

# Projective techniques in market research: valueless subjectivity or insightful reality?

A look at the evidence for the usefulness, reliability and validity of projective techniques in market research

Clive Boddy

Middlesex University Business School

Projective techniques are often used in market research to help uncover findings in areas where those researched are thought to be reluctant or unable to expose their thoughts and feelings via more straightforward questioning techniques. However, how the findings from projective techniques are analysed and how valid and reliable they are is hardly touched on at all in the market research literature. This paper aims to open this subject up for further discussion and recommends further research into the reliability and validity of projective techniques.

**Question:** So how *do* you actually analyse projective techniques?

**Researcher says:** Years of experience in using them and my training as a qualitative researcher has left me with an intuitive knowledge of what people mean when they perform a task in a certain way. (*Researcher thinks: I'm tired out after the last group, please ask me an easier question!*)

## Introduction

For the past quarter-century there has been a growing use of and interest in qualitative market research (Fram & Cibotti 1991; Miller 1991; Catterall 1998) and the concomitant use of projective and enabling techniques (Miller 1991) within it. A review of projective techniques in market research and their analyses, validity and reliability is therefore, arguably, overdue.

Catterall (1998) notes that the way market research is taught is functionalist, technical and narrow-minded, as if market research does not exist within the wider world of historical and societal events. It is perhaps not surprising, then, given this vocational training background, that market researchers ignore their roots, says Catterall, and are largely ignorant of the history behind and intellectual underpinnings of research practices and techniques. This gap in historical and intellectual knowledge may explain the lack of explanation in market research of the analysis, reliability and validity of projective and enabling techniques. This paper hopes to start to fill that gap and to suggest some areas for further research.

### **A definition of projective techniques**

Projective techniques facilitate the articulation of otherwise repressed or withheld thoughts by allowing the research participant or subject to 'project' their own thoughts onto someone or something other than themselves. Projective techniques are thus techniques that enable research participants or subjects to respond in ways in which they would otherwise not feel able to respond. Respondents are asked to respond to stimuli and the hope is that they will project aspects of their own thoughts or feelings via the use of the stimuli.

The *Oxford University Press Dictionary of Psychology* (Colman 2001) defines projective techniques as:

Any of a variety of personality tests in which the respondent gives free responses to a series of stimuli such as inkblots, pictures, or incomplete sentences. Such tests are based loosely on the psychoanalytic concept of projection, the assumption being that respondents project unconscious aspects of their personalities on to the test items and reveal them in their responses ...

The website of the Association of Qualitative Practitioners (AQR 2004) defines projective techniques as follows:

A wide range of tasks and games in which respondents can be asked to participate during an interview or group, designed to facilitate, extend or enhance the nature of the discussion. Some are known as 'projective' techniques, being loosely based on approaches originally taken in a psychotherapeutic setting. These rely on the idea that someone will 'project' their own (perhaps unacceptable or shameful) feelings or beliefs onto an imaginary other person or situation ...

Projective techniques may be used in qualitative as well as quantitative studies (Levy 1994) and they are useful (Boddy 2004b) in both.

Projective techniques are commonly used in qualitative market research (Gordon & Langmaid 1990) where the aim of the techniques is to facilitate the gaining of a deeper understanding of the area being researched. In discussing projective techniques they distance the use of projective techniques in qualitative market research from that of psychoanalytical practice, and suggest a more pedestrian and pragmatic definition:

Projection [is] the tendency to imbue objects or events with characteristics or meanings which are derived from our subconscious desires, wishes or feelings.

Dichter (1964) defined projection as meaning ‘to project subjective ideas and contents onto an object’, and said that one person could ascribe their own problems or difficulties to someone else. He described these techniques as being widely used in psychological work (Dichter 1960) and said that they are a non-directive interview technique where the respondent can project himself onto another and thus reveal some of the respondent’s own thoughts, feelings and fears.

### **Projective vis-à-vis enabling techniques**

The market researchers Chandler and Owen (2002) define projective and enabling techniques quite succinctly and in a way with which most qualitative market research practitioners (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Goodyear 1998) would probably agree. This differentiation is useful to make at the beginning of this paper as the techniques are often used interchangeably and the distinction between them may have become blurred in the minds of some qualitative market researchers.

Classically, the idea of a projective technique relates to a device that allows the individual research participant to articulate repressed or otherwise withheld feelings by projecting these onto another character. The idea of enabling techniques relates to a device which allows the individual research participant to find a means of expressing feelings, thoughts and so on which they find hard to articulate.

Enabling techniques are held to be the simpler (Will, Eadie & MacAskill 1996) of the two techniques as they just help people to talk about themselves. Will *et al.* make the useful distinguishing point that while all projective techniques may be enabling, not all enabling techniques involve projection. Other researchers (Lysaker & Bradley 1957) make the point that even pictorial devices, which do not function as projective techniques

(i.e. devices researchers would nowadays refer to as enabling techniques), may still have utility in generating responses.

Gordon and Langmaid (1990) state that the use of projective as opposed to enabling techniques is a false distinction in market research as the aim of both techniques is to facilitate deeper understanding. However, they do go on to say that in enabling techniques people are asked to do something that itself has no interpretive value (and so doesn't itself need to be interpreted). In terms of analysis there is a distinction because with enabling techniques the research participants are talking as themselves (that is not to say that this speech should always be taken at face value), whereas with projective techniques the research participants are talking as someone else and the researcher makes the interpretative assumption that they are talking as themselves.

This agreement over the definition of projective techniques is about as far as most research textbooks get on the subject. How they are subsequently used is little discussed and how they are then analysed is hardly explicitly touched on at all (Levy 1994; Catterall 1998), which is a situation that has hardly changed from ten or more years ago.

This paper aims to look at current reports of how projective techniques are analysed and what support for their reliability and validity exists, and aims to stimulate debate in this area of market research so that a better and more accessible understanding of the subject can be offered to those entering research as potential practitioners, to interested clients, and to researchers who are more used to a quantitative or direct questioning approach.

## **The origins of projective techniques**

Projective techniques were employed in market research from the 1940s (Catterall & Ibbotson 2000) to encourage research participants to express feelings and attitudes that might otherwise be withheld due to embarrassment or fear if more direct questioning methods were used. Market research originally borrowed (Robson 2000; Boddy 2004a) projective techniques from psychoanalysis and clinical psychology where they are still used (Richman 1996) to gain insights into personality and personality disorders.

Projection, as a concept, originated from Freud's work on paranoia (Lilienfeld, Wood & Garb 2000), where he conceptualised projection as a defence mechanism by which people unconsciously attribute their own negative personality traits to others. Lilienfeld *et al.* say that Freud's work

was subsequently developed by psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists. This development was based on the hypothesis that ‘research participants project aspects of their personalities in the process of disambiguating unstructured test stimuli’, and several different techniques were developed such as the well-known Rorschach technique, or ‘ink-blot test’, where subjects are assumed to project aspects of their personality onto the ambiguous features of a set of inkblots.

### **Projective techniques in market research**

A commonly used completion technique (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Will *et al.* 1996) in qualitative market research is ‘bubble drawing’. This is a device based on a technique called the Thematic Apperception Test where, according to Tucker-Ladd (2001), clinical psychologists use a series of standard pictures and ask subjects to make up stories about them. Tucker-Ladd says that what people see in the pictures says something about themselves and thus reveals their personality.

Projective techniques can be used in a variety of market research situations as well as in social and educational research (Catterall & Ibbotson 2000), and these do not have to be aiming at uncovering aspects of personality of any great depth. For example, a bubble drawing was used (Boddy 2004a) by one researcher to uncover students’ underlying attitudes towards the delivery of a lecture on marketing research rather than to uncover any deeper aspects of their own personalities. Projective and enabling techniques are thus useful when research participants have difficulty expressing opinions or feelings and researchers need some way of accessing these from the participants’ minds (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Kay 2001).

The influence of psychology on qualitative market research has led some commentators – for example, Colwell (1990) – to discuss whether qualitative market researchers should have an academic background such as a degree in psychology or other behavioural sciences. Many do have this background. However, it is a matter of debate whether such a background is needed for the competent analysis of projective techniques. The personal characteristics of the moderator (in focus group discussions) are said (Will *et al.* 1996) to be important in the use of projective and enabling techniques, and a person with a ‘warm, friendly, interested and relaxed’ approach, and who is capable of establishing rapport is recommended. Robson (2000) says that skill and sensitivity are required in the researcher to know when to use projective techniques, and that the interpretation

requires skill and experience. However a discussion of the types and levels of skill and experience needed is not entered into.

### **The reliability and validity of projective techniques**

Here reliability is taken to refer to the repeatability of a particular set of research findings – for example, whether different researchers draw the same conclusions from the same set of results. Validity is taken to refer to how well a piece of research actually measures what it sets out to measure or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent.

As market research borrowed projective techniques from psychology it is pertinent to ask about the status of the techniques in that discipline and practice. In psychology there are criticisms of the reliability of projective techniques. A major criticism of projective techniques in clinical psychology has been that the interpretation of them can be as much a projection of the psychologist as of the subject, particularly in techniques like the ink-blot test where subjects are asked to say what an ink blot looks like or represents or means to them, and their current state of mind interpreted from this.

This sort of criticism has led to the controversial status of projective techniques in clinical psychology, as described by Lilienfeld *et al.* (2000). They conclude that such techniques are not inherently unreliable but can be poorly used or unreliably scored. They do note that the ‘scientific’ status of such tests remains highly controversial. Interestingly, these authors comment to the effect that projective techniques present a discrepancy between research and practice in clinical psychology in that when evaluated as psychometric instruments they tend to make a poor showing, whereas in clinical use in psychology they remain popular.

The first journal report (Fram & Cibotti 1991) of a projective technique in market research was Haire’s (1950) famous report on instant coffee buying. Despite its age this remains one of the key papers in establishing the reliability and validity of projective techniques in market research. This study used two almost identical shopping lists of items where one list included instant coffee and one included non-instant coffee. A sample of housewives was asked to describe each of the purchasers of each shopping list. The housewife who was said to buy the list containing the (Nescafé) instant coffee was more commonly said to be lazy and sloppy, whereas the housewife said to buy the list containing the (Maxwell-House) non-instant coffee was more commonly said to be thrifty and a good housewife.

Haire conducted two further studies to examine the phenomena further and in the third study negative projections of the instant coffee housewife were correlated with non-instant coffee purchase (via a pantry check). Haire concluded from the research studies that some motives, because they are socially unacceptable, exist below the level of verbalisation and that these motives can be assessed if approached indirectly. The research illustrated that housewives who projected negative characteristics onto instant coffee buyers were largely not buying instant coffee themselves. This series of three studies by Haire has been a major source of support for the users of projective techniques in market research.

Fram and Cibotti (1991) describe how a number of studies have replicated and validated Haire's findings since 1950, with the finding that attitudes to instant coffee purchasers have softened over time and that negative attitudes are effectively no longer present by the time of their own replication in 1990. They report that these replications have generally supported the validity and reliability of the use of projective techniques in market research, although a study by Anderson (1978) questioned the validity of Haire's technique.

### **Reliability issues**

Researchers (Catterall & Ibbotson 2000) are reported to find considerable consistency in the responses obtained from using projective techniques but less consistency in the interpretation of such responses. This mirrors their criticisms in psychology where the subjectivity of the researcher is said to make the use of projective techniques unreliable.

Other researchers (Hussey & Duncombe 1999) also identify that each moderator brings his or her own subjective style to the interpretation of projective findings and identify this as a fallibility of the method. Levy (1985) also mentions that given the varied skills among researchers themselves and the necessity when using projective techniques for intelligent interpretation, questions are raised about the reliability of projective techniques. He notes, however, that research competence is a challenge in any type of research and that familiarity with using projective techniques increases their reliability.

These issues would be relatively easy to research further by comparative studies using more than one researcher to see if one set of results is interpreted the same way by different market researchers.

## **Internal reliability**

Many market researchers espouse an internal-reliability checking of the meaning of the results of projective techniques as research progresses so that they can be confident in their findings. Griggs (1987) in his paper on analysing qualitative data, mentions that 'a classical method of verifying findings is to show that independent measures of the same phenomenon give rise to the same conclusion'. This sort of triangulation (cross-checking) is often undertaken in market research (Zober 1955) by comparing the results from the use of one technique with those gained from another. This provides some measure of the reliability of the research undertaken.

Often the analysis of the results of projective techniques can be based (Ereaut 2002) on the meanings attached to the material by the people who produced it. Market researchers (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Robson 2000; Chandler & Owen 2002) advocate an exploration of what was done in a projective task to a discussion (within the research as it progresses) of what this means to the people involved in the research. This is arguably even more important in international research as, for example, the word association of a product or idea with being 'American' can have wildly different nuances and meanings in different countries and cultures and at different times. In similar vein, Gordon and Langmaid (1990) stress that it is the research participant's own interpretation of the response that is of prime importance.

A practical problem with this method of interpretation is that if a number of different techniques are used in qualitative research within an individual session and/or across a variety of people or in a variety of groups then the time available to address the meaning attributed to each response within each session may just not be available. This must make it tempting for the researcher to assume that he or she knows what the research participants mean and to proceed with the research on that basis.

## **Validity issues**

The controversial position of projective techniques in psychology, and the view that such techniques can be poorly used or unreliably scored and that the interpretation of them can be as much a projection of the psychologist as of the subject, has led at least one researcher to call for the rejection of projective techniques in market research on the grounds that they are not valid. Yoell (1974) describes the techniques as being as 'valueless as dream interpretation' in market research and as being 'un-testable and scientifically illegal'. However, he arguably does so mainly on a reading of

an evaluation of their use in clinical psychology rather than in market research. This, along with Haire's evidence to support the contrary position, may explain why market researchers seem to have largely ignored Yoell's paper.

In their 1996 paper on projective and enabling techniques, Will *et al.* state that the ability of projective techniques to tap into consumers' subconscious remains unproven and that their main function is therefore as devices to create open and uninhibited discussion.

Levy (1985) in summarising his paper on projective techniques in marketing includes the observation that, often, projective techniques enable respondents to express themselves in fuller, more subtle and in fairer ways (than they could in responding to direct questioning), and that this can therefore achieve greater validity than is possible using methods whose reliability appears to be more comforting to the researcher. It is precisely this promise of achieving greater validity that makes the use of projective techniques so attractive to market researchers.

Haire's finding in his third study, that negative projections of the instant coffee housewife were correlated with non-instant coffee purchase via a pantry check, is evidence of the validity of projective techniques in market research. Further evidence along these lines would be welcome.

### **Reports of the usefulness of projective techniques in market research**

Reports by market research practitioners of the usefulness of projective techniques in market research are virtually unanimous in their praise of the insights offered by using projective techniques. The advantages of these techniques are typically hypothesised to be their ability to get around or under the conscious defences of research participants and to allow researchers to gain access to important psychological information of which respondents are not consciously aware.

Cooper and Tower (1992) describe how qualitative research can benefit research into consumption and usage of the arts by using projective techniques to get at the 'private, non-communicable, unconscious or repressed attitudes and motives' of arts consumers. They say, 'projective techniques encourage consumers to express their private and unconscious beliefs and feelings by talking about other people rather than themselves' (e.g. 'bubble' pictures). A similar description of projective techniques is given by Sykes (1990) in her review of the literature on the validity and reliability of qualitative market research.

This 'bubble' approach is a projective construction technique where research participants have to construct an answer to a given, usually drawn, setting or scenario. Such bubble techniques are reported in Moller and Alsted's (1996) paper on understanding consumer reactions to cinema advertising in Denmark.

Cooper and Tower (1992) used a similar device in their exploration of consumer attitudes to the arts mentioned above. They say that this gives the research participant 'permission' to project his beliefs and feelings onto the picture, which accesses 'underlying motivations and inhibitions'. Cooper, on his company (CRAM) website (Cooper 2002), says that the benefits of projective techniques in market research are that they 'encourage emotional reactions as well as rational ones'. Gordon and Langmaid (1990) discuss projective techniques in their book on qualitative market research. Bubble drawings are mentioned as being anonymous devices that help assure freedom of expression. The writing of a script (Nancarrow *et al.* 2001) in the third person is a similar way of freeing those researched from self-consciousness, encouraging people to reveal the influences they may be unaware of at a conscious level, or would rather hide.

### **The analysis of projective techniques in market research**

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991) say that projective techniques in management research always require 'expert analysis', but they do not define this. Some practitioners (Boddy 2004a) argue that some projective techniques are so basic that any academic or researcher should have little problem using them, but again do not go on to explain in any detail how this is done.

In discussing focus groups Robson (2000) states that the interpretation of projective techniques requires 'skill and experience', but does not elaborate beyond that apart from agreeing that a discussion of the meaning of the projective techniques' results within the research is a valuable learning process. Miller (1991) agrees that the person in charge of the research has to be 'experienced' and that attention has to be paid in the analysis of projective techniques to what is not said as well as what is said. Valentine (1996) argues that researchers should be objective, systematic and rigorous in analysing qualitative research, and that research into the interpretation of qualitative data has been neglected. The lack of published papers into the usage and analysis of projective techniques would seem to verify this.

With projective material that is produced physically in picture or collage form, a visual examination can also be made of the consistencies of such material across different groups or interviewees. Differences in visual images chosen to represent something can display self-evident patterns and differences across age groups, for example. In psycho-drawing, as another example, the most prominent features of a drawn brand may be interpreted by the researcher as being the most salient for consumers of that brand rather than as being the easiest aspects of a brand for consumers to draw. However, the difficulty of accurately interpreting these patterns and differences in pictorial representations remains an interpretive task for the researcher during or after the research. At a further stage of removal from the data itself, other readings of the meaning of the material can be based on some theory or perspective such as a psychoanalytical approach of some sort.

When using the bubble technique of the two reply bubbles (speech and thought), this researcher has usually characterised the thought bubble as being the more reflective and ‘deeper’ part of the answer, especially where the answers in the two bubbles do not match. However, this approach to interpreting a particular projective technique is based on an understanding gained from experience as a practitioner and not on any research-based understanding of the technique.

The implicit assumption among researchers is that these pictures, scripts (Nancarrow *et al.* 2001), bubble drawings (Zober 1955; Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Boddy 2004a) and other projective techniques (Cooper & Tower 1992; Moller & Alsted 1996) are evaluated assuming that what is presented in the completion of techniques by those researched represents their truer feelings about and attitudes towards what has been researched more than would otherwise have been evident. This is sometimes stated explicitly (Zober 1955; Kennedy 1997) by some commentators: Kennedy says, ‘It is a fact that most people, when asked what others think, will give their own opinions’, although this statement is not backed up with any supporting references to research on this. However, this assumption is not often explicitly asserted by researchers. Perhaps to do so would draw attention to, and therefore question, the assumption?

In psychology (Lilienfeld *et al.* 2000) the projective technique interpreter is said to work in reverse. If research participants are projecting hidden or unwanted elements of their personalities onto other characters then these are simply assumed to be their own characteristics. The interpretation is quite clear; the assumption is that if the research participants say something through some other character then the interpreter assumes it is

the research participants saying it about themselves. Such analysis is perhaps implicit in the way qualitative market researchers phrase some questions. For example, in researching attitudes to violent films we may ask something like ‘What would people like you do if they found a case of violent videos?’ rather than ‘What would you do if you found a case of violent videos?’ The obvious aim is to try and bypass conscious defences of feelings of embarrassment and get access to underlying attitudes and motivations.

The same holds true for bubble drawings using replies in a ‘says’ talk bubble and a ‘thinks’ thought bubble as responses (as in the question at the beginning of this paper). In my experience qualitative researchers would usually give more credence to the thought bubble on the often unarticulated assumption that it is the response more likely to have circumvented the conscious defences of research participants.

In analysing the results of projective techniques at an aggregate level (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Boddy 2004a) the data are reportedly analysed via a combination of qualitative content analysis, where a sorting of data along similar lines is made to make the findings easier to describe, or quantitative content analysis (Zober 1955; Levy 1994; Hussey & Duncombe 1999) and a grounded theory-type approach as described by Glaser (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1998; Glaser 2001; Glaser 2003) and Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991) where further stages of reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing, linking and re-evaluation of the data take place.

Levy (1994) describes how results from the quantified use of projective techniques can be tabulated, used systematically and compared to normative data. However, such norms do not usually exist in market research.

Interestingly, market researchers explicitly state that they are tapping in to the subconscious elements of the minds of research participants (Gordon & Langmaid 1990; Cooper & Tower 1992) or trying to bring to the surface elements of the conscious and unconscious (Cooper & Shore 1999) mind when they are using projective techniques.

An earlier description (Zober 1955) of how projective techniques were useful in three quantitative studies involving grocery retailing, milk marketing and a chamber of commerce concludes that projective techniques may give a finer qualitative interpretation than objective questions alone, but that conclusions drawn from both types of question should be compared in the process of analysing the data as a whole. The paper (Zober 1955) makes the additional comments that those interviewed seemed to

enjoy working with pictures in using the techniques, that using the techniques helped to break the ice, that pictures were useful where respondents may find it difficult to talk about their attitudes, and that using the techniques can yield more information than objective questioning alone.

These benefits to the process of research undoubtedly help account for the continued popularity of the use of projective techniques in market research.

### **Ideas for further research**

Research into the reliability and validity of using projective techniques in market research is sadly lacking and badly needed. However, given the frequency of use of the techniques it should be a relatively easy task for practitioners to include such research in existing projects. Researchers on the client company side could encourage such research to enhance and expand the body of evidence for the validity and reliability of using projective techniques. It is in their interests to know that the research that research companies are conducting for them is robust and sound.

In terms of reliability it would be relatively easy, for example, for a research company to ask a second researcher to examine and interpret the results of using projective techniques in any particular project and to then compare the findings from the two researchers. The extent to which the interpretation of the results is similar would be a measure of the reliability of using projective techniques.

In terms of validity a comparison of respondents' projections about a particular product or brand could be made with their own reported or actual (via scanning data or a pantry check) brand usage to see to what extent one is predictive of the other. If, for example, professional managers reported via a projective technique that the types of people who drank a brand of beer were labourers, farm workers and fishermen, and they didn't drink the brand themselves, then this would be evidence for the validity of the projective hypothesis and of projective techniques. If, on the other hand, it was found that they did drink the brand themselves then this would be evidence for the invalidity of projective techniques.

### **Conclusions**

Projective techniques are almost universally said by market researchers to be useful but few researchers other than Haire have provided evidence of their reliability and validity.

If the ability to tap into consumers' subconscious remains unproven then projective techniques are not proven to be projective. In this case there is arguably a need for market researchers to provide some research-based evidence for claims that they are projective other than the usual anecdotal evidence regarding the 'successful' use of the techniques over the past 40 or so years.

In 1996 researchers writing on this subject (Will *et al.* 1996) ended their paper with a call for more research on how data collected from these techniques compares with data collected from more direct questioning, and for a closer examination of how data collected from projective and enabling techniques can be analysed and interpreted.

While this current paper goes a little way towards these goals it is clear from the literature that such research is still substantially lacking. The background, history and theory behind the use of projective techniques is fairly well understood but the practice of their interpretation and its validity and reliability is less clearly defined and not often discussed by market researchers.

Given the continued growth of market research and the concomitant use of such techniques since the 1996 paper and other previous papers were published this call for further research-based understandings of these techniques is arguably even more pressing now than it was then. This paper re-opens the discussion and seeks further research, analysis and understanding in this important area.

Research into both the validity (referring to how well a piece of research actually measures what it sets out to measure or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent) of using projective techniques to determine whether the researchers using them are really accessing people's projections of their own thoughts and feelings onto others, and into the reliability (referring to the repeatability of a particular set of research findings) of using the techniques to see, for example, if different researchers draw the same conclusions from the same set of results gathered using projective techniques would be a welcome addition to the literature on the subject.

Research suppliers should be interested in conducting and publishing such research so that they can provide a justifiable rationale for the research process, and research buyers should be pushing them to undertake it so that market research does not continue to operate in this area void of any substantial scientific underpinning of reliability and validity.

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