Laddering: how (not) to do things with words

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to provide a discourse-based critique of the laddering interviewing technique, and to make academics as well as practitioners aware of some of the limitations in applying this particular consumer interviewing technique.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper first describes the laddering interviewing technique, which traditionally has been conceptualised within a cognitively-oriented perspective, i.e. the laddering interview is seen as a cognitive task. Then a critical discussion of some of the problems inherent in this view follows. After this, an alternative conceptualisation of the laddering interview is proposed, namely, that it is a discursive event. On the basis of insights from Wittgenstein and Austin it is suggested that the laddering interview is a room for social actions where both interviewer and interviewee are “doing things with words”. An example of applying the discursive approach to a sample sequence from a laddering interview is also provided. Finally, it seeks to evaluate the laddering interviewing technique in terms of its capacity to tap into “the voices in the marketplace”.

Findings – Finds that the laddering interviewing technique has its raison d’être as a quick and structured way of tapping into the voices and institutionalised rationales of the consumers in the marketplace. However, it is also found that the laddering interviewing technique “locks” the interviewee into one particular consumer identity; it prompts only answers that are valid with perfect strangers; it prevents the interviewee from unfolding his arguments fully; and it has a constant focus on personal preferences excluding the possible dissociations from other consumers – all of this making the data less rich and varied.

Originality/value – The unique value of this paper is that it sums up and provides a theoretically-based critique of the laddering interviewing technique. It is believed that this critique will lead to a more appropriate appreciation of what is going on in a laddering interview and of the utterances that the consumers make in such an interview.

Keywords Consumer research, Quality management, Research, Interviews

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In contemporary consumer research, it is generally accepted that if we want to know about consumers’ lives, thoughts and feelings, we may ask questions about these things. We find it natural to apply so-called verbal methods that rely on consumers’ verbal accounts, e.g. in experiments, surveys, or depth interviews. A central issue in the application of any verbal method is how the researcher can formulate “good questions” that will give the consumer the opportunity to provide us with “good answers”. However, in order to regard this issue and to set up any criterion for what may constitute “good” or “bad” questioning it appears necessary to first address the issue of
how we may conceptualise the sequences of questions and answers on a theoretical level. Within the means-end literature it has been suggested – in order to set up guidelines for “good” interviewing – that the laddering interview be conceptualised as a cognitive task, that is, a task that supports the researcher’s attempt to tap into the cognitive structures of the consumer (Grunert and Grunert, 1995; Grunert, et al., 2001). In the laddering interview, the sequential why-questions are asked in order to tap into the consumption-related means-end structures in the interviewee’s memory. More lately, Scholderer and Grunert (2005) have attempted to validate the existence of means-end chains through controlled experiment testing, albeit with mixed results. Thus, the issue of methodological self-criticism is not an unknown phenomenon to the cognitivist tradition advocating means-end chain theory.

However, in this paper, we would like to discuss critically this cognitive conception of the laddering interview. Bagozzi and Dabholkar (2000, p. 536) underline the ontological difficulty in cognitivism, that the means-end linkages elicited in laddering interviews should “represent inferences in the minds of consumers”. Instead, they suggest to apply a discursive approach in their attempts to conceive the laddering interview, that is, an approach that stresses the normativity and intentionality of human behaviour. Instead of a cognitive approach, we will follow the path opened by Bagozzi and Dabholkar and plead that a discursive approach is more appropriate to the understanding of the consumer interview.

However, while Bagozzi and Dabholkar (2000) add a distinct reference to the social construction of discourse they do not leave the domain of psychology. Likewise, they do not use their insights to generalize their critique to the construct of means-end chains per se. Their ambition is to preserve the basic means-end approach to human behaviour by replacing a problematic cognitivism-oriented ontology with a different one.

Our ambition here is different. We would like to make a distinctly extra-paradigmatic critique of the laddering construct, i.e. a deconstruction of the laddering interview in such a way that also the fundamental assumption of a means-end-based rationale is questioned. Focusing here mainly on the issues of the qualitative approach of laddering, the broader consequences of this critique, however, form the core of a different manuscript which is under preparation. Our critique of laddering as an interview technique is based on a consumer culture theory perspective (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), a perspective which has its origins in a critique of cognitive approaches to consumer behaviour (Belk, 1987). A discursive approach, as we see it, is not only based on a more appropriate perspective on the interview situation as a social process compared to the cognitive view. Such an inclusion of the interview as a social situation also opens up for an understanding of how data originating from laddering (and other qualitative) interviews are “produced” rather than “found”.

In our discussions here, we will draw on our own experiences with laddering interviews, but our intention is not to provide a thorough and more or less technical description of the various ways laddering interviews could or should be done. Instead, we would like to contribute to the debate on a more sociological level where the practice of consumer research and laddering interviews are conceived as an institutionalized praxis that “does something to” the persons involved in this praxis (cf. the title of this paper). We are aware that slightly different versions of laddering exist both among practitioners and researchers, but in the present paper we adhere to the guidelines provided by Reynolds and Gutman (1988) in their seminal work.
The ladder interviewing technique
The ladder interviewing technique is intimately related to the means-end approach to consumer behaviour. A basic premise of this approach is the idea that the consumer does not buy products for their own sake, but for what they can do for him (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988, p. 11). The products and their features do not in themselves represent any goals, instead they represent means by which to achieve other ends, and these other ends may again be means of the achievement of further ends, hence the term means-end chains.

A prototypical example could be a food consumer with a preference for organic food. He may feel that when buying organic food he will support methods of food production that are sustainable and not too harmful to the natural resources, which again may contribute to his sense of environmental responsibility and solidarity with future generations. Usually, means-end chains are depicted as chains connecting six different types of categories: concrete attributes (organic), abstract attributes (sustainable produce), functional consequences (support for organic producers), socio-psychological consequences (identifying with “responsible” citizens), instrumental values (environmental consciousness), and terminal values (solidarity with future generations).

The traditional tool for gaining insight into consumers' means-end associations is ladderising (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). This technique consists of two phases. First, the interviewee is presented with a set of products – typically from the same product category – and the interviewee is encouraged to tell which attributes or features are of importance to the choice of products within this category.

In the second phase of the interview, the interviewer will take his point of departure in the attributes elicited in the first phase, and as to the attributes that the interviewee considers most relevant the interviewer will ask why they are important to her. For each answer, a new why-question is posed. By these sequences of why-questions the interviewee is encouraged to link concrete product attributes with product consequences and/or personal values. The sequence of why-questions will proceed until the interviewee cannot come up with any more answers. In this way, the interviewee is led up a ladder of answers of higher and higher levels of abstraction. The outcome of a ladderising interview will be a number of means-end chains of varying length. Ideally, the elicited means-end chains will link the very concrete attributes of the product with the abstract concepts of life values and goals. If more interviews are carried out, the means-end chains from all the interviews can be elaborated into a graphical representation that summarises the means-end associations of the whole group of interviewees. This graphical representation is typically referred to as a “hierarchical value map”.

The results of ladderising interviews may be applied in the work of finding solutions to marketing problems, e.g. the segmentation of consumers in terms of their value orientation within a product category, the assessment of consumers’ preferences and their preferred abstraction level for evaluating products and brands within a category, the assessment of consumers' evaluation of advertisements, or the development of advertising strategies (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988).

In a cognitive perspective, means-end chains can be understood as a model of how consumption-relevant knowledge is stored in the memory (Grunert, et al., 2001). When applying this perspective on consumption, the research task will appear as “the elicitation of consumers' cognitive structures” which is typically done by verbal
methods, and in the case of means-end analysis, the traditional method has been to conduct laddering interviews. It is the conceptualisation of these verbal methods – and of the laddering interviewing technique in particular – that will be the focus in the remainder of this paper.

The critical incident: a personal account of a laddering experience

Our reflections on the laddering interviewing technique take their point of departure in a critical incident that was experienced by the first author some years ago while working on a research project on food choice. An episode after an interview that, in my (first author) opinion, had been successful sowed a seed of doubt as to what interviewing is all about. A reconstruction based on notes and memories about the incident is provided in the following review:

To check whether my impression was warranted, I asked how she had experienced the interview, what it was like to answer my questions, if it had been easy or difficult to make associations, etc. She answered that doing the first chain of associations had been a little difficult, but then she had grasped it, and the next chains were really easy. Again, I felt happy and very confident about the interview design. She had not had any real mental struggles during the interview. But now she confided a few things. First, she said that, actually, she was probably not the right person for this interview. She really did not know much about shopping for food or cooking. Unlike most other families, it was her husband who took care of these things. So, the reflections represented in the means-end chains elicited were in fact somehow irrelevant to her. Then she told me that the reason why she had been able to answer my persistent why-questions so easily at all was that, incidentally, just one hour before this interview she had read an article in a woman’s magazine. It was an article about how young women like herself with a job, career, husband, and children experience many conflicts because of all the opposite considerations they try to take into account. She “admitted” that if she had not had this article fresh in memory, it certainly would have been difficult for her to feed me with appropriate answers to my questions, and she would probably just have been irritated by my probing into her life and personal values.

The experiences from this test interview inspired some initial considerations. Firstly, this woman had taken upon herself a role regarded as appropriate for a woman of her age and circumstances. And she had let this role do the talking instead of giving voice to her role of uninvolved housewife, which might have been more appropriate. Maybe, as to this particular woman, it would actually have been more appropriate to let her talk about why she did not spend time on shopping and cooking – and what else life could offer her. But then, as she said, the interview would have been useless to me, and it would not have been possible to evaluate the interview design. Thus, somehow, the woman could be said to have “made up” things, with the consequence that I had elicited irrelevant means-end chains.

Of course, strictly speaking, it could be said that she was making up ideas and providing false answers. However, the point is that her utterances in the interview should be seen as something else and more than just false representations of her cognitive structures. First, and foremost, during the interview, she had filled out the role assigned to her, i.e. she managed to present herself as a serious, reflecting and articulate consumer.

The interview as a cognitive task

Consequently, the laddering interview is not just to be conceived of as a neutral space, in which respondents report objectively on their reasons for certain consumption-related
actions. The act of reporting the consequences one seeks from consumption may be related to reasons and consequences that are far beyond those presented in the utterances themselves. And the act of accepting to participate in an interview may be related to reasons and consequences that are beyond the mere participation.

The considerations dominating in the process of making the interview described above are clearly in line with a conceptualisation of the process of asking and answering questions as a cognitive task. This conceptualisation has particularly emerged and gained a footing within survey research where it has supported the efforts of constructing “good” survey questionnaires, i.e. it helps to the understanding and countering of issues such as order effects, contrast effects and interviewer effects (Sudman et al., 1996).

Thus, viewing the interview as a cognitive task means that answering questions is a matter of interpreting the questions, searching memory for relevant information, integrating the retrieved information to an answer, and reporting that answer to the interviewer (Torangeau, 1984; Torangeau and Rasinski, 1988). When taking such a view, the primary interest will lie in formulating questions and providing cues that will activate the right parts of the memory structure – and only the right parts. Within the field of research into survey methodology, this cognitive view of the interview has been prevalent for some years now (Sudman et al., 1996).

It may be that survey questionnaires with their typically close-ended questions are particularly susceptible to a cognitive understanding. However, according to some authors, this understanding also lends itself to open-ended questions (Torangeau, 1984), i.e. questions typical of the qualitative interview. In line with this thinking and as mentioned in the introduction, Grunert and Grunert (1995) suggest that also the laddering interview be considered a cognitive task. Thus, in the laddering interview the respondent will have to interpret the interviewer’s why-questions, search the memory for information that will qualify as an answer to the why-question, integrate the retrieved information into an answer that fits into the format set by the interviewer, and verbally report the answer to the interviewer. It is, however, not difficult to imagine that also some editing will take place before the actual reporting.

An important task for the researcher will be to avoid the activation of memories irrelevant to the phenomenon in question and to avoid inducing cognitive processes of a problem-solving character, i.e. strategic processes. From a cognitive perspective, such strategic processes make up a threat against the validity of the research and it is therefore of the utmost importance that we try to safeguard against these threats. In the case of laddering interviews, it may loosen the cognitive constraints if the interviewee is encouraged to talk in a natural flow of speech without being disturbed by abrupt why-questions. This approach can also be referred to as “soft laddering” (Grunert, et al., 2001, p. 75).

Grunert et al. (2001) elaborate on potential problems in the execution of laddering interviews: the possible elicitation of irrelevant attributes, unclear situational dependence of the answers given by the respondent, multiple answers on single probes, and answers that have come about only by putting heavy pressure on the respondent. They point to a possible solution, namely that of letting the respondent produce a natural and redundant flow of speech.

However, this solution leads to another problem, namely that of extending the role of the interviewer who will have to interpret and generalise the answers given by the
respondent currently during the interview in order to distil ladders suitable for subsequent analysis. (Grunert et al., 2001, pp. 75–6). This is a problem, because this extended role will require cognitive processing by the interviewer, e.g. he would have to generalise episodic information to semantic, he would have to simplify elaborated accounts, and he will have to sort out levels of abstraction. The more this occurs, the more the interviewer will influence the results, which is just exactly the kind of influence we try to minimise by utilising more structured approaches to the collection of laddering data.

We seem to end up with a kind of paradox. That is, the price for reducing the restrictions on the respondent’s flow of speech, and thereby also reducing the amount of inappropriate cognitive processing on the respondent’s side, appears to be an increase in the amount of cognitive processing on the interviewer’s side. And vice versa, the price for reducing the mental processing on the interviewer’s side is an increase on the respondent’s side.

**Epistemological foundations of the interview as a cognitive task**

These efforts towards eliminating cognitive strategic processes in the laddering interview inscribe themselves in the larger project of eliminating that any distortion takes place when obtrusively enquiring into people’s lives and thoughts. Obtrusive that is what we are when we try to access consumers’ beliefs, attitudes and intentions as well as other cognitive phenomena (like, e.g. their means-end knowledge). Evidence abounds about obtrusive questioning and its ability to systematically shape and construct the answers provided (Liefeld, 2003).

However, it is in fact difficult to imagine how to study mental phenomena with un-obtrusive methods. Therefore, even though we do not really like it, the social interaction with the persons to be studied is a condition we have to live with – but awareness of and attempts to minimise the effects of this interaction should be promoted. Grunert et al. (2001) explicitly subscribe to this neo-positivist, nomological perspective, which is typical for most cognitive psychology.

Within this perspective, the interview is conceptualised as a stimulus-response event where the respondent is probed by questions, and the responses are taken to be indicators of otherwise unobservable phenomena such as mental association like means-end chains. Ideally, the object, in this case the respondent and his thoughts, should not be influenced at all by the measurement instruments and processes, i.e. the interviewer and his questions.

If this is how the interview is conceived of, then it becomes evident that research designers seek to minimise the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. In behavioural, experimental research, the interaction between investigator and participant is considered an important source of measurement errors. However, since a total elimination appears elusive, it is at least preferable that procedures are standardised across interviews so that the influence will be the same in all interviews.

In the case of laddering interviews this option is also available, but then we talk about so-called “hard laddering” where the elicitation of means-end chains is done, e.g. by means of a paper-and-pencil task guided by written instructions only. It should be mentioned though, that even without an interviewer being present when a respondent for instance fills out a survey questionnaire, many distortions like question order and response order effects exist.
Thus, the paradox is general for neo-positivism as well as specific for laddering. Asking questions and establishing interaction between interviewer and interviewee is a prerequisite for getting access to the minds of the consumers. However, this interaction is considered a distortion that should be minimised if not eliminated. Now, our point is that if this interaction is conceived of as no more than a disturbing factor, then the design and planning of interviews will build on wrong or at least inappropriate assumptions about human communication:

The received view of science pictures the inquirer as standing behind a one-way mirror, viewing natural phenomena as they happen and recording them objectively. The inquirer (when using proper methodology) does not influence the phenomena or vice versa. But evidence such as the Heisenberger uncertainty principle and the Bohr complementarity principle have shattered that ideal in the hard sciences [...]; even greater scepticism must exist for the social sciences. Indeed, the notion that findings are created through the interaction of inquirer and phenomenon (which, in the social sciences, is usually people) is often a more plausible description of the inquiry process than is the notion that findings are discovered through objective observation “as they really are, and as they really work” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 107, emphasis in the original)

We propose to discard the conception of the laddering-interview as a stimulus-response event and instead to take up another view of the interview, i.e. a view that has a much stronger focus on “what is going on” between the interviewer and the interviewee and that does not treat this “what is going on” as a disturbing factor. In a qualitative interview, the element of language production and its conversation-like character are so salient that we find it unreasonable to maintain the conceptualisation of the interview as solely a cognitive task. We do not contend that cognitive processes do not take place at all in the qualitative interview. What we doubt, is the viability of viewing the interview as a predominantly cognitive task rather than a discursive event.

**The laddering interview as a room for actions**

Typically, in the laddering interview the interviewees are encouraged to report on their reasons for certain consumption-related actions. The interviewer will attempt to register these – in one way or another – for later analysis. However, there may be many more actions and reasons at play in a laddering interview than those registered by the interviewer.

Such critical reflections are based, among others, on the later Wittgenstein’s insights that we, as human beings, when trying to understand meaning formation, are inclined to make two mistakes, namely to think that psychological constructs have some kind of inner, essential existence whose meaning is given once and for all and can be revealed through introspection. Meaning, according to Wittgenstein, is always a result of ongoing language games and not some stored fact in the mind that can be dug out for later use.

Austin (1962) builds on such reflections and points out that linguistic communication is always performative, it is always a speech act, and more significantly, that this act under certain circumstances is able to produce the state of affairs it describes. However, this performativity is deeply dependent on a high degree of conventionalism. That is, words can do things when there are pre-established conventions indicating the meaning and effect they are supposed to have.
Austin and Wittgenstein provide us with an understanding of the language that gives rise to a view of people’s opinions as “actions”; they do things. Furthermore, they point to the institutionalised setting, or in other words, the prevailing conventions in any situation as decisive for what can be performed through speech acts. This is crucial for the understanding of why laddering cannot be regarded as a neutral archaeological excavation of layers in the interviewee’s mind.

The participants in an interview are also “doing things”. Obviously, the interviewer “asks questions” and the interviewee answers by “asserting” things about her doings as a consumer. But beyond this, by his utterances, the interviewer both frames the situation in a certain way and assigns certain roles – or positions – to himself and to the interviewee. Within this frame and these roles the interviewer and interviewee can propose (other) utterances.

On the other hand, also the interviewee, with his utterances, creates a certain picture of himself, i.e. he constructs a certain identity with situational traits. Taking this perspective on the interview, focus will be on how certain words and ways of talking have certain effects or consequences.

The laddering interview as a social situation: a discursive approach

A contemporary off-shoot of the works of, among many others, Austin and Wittgenstein is the whole field of discourse analysis. An important issue in discourse analysis is the context in which the analyzed utterances are put forth. The context may be defined as a more or less structured social situation where the actors are given certain roles or positions to talk from. Discourse analysis, however, is not a clearly defined approach and there are many views on the role and nature of discourse in modern social sciences. As will be seen below, we will focus explicitly on the discourse psychology (more rightly described, in fact, as a discursive social psychology) of notably Potter and Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992).

In the laddering interview, there is a constant focus on the interviewee as an individual. For instance, with the way of asking why-questions it is all the time the interviewee’s choices and thoughts that are brought into focus. By asking what is important and why it is important – and at the same time expecting answers to this – the interviewee is constructed as a sovereign, independent and reflecting person who is capable of spontaneously putting forward accounts of these things. The interviewee is considered an active subject responsible for his own behaviour and thoughts.

There is, however, a subtle ambiguity in the interview as to this position of the interviewee: the interviewee is constructed as an individual person, a reflecting consumer who makes free choices – but this is a position the interviewee is more or less forced into. It is a forced identity where it is not legitimate not to be able to make reasons for your choices. An interviewee, who cannot or will not give reasons for his choices, does not fulfil the role assigned, and thus he does not live up to the expectations of the situation. In such a case the interview “collapses”.

The laddering interview draws on one of the core disciplines in rhetoric, namely argumentation. Argumentation involves enunciating sentences or series of sentences containing statements – with the purpose of supporting, making probable, justifying, or explaining other – statements (Antaki, 1994). This clearly applies to the laddering interview, where the series of why-questions encourage the interviewee to argue for her
statements and opinions. It should be noted though that in the laddering interview the argumentation as an activity is not unfolded completely. This is because the interviewer does not engage in any formulation of refutations or counter-arguments. In spite of this “one-sidedness” in the type of argumentation represented here, the means-end chains produced in the laddering interview can easily be conceived of as chains of arguments or reasons for the choices and preferences that the interviewee put forth in the beginning of the interview. The why-questions are bringing the interviewee into a position where he has to justify, explain and defend his previous statements. In other words: he has to argue.

So, the identity of a free consumer, who, during the interview, is capable of coming up with sensible answers in terms of chains of arguments, is a forced one. However, this does not make the answers of the interviewee less interesting. Even though the position is a forced one, the interviewee still has to “fill out” with statements that are culturally valid. Otherwise, the interview will collapse – again.

Hence, the produced means-end chains are to be considered chains of culturally valid reasons. From this perspective it is now interesting to observe which material these chains are made of, i.e. which discourses does the interviewee draw upon in order to construct and maintain his position as a sensible consumer? And at the same time, it becomes relevant to observe which other identities the interviewee constructs in order to support this position.

As we have already indicated, the first thing to note here is the conventionality of the consumer interview and the market research as an instituted practice. What we are addressing here is not the problem of conventionalism and conformism of marketing research as a practitioner-oriented tool. On the contrary, qualitative marketing research from the 1980s to the present day (as described in Gordon and Langmaid, 1988; Carson, et al., 2001; Belk, 2006, but also as practiced in many consulting agencies), has developed tremendously and seen the flourishing of very creative methods, notably more and more sophisticated questioning techniques, projective techniques, and new uses of ethnographic approaches. What we are talking about here, is rather the fact that along with the familiarization with and ubiquity of marketing research as a social phenomenon, certain “rules of the game” have tacitly instituted themselves in our minds, interviewers and interviewees alike. Thus, there are a number of a priori assumptions at stake on “both sides” of the interview concerning the roles to be filled. Indeed, it is common practice in the teaching of qualitative (interview) research techniques that the informant should initially be told not to play the role of a quiz participant, i.e. somebody who is supposed to come up with “correct answers”. But abandoning this role does not mean that there are not other roles at stake. There are a number of other discursive roles pertaining to meaningful conversation: taking research “seriously” being invited to let one’s voice “be heard” for the benefit of the market, other consumers, society…

Finally, it is worth noting the fundamental premise that one can establish meaningful and relatively simple causal relations between various assertions – in other words that it is meaningful to ask such “why” questions. That this is a meaningful task is dependent on the existence of a “modern” secularised individual who is not subject to transcendental powers and act and judge relatively freely within the frames given by the socio-historical context. The usage of discourse analysis for
an understanding of the laddering interview points to fairly profound “truths” about the interview situation.

The interviewees’ use of discourses
Discourse psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) has been developed as a critique of and challenge to the cognitive social psychology. In contrast to cognitivism, where linguistic utterances are seen as representations of the speaker’s underlying cognitive structures, discourse psychology sees the same utterances as elements in the speaker’s construction of the world and as parts of the speaker’s social actions. So, in discourse psychology the focus is on how people construct themselves and the reality in which they live, including other people. However, Wetherell and Potter (1988, p. 168) do not talk so much about “discourse” but prefer the term “interpretative repertoires”:

Repertoires can be seen as the building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena. Any particular repertoire is constituted out of a restricted range of terms used in specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. These terms are generally derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signalled by certain tropes or figures of speech.

A repertoire is a resource the speaker may use for constructing versions of reality. Repertoires are flexible in the sense that their usage varies with the different social circumstances and different interests that are at work. Hence, it should not be expected that people are consistent in their use of repertoires; rather, it should be expected that it varies as it is assumed that they will draw on different repertoires in different situations. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987) in the identification of repertoires in a text/transcription, the analyst should look for:

- patterns in the data, i.e. differences and similarities in the content and form of utterances; and
- actions, i.e. what the speaker is trying to do – and the consequences of his way of speaking.

In the following, we will discuss another example from a laddering interview and try to make an analysis with point of departure in Potter and Wetherell’s ideas about repertoires. It should be noted that a comprehensive analysis would take up far more space than is available here.

I: You said, that it was important to you, that the food is not “industrialised” – why is that?

IP: Well, you never know what they do to the food and what they put in it. Alright, it says on the label what additives they have used, but who can understand all the strange words that are there? Then they use all sorts of additives and preservatives and chemicals...

I: Why is it you don’t want these things in your food – why is it important?

IP: First, of all I find it disgusting. And then you risk all sorts of allergic reactions. And it’s especially the kids. It’s no wonder, why so many kids have allergic reactions nowadays, when they put so many chemicals in the food. It’s difficult, but you have to try the best you can to protect your children from too much dirt in the food:

I: So, it’s in order to avoid your children having allergic reactions, that you also avoid food with additives?
IP: Yes.

I: Why is it important to you, that your children do not have allergic reactions?

IP: Well, I suppose it’s your damn duty as a mother to avoid your kids getting ill. Of course you cannot protect them against everything in the whole world, but some things you actually can control. For instance, this thing about additives. And here the kids hardly can defend themselves.

I: So, it’s your responsibility that the children don’t get allergy?

IP: Yes, indeed!

I: What does it mean to take on this responsibility – why is that important to you?

IP: It means everything! If I don’t take on that responsibility, I don’t live up to my responsibility as a mother.

I: What happens if you don’t live up to that – why is it important?

IP: I would get really bad consciousness. If I gave something to my kids that would make them ill, I would feel like the worst mom in the world... There are certain standards... I guess any mother feels like that...

What is going on here? In the construction of the foodstuffs, the woman draws on a toxicological discourse (food-as-poison). The food is constructed as dangerous – or at least potentially dangerous; it could be harmful, not least to the children’s health. The children are constructed as more or less defenceless victims who need protection against the dangerous foods. The woman is constructing herself as a responsible mother who takes seriously the task of protecting the kids against the harmful food products. This task is described as more or less given, i.e. it is her duty to live up to some standards, that are defined as universally valid, since “any mother” would do this. The woman is constructing herself as a person with a strong sense of duty.

In this short sequence, several discourses – or interpretative repertoires – are at work: food-as-poison, children-as-defenceless and mother-as-protector. In this “cross field” the choice of foods almost becomes an act of war. One of the additional, social consequences of this way of talking seems to be a criminalization of the food industry and an infantilization of the children. A comprehensive analysis would of course, include more sequences and more interviews, so that more – and more nuanced – descriptions of discourses could be obtained. Thus, it is very likely, that the same woman in other sequences in the same interview would construct the food, the children and herself in ways very different from the ones presented here, e.g. she may talk about food as containing important vitamins and minerals that the children need in order to grow up and get strong (food-as-building bricks). Just for comparison’s sake, a traditional means-end analysis of this sequence most probably would have resulted in a means-end chain very much like this:

... no additives – protect children from illness/allergic reactions with children – protecting children – being a responsible mother – good consciousness.
Evaluation of laddering in a discursive perspective

Even though it may not be in the spirit of discourse analysis, the discursive perspective seems to be very relevant in the realm of market analysis – especially when we consider the analysis of consumers in late modern society (Giddens, 1991). Consumers here are often accused of being fickle and “chameleon-like”. They soon take on one identity, soon another, which makes it difficult to divide them into stable segments. Here, the discourse analysis becomes relevant because it does not try to categorise the consumers, but rather tries to identify the positions between which they “float around”.

In this perspective, the companies may use the discourse analysis as an instrument for listening to the “humming of voices” in the market place. And as a communicating actor in this market place, the company itself could try to take in or establish a position in this “humming”.

If we are to evaluate the laddering technique in terms of its abilities as such a listening instrument, we must, however, conclude, that it is probably not the very best instrument we can get. Firstly, the interviewees are very much “locked” into the identity as sensible and independent – if not rational – consumers. There are indeed other ways of constructing oneself as a consumer, e.g. “the victimised consumer” or “the exploring consumer”. These other identities do not have any voice in the laddering interview – and hence there is no opportunity to listen to them either. Secondly, in the laddering interview, the interviewee is to present his arguments to a stranger. If we consider the major part of our consumption-related actions, these take place in the immediate social network in everyday-life. The interests at stake here may be very different from those in the meeting with a (perfectly) strange interviewer. Hence, what we hear will not necessarily be the arguments that consumers use in their close social networks but those they use in consumer interviews. Thirdly, the interviewees are not allowed to fully unfold their arguments, something which has to do with the role of the interviewer. It is right that the sequences of why-questions will stimulate the interviewee to construct short or long chains of arguments and reasons. However, in the typical laddering interview, it is not the task of the interviewer to go into a dialogue – or into clinch – with the interviewee in order to make him explain in which situations he may reason in one way, and in which he may reason in another way. Hence, the possibility to identify actual discursive patterns in the data is to a large degree reduced. Finally, by constantly focusing on the interviewee’s own choices and preferences (“why is it important to you . . .?”) we lose the possibility of letting the interviewee distance himself from other positions, i.e. other consumers’ choices and preferences. If the interviewees were allowed to present such dissociations, it would probably be easier to identify the repertoires and their variations. This idea is supported by Douglas (1996) who claims that for consumers it is much easier to formulate what we do not like rather than what we do like.

Hence, if we evaluate the laddering technique on the premises of discourse analysis, we can point to certain weaknesses in the material that it is possible to collect by means of this technique. Under all circumstances the material will be atypical for the discourse analyst. This is so, firstly, because the discourse analyst normally will use “natural discourses” in terms of everyday conversations and already existing texts (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, p. 127). Secondly, if the discourse analyst himself wishes to take part in the data production, this will often be in the form of more traditional,
qualitative interviews with a much wider range of open questions (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, p. 131).

The virtue of the laddering technique must then be that it is a relatively quick and structured way of making interviews. And in spite of the above mentioned objections, it is still possible to work up a data material that could be subjected to analysis. This material may – or may not – be easier for the researcher to work with and interpret than material with longer interviews and longer sequences. An important point is though that in the interpretation it is essential to consider the conditions under which the data were generated as these conditions contribute to the meaning that can be attributed to the data.

Conclusion

We have tried to establish a critical investigation of the laddering interviewing technique based on our own empirical experience as well as a more theoretically-based critique drawing mainly on discourse psychology. Our conclusion is that while laddering as a technique may be able to elicit a network of associations from the consumer’s mind, in the form of streams of what we could call “motivating functions” it is problematic to confound this elicitation with an “objectively” existing cognitive structure.

The laddering technique is highly sensitive to situational circumstance. Situational effects include both the affective state of the respondent (Huber et al., 2004) but also, as we have demonstrated here, the social environment and especially public and mediated discourses. These cognitive structures, then, are not “unbiased glimpses into the consumers mind” but a particular and situational performance of a social discourse.

It is the problem of laddering, as with many other questioning techniques, that the interviewee is not “held responsible” for his answers. There are no corrections to the value systems proposed by the interviewee. In that sense, laddering may serve a purpose of unfolding those rationales (or rationalisations) that occur consciously to an interviewee being forced into the discursive role of a laddering informant. This may be very valid for the researcher in terms of discovering personal and mono-causal chains of relations, oftentimes reflecting socially instituted and sanctioned legitimacies. The discourse-based researcher, however, is fully aware that what is elicited through laddering is exactly that; not a direct correlate with the interviewee’s cognitive or non-cognitive categories used in other situations, e.g. purchase decision making.

So we conclude that the laddering technique may be instrumental for the researcher to construct a relatively quick and accessible overview over cognitive linkages between products and life world. And with its scientific foundations in a set of assumptions concerning cognitive processes, the technique as such is more valid than many other “quick-and-dirty” solutions used in commercial marketing research. Furthermore, when it comes to practitioner-oriented marketing research, this usefulness is further supported by the technique’s relative simplicity, both in terms of approach and overview of results. In this context, where relatively accessible, if not simplified, results rather than scientific accuracy may often be the order of the day, laddering has its advantages. The problem arises predominantly from a too rigorous interpretation of the validity of the results, if they are taken as an accurate reflection of a context-independent cognitive structure. In other words, laddering as an elicitation technique can be OK, whereas means-end chain theory becomes more dubious from the discursive psychology perspective used here.
As we have seen, a purely cognitive understanding of the interview does not take into consideration the situational and institutional context of the interview. The question is whether it can do that? As we have seen, laddering as an interview process is not exempt from critique and suggestions for amelioration from its own ranks. Our critique in a way saves the laddering technique as one way of eliciting a certain type of information from an interviewee, but does so at the expense of the more fundamental cognitive approach to interviewing situations, and in particular the theory of means-end chains.

References


Further reading

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