; Thompson, 1997) who have, by and large, used narrative ideas

to aid the interpretation process of consumption texts. In the next section we briefly consider some of the key features of narratives that these interpretations are based on.

### **Narrative features**

The origins of narrative can be traced back to the writings of Aristotle (384-322 BC) especially his work *Poetics* (Potts, 1968). The primary premise of a narrative is that it has a sequence, or a beginning, middle and an end. Gergen and Gergen's (1988; p. 20-22) synthesis of the narrative literature concluded that the following (see table 1) are important 'to the construction of intelligible narratives in contemporary western culture'.

**Table 1: The key features of narratives**

Feature	Brief Description
The establishment of a valued end point	Every story must have a 'point' to make. Moreover this point must be valued, negatively or positively, by the people involved in the narrative process
Selection of events relevant to the goal state	Once we have decided the 'point' to our story we then select only those events that help us to make our point

The ordering of events	Once we have decided the point of our story, and selected the events with which we will tell our story, we tend to place them in 'linear, temporal sequence'
Establishing causal sequences	The order in which we put the events of our story also tend to be causally linked, that is event b only happened because of event a and so on
Demarcation signs	Stories tend to have well recognised beginnings, (middles) and ends

Source: Gergen & Gergen (1988)

In addition to having these key elements the plots within narratives (or narrative forms) tend to have a basic structure. Following in the Aristotelian tradition, Frye (1957) identified four basic plots, comedy, romance, tragedy and satire. For example, romantic plots tend to 'consist of a series of episodes in which the major protagonist experiences challenge or threats and through a series of struggles emerges victorious' (Gergen & Gergen 1988; p.23). Moreover these basic plots can be further characterised in the way that the plots are narratively configured (Polkinghorne, 1991) or arranged. The configurations are based on: our relative evaluative position, that is the extent to which we value the 'end point' of the story and our development towards our 'goal state' or end point over time. Polkinghorne (1991) described this process as emplotment, 'a procedure that configures temporal elements into a whole by 'grasping them together' and directing them towards a conclusion or end' (p.141). Gergen and Gergen (1988) identified three basic narrative configurations: stability narratives are either positively or negatively evaluated narratives that remained unchanged over time; progressive narratives where our evaluative position improves with time; and regressive narratives where our relative evaluative position worsens with time.

We have briefly considered what narratives are (stories), the purpose of narratives for individuals (sense making) and the key features of narratives. By drawing on the work

of Mishler (1995) we can begin to highlight the different ways in which narratives are used by researchers. So, although researchers may agree on what narratives are and on some of their key features, there are differences in the way that they use narratives to inform their understanding of how people make sense of their lives.

### **A narrative typology**

Mishler (1995) identified three main approaches used by researchers. Firstly he identified researchers who focused on the way in which stories were constructed, specifically the sequence of events told in the story (reference and temporal order). Secondly, he identified a group of researchers who focused on how stories gain their structure and coherence through the use of different grammatical devices (textual coherence and structure). And finally he identified a body of research that concentrated on the functions of narrative within a psychological, social and cultural context (narrative functions). Table 2 shows these three approaches and identifies examples from within management, marketing and consumer research. We will briefly consider some of the key debates that arise from Mishler’s analysis and discuss the implications for consumer research.

**Table 2: A narrative typology**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Focuses on</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Reference and temporal order	The relationship between the ‘succession of happenings and its textual representation’. Assumes a correspondence between language and reality.	Stern <i>et al</i> (1998) Bush <i>et al</i> (1997) Brown & Reid (1997)
Textual coherence and structure	How language is used to create meaning through the use of	Stern (1995)

	grammatical devices (e.g. metaphors)	
Narrative functions	How narratives ‘work’ to create: a sense of one’s self or social processes or institutions or representations of cultures	Stern (1995) Thompson (1997) Barry & Elmes (1997) Boje (1991) Deuten & Rip (2000) Dunford & Jones (2000)

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Source: adapted from Mishler (1995)

Consumer researchers have adopted narrative ideas to develop a richer understanding of different aspects of consumption. Stern (1995) for example, drew on Frye’s taxonomy to interpret consumer stories surrounding Thanksgiving, finding that the stories generated by her participants matched Frye’s taxonomy. Stern *et al* (1998; p. 208) also used narrative ‘to gain insight into the consumer’s view of a marketing relationship’. In these examples and others (see Brown and Reid, 1997) narrative is being used as an interpretive tool to aid our understanding of the way consumers’ structure their consumption experiences and so make sense of this particular aspect of their lives. So, for example with regard to the functions of narratives, Stern (1995) highlights the relationship between an individual’s story and cultural myths whereas Thompson’s (1997) analysis highlights the relationship between an individual’s story and issues pertaining to their identity.

A number of related issues emerge from Mishler’s (1995) typology that we suggest are of importance to consumer researchers. We will use these issues as the basis for our discussion in the rest of this paper. First, there is the issue of the nature of the story to be used for narrative analytical purposes. At issue here are the questions of

whose story is represented in the narrative under analysis and the relationship of that story to 'reality'. Second (but inevitably linked to the first), there is the issue of representation of those stories. Some ethnographers, for example have dropped their realist pretences and now see their work as representations or stories told *by* them (e.g. Geertz, 1988). In addressing this issue we use the concept of a paradigm to reconsider our understanding of narrative. Our aim is to elevate narrative from an interpretive or analytical tool, arguing instead that narrative should have ontological status. We then discuss the implications of our perspective for generating narratives of consumption. Finally, we build on Mishler's (1995; p.108) concept of the 'narrativization of [consumer] experience' or the role that narrative plays for our cognitions, memory and conceptions of self. We argue that consumer researchers have much to gain from understanding the inter-relationships between narrative, consumption and identity.

### **Whose story is it anyway?**

We have some reservations when using frameworks for analysing stories (exemplified in Gergen and Gergen's (1988) synthesis above) that are implicit in most consumer research studies. Such frameworks usefully highlight the importance of narrative as a heuristic device. Heuristically, narrative analysis enables consumer researchers to discover richer ways of understanding consumers' consumption behaviours, whilst simultaneously allowing our participants a means with which to express and structure their experience.

However, the early academic forays into narrative upon which Gergen and Gergen's synthesis is based were conducted by socio-linguists. And the seminal contributions to narrative theory development from socio-linguists (e.g. Labov and Waletzky, 1997/1967) are ultimately underpinned by structuralist inclinations. Structuralism, as a sustained intellectual project, rose to prominence during the 1960s. It is an 'analytical and theoretical enterprise dedicated to the elaboration of the rules that make the generation of meaning possible' (O'Sullivan *et al*, 1994). In terms of narrative theory development this led to the identification of the structural features of narratives and the subsequent objectification of these narrative structures as the focus of intellectual activity. However a post-structuralist perspective questions the authenticity of the story, the internal structure of the narrative, and instead refocuses on the external structures that have helped shape the story. Narratively speaking, structuralism asks what is the story, whereas post-structuralism asks whose story is it anyway.

### ***Narrative: a post-structural critique***

Post-structuralism assigns a central role to language in the construction of the self and of the social world. Language is viewed as both reflecting reality and constituting reality in dialectic dynamic. This entails the assumption that the self is not genetically determined but is socially constructed and produced across a range of discursive practices where meaning is a constant site of struggles for power (Weeden, 1987). Although individuals 'imagine' that they are the authors of their discourse and in control of its meaning (Weeden, 1987), discourse is largely socially and ideologically constructed. However, the social practices of discourse are in a dialectical relationship with social institutions and although individuals are constrained by their position in

orders of discourse, they are also enabled to act creatively within the discursive frame (Fairclough, 1989). Social practices draw upon discourse types but do not mechanically reproduce them, so there is a gap between objective social space and representations of that space that become “a site for symbolic struggles that transform the real by renaming it” (Collins, 1993). This suggests that narrative can play an empowering role by exposing fundamental principles and values, what Taylor (1989) called ‘hypergoods’ through the ways in which we make evaluative distinctions between objects, people and institutions. The selective appropriation of elements from a potentially limitless array of social experiences in order to construct a narrative can demonstrate how power relations are being reproduced. But crucially, narrative can be used to address and transgress oppression, as demonstrated through the ‘resistance narratives’ of Latin American labour organisers such as Rigoberta Menchu (Burgos-Debray, 1984), which articulate the story of not just her oppression but of the history of her people’s oppression (Salazar, 1991).

By drawing on this post-structural narrative perspective, we believe that consumption texts can still be usefully interpreted according to revised narrative guidelines. Having identified the structural features of an individual’s consumption story, these features need to be re-framed within the context of the dominant socio-cultural narratives that the individual has been socialised into. We also believe that a narrative perspective has implications for consumer research beyond its use as an interpretive tool and this is the subject of the next part of the paper.

## **Towards a narrative paradigm for consumer research**

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs... it defines for its holder the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith; there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness. If there were philosophical debates... would have been resolved millennia ago.

Guba & Lincoln (1998)

We believe that it is possible to suggest a narrative paradigm for consumer research that inevitably shares similarities with other interpretive paradigms. Like other interpretive perspectives, a narrative approach questions the logic and suitability of transferring the philosophy, theory and methods of the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) to understanding human action (Geisteswissenschaften). What links together the different academic subjects that have utilised a narrative perspective has been the realisation over the past century that ‘language shapes the course and meaning of the human condition’ (O’Shaughnessy & Holbrook, 1988: p.197). And a fundamental way in which language manifests itself and is structured is through narratives. We seek to examine our underlying assumptions of human nature that are implicated by pursuing a narrative perspective (Marsden & Littler, 1999; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992). In doing so we borrow from Guba and Lincoln (1998; p.200) who suggested that ‘paradigms can be summarised by the responses given by proponents to three fundamental questions which are interconnected in such a way that the answer given to any one question constrains how the others may be answered’. These three questions are the ontological, epistemological and methodological questions.

## *Ontology*

The ontological question is, ‘whether the ‘reality’ to be investigated is external to the individual... or the product of individual consciousness’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; p.1). The realities we are investigating are human consumption practices. A narrative perspective is underpinned by a belief that ‘realities are multiple and constructed’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; p.37). The social world does not exist ‘out there’ independently of the people who interact in it. As such each individual has to make sense of the world in which they live. Objects, actions or behaviours of (or in) the social world only become ‘real’ to the individual once they have been interpreted by them and therefore acquired meaning. Moreover the dominant way in which meaning is acquired is through language. As O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook (1988; p. 197) commented ‘post-Wittgensteinian philosophers have seen language as the basic vehicle by which we construct the reality of our shared world’. But language is also polysemic (O’Sullivan *et al*, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995). This would lead us down the road to solipsism or ‘complete relativism’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, our interpretations are never wholly idiosyncratic. We are all socialised into the world, partly through a shared language, therefore our interpretations are often shared with others. As Gergen suggested (1991; p.242), ‘individuals themselves cannot “mean” anything; their actions are nonsensical until co-ordinated with the actions of others’.

The ontological position we are proposing shares similarities with three philosophical positions suggested by Hirschman & Holbrook (1992): the social construction of reality (SCR), the linguistic construction of reality (LCR) discussed earlier, and an individual construction of reality (ICR). They locate these three positions on an axis

according to the degree of determinism implicated by each perspective. Determinism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) or material determinism (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992) is at one end of the axis and voluntarism or mental determinism is at the other end of the axis. In essence what is at stake here is the extent to which we as individuals can exercise free will in determining the outcome of our activities. The SCR sees our realities being determined for us by our social and cultural conditions, whereas an ICR suggests that we are 'completely autonomous and free-willed' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; p.6). But, as Mardsen and Littler (1999) have highlighted, an underlying assumption of an interpretive ontology is that human beings are proactively engaged in giving meaning to their world. To acknowledge this critique, we include the Critical theorists' perspective who 'suspend judgement' (Murray and Ozanne, 1991) on this matter. Rather they focus on the 'constant interplay between subject (meanings) and objects (social structures)' (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; p. 132).

Narratively speaking we see this dialectic as the extent to which our individual narrative is written for us as opposed to the extent to which we write our own narrative. To put it another way, we suggest that individual emancipation by exercising free will, or to consciously choose from the choices available to us, represents an ideal, something worth striving for (see Murray and Ozanne, 1991). But these choices are not available to all equally. We subscribe to the view that we have choices to make, that we can exercise free will, but what is at issue is the extent to which we *realise* that we can make those choices.

Our narrative perspective also adds another dimension, time. We exist in space *and* time. As Heidegger suggested, an elemental aspect of our being-in-the-world or *Dasein* is our temporality (Kearney, 1994). We are therefore proposing a dynamic ontological position. We are born into the world, narratively speaking, as an important character in the life story of our parents. To begin with, our parents write our individual narratives for us, and more broadly, the social and cultural narratives we are socialised into also influence our individual narrative. Depending on a variety of factors (sex, ethnicity, economic and cultural capital, education etc. etc.) as we grow up, the balance shifts to us to author our own story by exercising free will in making the choices available to us. Postmodern commentators, for example, have highlighted the decline of socio-cultural metanarratives (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). But, narratives *per se* are not in decline. Rather, the issue is, who is the author of those narratives. We therefore find that socio-culturally derived metanarratives are being replaced with individually constructed ones. Some of us may successfully author our personal narrative, but many, we suspect, either never do, or for whatever reason are unable to do so. In a sense, therefore, by pursuing a narrative perspective we can assess the extent to which authorship of individuals' life stories, and by implication their consumption stories too, are written for them or by them (Polkinghorne, 1988).

In summary, our narrative perspective therefore subscribes to an ontological position whereby 'reality' is individually constructed, through language, but shaped, modified or 'consensualised' (Guba and Lincoln, 1998) by the social and cultural world within which the individual is embedded (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Our ontological position will therefore have implications for the way in which we conduct our research and this is the subject of the next section.

## *Epistemology*

Epistemological issues follow directly from our ontological position. Epistemology concerns itself with ‘the relationship between the knower and what can be known’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p.37). As Burrell and Morgan (1979; p. 1) commented, epistemology asks ‘how might one begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings’. Our ontological position underpins our epistemological position, but as Guba and Lincoln (1998) have suggested, the ‘conventional distinction’ between the two ‘disappears’. Because we see the possibility of multiple constructed realities, of our own as researchers and of the ‘objects’ of our enquiry, our participants’ consumption behaviours, any understanding or interpretation of that behaviour will be subjective. Moreover, as these realities are constructed there is no way of apprehending that reality prior to the research. Research design therefore tends to emerge (Lincoln And Guba, 1985). As such, any knowledge that is generated will inevitably be ideographic and time and context related (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The goal is to understand not explain. And because our focus tends to be a particular consumption behaviour, purposive sampling of that behaviour becomes important (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Finally, because we, as researchers, are part of the research process, inevitably we are also in our research. As Guba and Lincoln (1998; p. 207) commented, ‘the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that findings are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds’. Viewed in this way any meaningful difference between ontology and epistemology has collapsed. However, rather than viewing this as a weakness, interpretive researchers see this as a strength (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). We will explore this concept later in more detail. We now move on to outline

the methodological implications that result from the positions we have already adopted.

### ***Methodology***

Our ontological and epistemological position will dictate our methodological assumptions or ‘the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain knowledge of the social world’ (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; p.2). As we have already suggested the distinction between the ontological and epistemological has in effect disappeared and this distinction is further eroded when considering our methodology.

Methodologically we draw heavily on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is broadly speaking a theory of the interpretation of meaning (see Bleicher, 1980 for a thorough review). Hermeneutic ideas have their origins in theology, where their purpose was to interpret the Bible. However this methodological form of hermeneutics presumed that there was a meaning in the text and all that was needed was for it to be ‘uncovered’ (Schwandt, 1998). In essence this form of hermeneutics had ‘realist pretensions’ (Schwandt, 1998; p. 227) in that epistemologically, there still existed a subject-object split (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

The form of hermeneutics more suited to the ontological and epistemological positions that we have expounded is the more developed form of ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ originally elaborated by Gadamer, who himself drew on the work of Heidegger (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Schwandt, 1998). We have also supplemented this form of hermeneutics with aspects of the critical hermeneutics of Apel and Habermas (see Bleicher, 1980; Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Gadamer elevated

hermeneutics to an ontological level by arguing that ‘all understanding is linguistic’ (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; p. 55). Furthermore he also suggested that understanding was a fundamental aspect of existence (Bleicher, 1980). Interpretation assumes ontological status and ‘puts the inquirer on the same plane of understanding... as those he or she inquires into’ (Schwandt, 1998; p.229). Moreover, this results in a collapse of any meaningful difference between ontology and methodology - the nature of reality and how we access knowledge of that reality are essentially the same. Narratively, this would suggest that in the construction of a coherent life story, for example, ‘reality’ is represented by the story that is created by the individual. In making sense of our lives, therefore, we construct our own realities. As Bruner (1987; p.15, original emphasis) commented,

...the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure personal experience, to organise memory, to segment and purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives.

We adopt this position as axiomatic or a fundamental, immutable basic belief (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) but we would suggest it is not often made explicit in other forms of interpretive research.

Hermeneutics traditionally deals with texts. Following in the footsteps of Gadamer, Ricoeur suggested that all behaviour, and by extrapolation our consumption behaviour too, could be interpreted as a text and therefore could be subjected to a hermeneutic analysis (O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988). Furthermore, hermeneutic philosophy also privileges language as ‘the universal medium in which understanding occurs’ (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; p. 58). It is our contention that we need to add to this

perspective that a fundamental way that language manifests itself is through narrative. Freeman (1997; p. 175) for example, commented that ‘narrative is the basic medium in which human beings speak, think, grow into selves and understand each other’. To borrow from Descartes: ‘I narrate therefore I am’. We are therefore suggesting that if interpretation through language has ontological status, narrative should have that status too, that is, “narrative is an ontological condition of social life “(Somers and Gibson, 1994)In the next section we outline the implications of our developing perspective for the generation of consumption texts.

### ***Generating ‘narratives of consumption’***

Building on the philosophical position we have already outlined, we believe that it is expedient to limit the degree of a ‘subject-interpreting-object’ split that characterises much interpretive research. As Arnold and Fischer (1994; p.56) commented such a split is ‘a legacy of Cartesian subject-object dualism’ and therefore epistemologically hints at positivism. Rather, we embrace the idea that we as researchers in interaction with our participants co-create texts. In our case, we co-create narratives of consumption. We suggest, for example, that ‘traditional’ interviewing techniques where the aim is to elicit responses from our participants, which we as researchers then interpret, implicitly reinforces a subject-object split. We therefore suggest data generating techniques that are participative (Reason, 1998), the output of which become *our* narratives of consumption. These outputs would normally be conversations rather than interviews, which imply the researcher elicits responses from the participant.

We as researchers and those we research, in effect, become co-researchers. In this sense we, as co-researchers, belong to an interpretive community. Even though texts are potentially infinitely polysemic, interpretation and the construction of meaning tends to occur within a 'framework of similarity' (Fiske, 1987). The reason for this similarity relates to the inherently social nature of interpretation. While the individual brings his or her own subjective repertoire to a particular interpretive act, it is a repertoire shaped in 'particular social-historical contexts' (Thompson, 1990). The social nature of interpretation 'delimits' the heteroglossic potential of a reading in much the same way as open and closed texts exercise a degree of limitation on the polysemic text. The readers' connection to their "social position" ensures that their subjective interpretation will often match or correspond with other readers' interpretations of the same text. Thus interpretive communities are formed, and interpretive communities can offer a new way to segment markets along communities with shared understandings (Elliott and Ritson, 1997).

An alternative but similar approach to generating narratives of consumption is a variant of introspection. Introspection is the examination of one's own mental and emotional processes and 'involves the researcher reflecting on and analysing his or her own personal experiences pertaining to the topic under investigation' (Brown and Reid, 1997; p. 87). Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) called this researcher introspection. They also identified a form of introspection called interactive introspection. This is when both participant(s) and researcher interact (normally the researcher helps the participant(s) to introspect). The data used is a result of the interaction or 'the emergent experience of both parties' (Ellis, 1991; p.30). Therefore, the researcher and the participant(s), or the co-researchers, co-create or co-author the text pertaining to

the consumption experience. In order for this form of introspection to ‘work’ both participant(s) and researcher should be ‘in the midst of a similar life experience’ (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993; p. 341). In other words both parties should be experiencing or have experienced the same or a similar aspect of consumption and are therefore part of an interpretive community. In this way the researcher and the participant can share their consumption experiences and can create a narrative which ‘makes sense’ to both parties.

In the case of interactive introspection, the specific role of the researcher becomes to help the participant to create a narrative that makes sense to them. In doing so the researcher draws on their ‘[pre]-understandings’ (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Pre-understanding is a concept of hermeneutic philosophy that acknowledges that any interpretation offered by a researcher is guided by their own personal and socio-culturally situated experiences, or ‘being in the world’. In other words prior to the act of interpretation we, as researchers, and that which we are researching already exist. Rather than viewing these pre-understandings as biases that need to be eliminated, hermeneutic researchers suggest pre-understanding ‘enables rather than constrains interpretation’ (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; p.57). These pre-understandings would include the literature review the researcher had carried out pertaining to the topic of inquiry, reflections of their own consumption experiences, an appreciation of different narrative features, and a sensitivity to the broader social and cultural factors that shape peoples’ stories. During the research conversation the researcher draws on these pre-understandings to interpret the participants emerging consumption story. For example, we utilise two ideas from critical theory, the ‘dialectical step’ and ‘the awareness step’ (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; p. 137). During a research conversation inconsistencies in

the emerging story of the participant may become obvious to the researcher. The role of the researcher is to interpret these inconsistencies. These interpretations are then offered to the participant, reflected on by both researcher and participant and revised during the conversation until consensus is achieved between researcher and participant. Interpretation is always an on-going event. Typically in interpretive research, an interpretation is normally arrived at after the interview process. Interpretation may be shown to the original participant for subsequent corroboration or member checking. In our version interpretation takes place during the interview. In so doing, we suggest that we are able to arrive at 'intersubjective consensus' (Holbrook, 1995; p.245) or a consensual reality. Gadamer referred to this consensual reality as the 'fusion of horizons' (Bleicher, 1980). And as Arnold and Fischer (1994; p.63) commented 'it is in this fusion of horizons that the subject-object dichotomy is transcended'. This is also an example of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) which emphasises researcher and researcher mutually engaged on a voyage of discovery.

Such a technique has four major implications for interviewing. First, the task of the researcher is very onerous and so more than one interview may be necessary to allow space for both researcher and participant to reflect. Second, this process is best suited to interviewing techniques like the long interview (McCracken 1988). Long interviews can last for 4 hours or more and will often involve more than one interview. Third, the technique requires that a good deal of trust and rapport exists between researcher and participant so that the interpretation-reinterpretation process becomes 'power neutral'. One pragmatic solution to this problem is to purposively sample people who you know, already have a relationship with, and then to snowball from that purposive sample. Finally, such a technique requires both researcher and

participant to exhibit a high degree of self-reflexivity. It is argued that self-reflexivity is a fundamental aspect of the human condition in late/post modernity (e.g. Giddens, 1991). For some people it may well be. But in our personal experience as researchers, we have found that although people may possess self-reflective capacities they do not always exercise these capacities during the course of their everyday lives. Rather self-reflexivity tends to increase around ‘turning point moments’ (Denzin, 1989) in peoples’ lives (e.g. leaving home, death of a parent, separation or divorce, becoming a parent, death of a partner, new career etc.). Given that not all our participants will be experiencing turning point moments when we collaborate with them, the role of the researcher becomes to help the participant to self reflect and to co-author their biography. The relationship we are suggesting between researcher and participant is analogous to analyst: analysand relationship in psychoanalysis (Spence, 1982). Indeed, the whole project of psychoanalysis has been interpreted as a storytelling enterprise where the objective is to reconstruct all the elements of the analysand’s present into a new narrative, “an alternative, yet coherent account of life’s little fragments” (Schafer, 1980). We build on this idea in the next part of the paper.

### **Consumption, identity and narrative**

As we have seen, the role of creating a meaningful story or personal narrative is viewed as fundamental to the development of a coherent sense of self within the psychological and psychoanalytic literature (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Spence, 1982). Consumption too, is increasingly being viewed as important in identity construction (e.g. Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Giddens, 1991, McCracken, 1990). As William James (1890; p.291 original italics) once commented *‘a man’s Self is the*

*sum total of all that he can call his*', including our 'material self', the material possessions that we have. Paul Ricoeur (1981) emphasises the dynamics of identity construction through narrative and its location in social practices, as identity emerges intersubjectively, always being mediated by other people. Identity is constituted narratively, in that we receive a narrative identity from the stories that are told to us and those that we tell about ourselves, and this identity is mingled with that of others so that "we are literally entangled in stories" Ricoeur (1996 p. 6). We need to explore the matrix of narrative identity and how it is implicated with consumption practices over time and we now turn to how this dynamic perspective might be applied to the study of the lives of consumers.

### **Implications of a narrative perspective for consumer research**

We are suggesting two possible applications of the ideas we have presented. First, and perhaps the most challenging application, would be the empirical development of the narrative paradigm we have outlined above. In order to facilitate the production of suitable narratives of consumption we suggest that researchers should concentrate of 'turning point' moments in peoples' lives, which broadly speaking can translate into lifestyle segments. For example, we are currently involved with a project that is investigating the consumption behaviours of 'professional' mothers. Alternatively the narrative perspective would ideally be suited to a longitudinal study of consumption behaviour. Such studies are notably absent in the consumer behaviour literature.

Second, and perhaps the most pragmatic, is to supplement the interpretation of consumption experiences with a narrative perspective. For example, an interesting study could involve the narrative investigation of one of the cornerstones of the

cognitive perspective in consumer research, high involvement decision making. The stories that consumers generate surrounding the purchase of something significant could then be analysed in terms of the key features of narratives outlined earlier (for example, need recognition becomes a valued end point, the search for alternatives becomes the selection of events relevant to the goal state etc.). We suspect that such a study would corroborate Elliott's (1998) suggestion that important aspects of decision-making are based on non-linear emotions rather than linear cognitions.

However we are mindful and sensitive to the issue that as interpretive researchers all we are able to offer is *an* interpretation not *the* interpretation. There is never only one story. Multiple meanings are inherent in post-structuralism, and we defer to Barthes' description of language's inevitable "overflows, leaks, skids, shifts, slips" (Barthes, 1977). This freedom for language (and the individual) to be polysemic is evident in the lack of a unitary discourse found in empirical studies of everyday conversation where "people frequently argue with each other, and often aloud with themselves" (Billig, 1996). In their social practices individuals are faced with "ideological dilemmas" as to how to categorise information into the multiplicity of alternative schemas they possess (Billig *et al.*, 1988). This indeterminacy of meaning and relative freedom of the individual to escape from 'regimes of truth' has been related to consumption through Bourdieu's theory of social practice as "necessary improvisation" in symbolic fields, including consumption (Bourdieu, 1977).

Consumption as a social practice is a dynamic and relatively autonomous process that involves the symbolic construction of a sense of self through the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital. However, to paraphrase Marx: although we make our own history, we do not do so in circumstances of our own choosing. Symbolic

freedom is severely constrained by social structure and by the ideological limits that we are able to imagine. Discourse is socially determined through relationships of power extending through class and society. But this is not a uni-directional process as discourse also constructs social structures in a dialectical relationship, and individual acts of symbolic creativity are socially constitutive in that they cumulatively restructure orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

### **Conclusion... selling people stories**

In this paper we have outlined the potential contribution of narrative to both theory and method in consumer research. To end with, we would like to broaden the implications of our narrative perspective to marketing in general.

Strategic marketing management could explore ways of escaping the outdated Kotlerian war metaphor for strategy development. In its place we suggest a narrative understanding of marketing strategy development, where products or brands become the central characters in their own story with the brand managers (and those who help them e.g. advertising agencies) assuming the role of the author. Marketing plans are in essence stories: they have a beginning, a middle and an end; a valued end point (marketing objectives); selection of events relevant to the goal state (the marketing mix); and an ordering of events (marketing programmes etc.). Brands within a marketplace could then usefully be conceived as romantic, tragic, heroic or satirical brands. In the UK, for example, the carbonated soft drink Tango is an obvious example of a satirical brand.

Finally, stories and storytelling are an integral and pervasive aspect of all human cultures. Some of the largest TV audiences, for example, are achieved by programmes using a strong narrative form (e.g. Eastenders and Coronation Street), and the best-loved advertisements are often ones which adopt a classical narrative form (e.g. The Oxo family, Nescafe Gold Blend, Renault's Papa & Nicole). Through various forms of popular culture (TV, advertising, music, novels etc.), consumers are being offered a ready-made story that they can use as a resource to make sense of some aspect of their lives (Ritson & Elliott, 1999). The narrative audience can construct part of the story themselves in order to maximise its explanatory power, and this applies not just to audiences of consumers. McCloskey (1998) suggested that the most influential economic theorists, such as Maynard Keynes in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, achieved their rhetorical power partly by leaving gaps in the narrative for readers to fill in themselves (Gestalt psychologists call this closure). In a sustained *tour de force* Peter & Olson (1983) suggested that science can be seen as a special case of marketing, where the most successful scientific theories are those that are successfully marketed, using the persuasive tools of marketing management. The Rhetorical Tetrad (McCloskey, 1994) demonstrates how facts and logic can be supplanted by stories and metaphors that have the added weight of personal relevance, see Fig 2.

## **Figure 2**

### **The Rhetorical Tetrad: The Four Human Arguments**

*Impersonal*

*Personal*

<i>Particular</i>	FACT	STORY
<i>General</i>	LOGIC	METAPHOR

Source: adapted from McClosky (1994)

Perhaps we can now attempt to redefine marketing as a narrative project, where like psychoanalysts using analysis to develop a potential new life story, we use marketing research to identify stories that we can turn into rhetorical metaphors that may have some general persuasive power. This persuasive power may be limited to interpretive or brand communities who share some aspects of meaning based on life experiences and social influences through peer groups. Marketing narratives are particularly likely to appeal to consumers seeking to achieve an approximation to their ‘Ideal Story’ and studies have shown that strong emotions are generated when we sense a match between an actual or potential story and our ideal one (Sternberg, 1998).

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