Reflections on collaboration in interpretive consumer research

The VOICE Group[1]
VOicing International Consumption Experiences

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges and opportunities of collaboration in interpretive consumer research.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews literature on research teamwork, particularly on qualitative and international projects. It also provides an account of research collaboration on an interpretive research project across four countries, involving eight researchers.

Findings – Despite the cult of individualism in academic life, most articles in leading marketing journals are now written by multi-author teams. The process and implications of research collaboration, particularly on qualitative and international projects, have received little attention within the marketing literature. Qualitative collaborations call for another layer of reflexivity and attention to the politics and emotions of teamwork. They also require the negotiation of a social contract acceptable to the group and conducive to the emergence of different perspectives throughout the research process.

Originality/value – While issues surrounding the researcher-research participant relationship are well explored in the field, this paper tackles an issue that often remains tacit in the marketing literature, namely the impact of the relationships between researchers. The paper draws on accounts of other research collaborations as well as authors’ experiences, and discusses how interpersonal and cross-cultural dynamics influence the work of interpretive research teams.

Keywords Consumer research, Research methods, Women, Team working, Cross-cultural studies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Although interpretive research highlights the social construction of knowledge, the literature has tended to focus on relationships between researchers and the researched. As a result:

We have not [...] adequately addressed the relationship of researcher to researcher and the role researchers’ interactions with other researchers play in the interpretive process and the co-construction of knowledge (Wasser and Bresler, 1996, p. 5).

This shortcoming has been noted in disciplines such as education and health studies, prompting some insightful and constructive accounts of research team working. These have often been offered by multi-disciplinary qualitative teams, where one or more authors had a professional interest in interpersonal communications and relationships (Liggett et al., 1994; Barry et al., 1999; Hall et al., 2005). The marketing literature, however, is largely silent on this issue, even though multi-author collaborations are now the norm (Schroeder et al., 1995; Brown et al., 2006).

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This paper presents an interim report on our experiences of collaborating in an academic context where multi-author teams are common, but where issues of research teamwork remain largely unexplored. As eight marketing academics from five different countries researching consumption experiences in the transition to motherhood, we have had cause to focus on the challenges and opportunities of researcher-researcher relationships. Researching a topic that crosses the boundary between our professional and private lives (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998), and doing that as part of a larger researcher/author team than the norm within our discipline, has engendered a heightened sense of reflexivity in undertaking this project. It has led us to reflect on the situatedness of interpretive consumer research, in terms of each researcher’s relationship with the research topic, participants and co-researchers, and within particular social, cultural and institutional settings.

The paper begins by acknowledging the cult of individualism in academic life (Barry et al., 1999). It then offers a brief description of our ongoing research project, before discussing the issues we face and the choices we have made in working together. We relate our choices to accounts of other academic collaborations amongst health and social scientists, and to common practice within the management and marketing disciplines. Research collaborations are not the sole preserve of academics, however; qualitative marketing research practitioners are increasingly likely to find themselves working in larger, cross-disciplinary and/or international teams. By exploring aspects of research teamwork and sharing our experiences of collaboration, we seek to stimulate reflection, discussion and effective practice concerning these important but often invisible aspects of research work.

The myth of the lone researcher

Like the powerful myth of the “solitary subject” in consumer research (Ritson and Elliott, 1999), the lone researcher looms large in academics’ collective imagination. Unlike our natural science colleagues, few social scientists have been trained to work in a team environment. PhD programmes typically train researchers to work individually or within the supervisor-supervisee dyad. Rarely, however, do they discuss or offer practical experience of researching in larger groups, let alone reflect on the requirements, costs and benefits of working in a team with individuals from different cultural, social or philosophical backgrounds. Thus, the socialization of PhD students in social sciences represents “an extreme example of isolation in the search of knowledge” (Wasser and Bresler, 1996, p. 5), creating the template for “lone scribes sequestered in individual offices” as their careers develop (McGinn et al., 2005, p. 562). When academics come together to work on a project, then:

At issue are professional values of autonomy, individualism, and self-reliance which run deep, and possibly counter to collaboration and commitment to team goals (Delaney and Ames, 1993, p. 9).

Although this comment referred to multidisciplinary research teams, the “cult of individualism in academic life” (Barry et al., 1999, p. 28) means that it resonates within as well as between disciplines. In particular, undertaking qualitative fieldwork is generally seen as a “solo, even very isolating” process, and managing qualitative data is presented as an idiosyncratic activity (Richards, 1999, p. 7). Individualism does not fit well with the contemporary research environment, however, where research
collaboration across international, institutional and/or disciplinary boundaries is strongly encouraged and becoming increasingly common (Bournois and Chevalier, 1998; Tishelman et al., 1999; Thomas et al., 2000; Peterson, 2001; Hall et al., 2005).

The move from solitary or two-person exercises to larger research teams is not only a matter of scale, but also – and importantly – one of scope (Milliman and von Glinow, 1998). Research in groups cannot simply be seen as an accrual of individual knowledge, but rather will be radically different in process and outcomes. At a basic level, the shift to larger research teams brings differences in group dynamics and power, quite like those occurring in work groups in other settings. As Mountz et al. (2003) point out, team research introduces an additional layer of relationships to the theoretical exploration, field work, data analysis and writing up, potentially enhancing and certainly complicating the process of knowledge creation.

Interpretive consumer research has been dominated by studies undertaken individually or in small teams of two or three (Thompson, 1996; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Hogg et al., 2004). The most prominent exception to this is the iconic 1986 Consumer Behavior Odyssey by Russell Belk and colleagues (Belk, 1991). While Belk and Melanie Wallendorf were present throughout this epic journey, almost two dozen other researchers joined them at stages on their way from one coast of the USA to the other. However, the Odyssey followed a loose research agenda, with individual researchers pursuing topics of particular interest to them, using a range of naturalistic research methods. Research was then written up individually and in small teams, in journal articles and a volume edited by Belk.

Within the marketing discipline more broadly, several studies have traced the growth in multi-author publications in recent decades. The proportion of single-authored papers by North American scholars published in the top three marketing journals decreased from 82 to 31 percent between 1960-1964 and 1980-1984, for example, while the proportion with three or more authors increased from 2.5 to 19 percent over the same period (Fields and Swayne, 1988). More recently, Brown et al. (2006) report that multi-authored papers accounted for around 75 percent of the articles in the 19 leading marketing journals between 1991 and 2000. Three-author papers accounted for just over 25 percent of this output, and four or more authors were responsible for just under 6 percent. Whilst many of these multi-authored publications may be drawn from multidisciplinary studies, the marketing literature offers very little discussion of co-authorship issues (Schroeder et al., 1995). Seeking to stimulate reflection and discussion in this area, we first provide a brief outline of the ongoing project which brought this research team together.

**Background: origins and nature of the research project**

This paper draws on our experiences to date of undertaking an ongoing interpretive study of consumption experiences in the transition to motherhood in different countries. The project began when Andrea Prothero obtained a one-year fellowship to research this topic and invited seven other marketing academics, who were also mothers, from five different nationalities to join her in this research project. We have now been working together as a team since September 2005, collaborating on research design, data generation and initial data analysis. At the time of writing, we have worked together to produce eight journal articles (including this one), five conference papers, and one working paper.
Our initial research questions concerned how consumption was intertwined with first time, expectant mothers’ transition to a different family role and market segment in different cultures. We were particularly interested in the formation and maintenance of their identities as mothers, and how they navigated a course through discourses of the “good mother” (Prothero, 2002; Miller, 2005). As data generation progressed, we also became interested in the transition to motherhood as a distinctive site for exploring the acquisition of gifts and the circulation of consumption-related advice and second-hand goods within social networks.

Consistent with previous studies outside the marketing discipline (Oakley, 1979; Bailey, 1999; Miller, 2005), we chose as our participants women who were pregnant with their first child, rather than those involved in adoption, fostering, or other forms of mothering. The project began with each researcher writing an introspective account of her own transition to motherhood. That exercise was intended to highlight cultural differences and insights related to the research topic, but as discussed below, it was a pivotal point in the evolution of the research team and of the project.

Each researcher (or research pair for countries where two members of the team were living) then interviewed 4-6 mothers prior to and after the birth of the child. Each mother was asked to keep a diary and take photographs of significant baby-related purchases and acquisitions. These documents allowed the first interview (late in the third trimester) to be tailored to the experiences of each expectant mother. Drawing on phenomenological interviewing practice (Thompson et al., 1989), questions took the form of “tell me about feeling confused when you were buying the pram”. Second interviews (typically 3-4 months after the birth) focused on post-birth experiences, and how their thoughts and feelings about identities, relationships and consumption had changed since the first interview. Our sample (currently six mothers each in Denmark and Ireland, four each in the UK and the USA) was obtained by snowballing methods. Consistent with other studies using a similar strategy (Bailey, 1999; Miller, 2005), this led to a mainly white, middle-class, heterosexual set of participants, in the mid-1920s to late-1930s age bracket.

In the following sections, we offer an account of our group composition and working practices, relating our choices and experiences to those discussed in other papers on research teamwork, especially on qualitative projects. Many of these papers have addressed issues of team formation, composition, structure and process, as well as the questions of authorship, and the remainder of this paper is structured accordingly.

The research team

Team formation

Reflecting on their collaboration, Liggett et al. (1994, p. 78) observe that “identifying the right blend of colleagues to carry out the research was probably the most important decision made.” In their case, the principal investigator drew on his professional network to recruit people he saw as able to work together and enjoy spending time together as well as having the knowledge, skills and motivation to contribute to the project. For our motherhood project, the team created by Andrea Prothero was based on her knowledge of each member’s published work, some previous professional collaborations, and her broader research network. The following e-mail excerpt indicates her original rationale for the team’s composition:
I obviously know everyone, and I think this group would be great intellectually; I also feel everyone would really gel with each other and we might have some fun, as well as becoming involved in an interesting, international research project. For me the fact that we are all mothers is also important and I have a strong sense that this will impact in some way, although at this stage I'm not exactly sure how [...] (A.P.).

Her decision to draw only on mothers for the research team is consistent with feminist standpoint epistemology, which states that researchers who have experienced the phenomenon of interest will be better equipped to study it (Brooks, 2006). Although some may contest this position, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2007) states:

Many claims to epistemic privilege on behalf of particular perspectives with respect to certain questions are commonplace and uncontroversial. Auto mechanics are generally in a better position than auto consumers to know what is wrong with their cars. Practical experience in fulfilling the social role of the mechanic grounds the mechanic's epistemic privilege, which lays a claim to greater reliability than the judgments of auto consumers.

She contacted all members of the group directly to initially ask their interest in the research project. Initially, she was the only person who knew everyone, although the remainder of the team had some personal and professional connections with at least a few other members. We were all mothers of young children as well as marketing academics, and our shared identities made us enthusiastic about exploring a consumer research topic that would bridge our personal and professional lives. These direct and indirect connections and our shared investment in the research topic created an initial atmosphere of mutual trust and respect (Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999). This was tempered however by the knowledge that we were beginning with “very limited familiarity with each other’s methods, styles and modes of data management” (Hall et al., 2005, p. 397).

Initial research proposals tend to be written for a team rather than by a team (Richards, 1999), and this was the case here. At the team’s first meeting (attended by seven of the eight members, reflecting the difficulties of international collaboration), it was agreed that the initial research proposal, for which Andrea Prothero had been awarded a one-year research fellowship, would form the basis of our work. Another team member suggested, however, that given the international nature of the group, we should begin by making explicit the cultural and institutional context in which we each became mothers. This had a far-reaching impact on the team, both in extending ownership of the research design and in leading us down a more introspective, reflexive path. As Miller (1998, p. 60) observes, a qualitative researcher’s autobiography is “a continuous and dynamic thread running through all stages of the research process.” This means that:

To be reflexive is not only to be self-conscious, but to be sufficiently self-conscious to know what aspects of self it is necessary to reveal to an audience so that they are able to understand the process employed, as well as the resultant product, and to know that the revelation itself is purposive, intentional, and not merely narcissistic or accidentally revealing (Ruby, 1980, p. 55).

In keeping with this principle, qualitative researchers typically keep some form of personal reflexive journal during the course of a project. Qualitative research undertaken in a team places further demands on researchers, however, calling for “both individual and group reflexivity, with a dialogue between the two” (Barry et al., 1999, p. 31). In order to achieve this, these authors supplemented individual reflexive
diaries, field notes, memos and team discussions with two written reflexive projects. First, they provided a reflexive account of their individual orientation towards the project, and second, each member offered his or her own definitions of key terms and concepts arising from preliminary analysis.

In our case, in addition to individual field notes and reflections, e-mail correspondence within the group served to foster reflexivity. Writing introspective accounts of each member’s transition to motherhood was intended to encourage reflexivity and cultural sensitivity in data generation and analysis. From a group perspective, it also served to highlight differences in our family backgrounds and histories, and our experiences of motherhood. This exercise represented a significant milestone in moving from a loosely connected network to a team bound by trust and commitment to the research project. Writing and sharing such personal accounts, expressing the joy, excitement, anxiety, and sometimes the boredom and frustration of first-time motherhood, made each of us feel vulnerable in some respects. Reading each others’ accounts helped foster understanding between the group members and afforded us a heightened sense of empathy, responsibility and moral obligation towards our research participants. This is evident in emails to the group expressing anxiety about how others would interpret aspects of their own introspection. For example:

Please find attached my motherhood introspection. I am unsure as to whether this will make sense to anyone; I did not expect to write about the issues I ended up writing about. The other thing I noticed quite strongly was my awareness of an “audience” and concomitant “impression management” (S.G.).

I think writing our SPIs would have been an invaluable experience for us even if we junked all the accounts immediately after reading them, as there is a real fear of exposing deeply private things and concerns about perhaps losing control over how the information would be used: there are certainly parts of my account that I would feel very uncomfortable about seeing as a quote in a paper, for example. This kind of experience can only help us understand more of what we are asking of our informants and what our responsibilities are in terms of treating their experiences and feelings with the utmost respect (S.O’D.).

It was also noted by members of the group that our introspections revealed aspects of our partners’ and families’ lives, and this served to highlight reflexivity in recognising how our own involvement straddled public and private realms and brought particular tensions and responsibilities with it. There was also considerable discussion about finding our author/narrator voice. In writing the introspections, some chose to write using pseudonyms, for instance, and there was also a mix of first and third person accounts. Finding our own voices was a difficult process for many in the research group and the differences in both style and content allowed reflection on both our differences and similarities. One team member wrote:

It did take me longer to get started on this than I had thought. I imagined it would be quite straightforward. The issues were finding an author’s voice or a style to present. I found initially that I was far too concise and really provided little more than a list [...] I settled on writing much more in the style of a flow of consciousness. This allowed me to remember the details, the feelings and thoughts I had at the time. This was also much more emotionally taxing than I had thought [...] So there is no real order and this is very much my story [...] I am aware that identifying it as a flow of consciousness or as a story is also a little untrue.
I was deeply aware of the purpose that I was writing for. As such there is possibly more reflection than would normally occur in a story or in an interview (A.D.).

These early exchanges and reflection on our introspections made it easier to share the often personal and intimate data provided by our research participants, since we were confident that other team members would accord the same respect to “our” research participants’ accounts, as we had to our own individual writings.

**Team composition**

Is it useful or wise to look for diversity or is it more appropriate to look for a set of homogenous researchers who bring to the group a common background and one that is known in advance? (Sauquet and Jacobs, 1998, pp. 167-8).

Many published accounts of research collaboration are based on multidisciplinary teams which had to negotiate very different perspectives as they worked through issues of research design, fieldwork, analysis and writing (Delaney and Ames, 1993; Martinez-Salgado, 1999; Barry et al., 1999). Some of these teams combined senior researchers with less well established academics, graduate students or contract researchers, calling for reflection on group dynamics in the face of such status differences, not to mention levels of job security (Tishelman et al., 1999; Mountz et al., 2003; Hall et al., 2005).

On the face of it, our team lacks the diversity evident in such accounts. We are all white, middle-class, Western marketing academics, with similar levels of seniority and permanent positions within Schools of Business or Management. Allied to these professional similarities, we are all in established partnerships with the fathers of our young children. Despite this, we argue that diversity is a feature of our team, in terms of culture, academic perspective, and personal experiences, and that each of these dimensions poses particular challenges and opportunities.

**Cultural differences**

Our team comprises one American, one German, two Danish, two British and two Irish researchers. We live in four countries – the USA, UK, Ireland and Denmark, with three of us living outside our native land. Many international research teams require some members to write and communicate in a non-native language. For international qualitative collaborations, however, such challenges run deeper, since entire interview transcripts may need to be translated, and at least part of the analysis may be conducted in a language not native to all participants. As our Danish and German team members were fluent in English, the language issue was not discussed explicitly at the outset. It was simply taken for granted that the Danish interviews would be translated into English, and that analysis would be undertaken in English. Other, more subtle linguistic challenges were also present in the group. The “native” English speakers were divided by a common language, since our team members (and those we interviewed) drew on American, Irish, Scottish and Welsh idioms. For example, our American teammate “cringed” at British and Irish references to the “teats” on babies’ bottles. She referred to these as “nipples,” which they found just as embarrassing. While unavoidable, the use of multiple languages represents a challenge, especially during data analysis. More positively, however, it encourages clarity of expression and discussion about the nuances of particular terms, both of
which should improve the quality of analysis and output. Two extracts from team members’ notes illustrate this point:

The prolific use of the term “bump” in the UK is contrasted with the absence of any commonly used term for the belly in the US. This could illustrate the still hidden nature of pregnancy in the US vs UK (S.D.).

When there are references to maternity/paternity leave arrangements in my interviews I feel compelled to explain them in more detail when I translate the interviews – because these arrangements appear to be so different from those in other countries – and because I think they frame so much of the way of thinking […] (E.S).

Of course, having members of multiple nationalities and/or cultural backgrounds in an interpretive research group creates challenges and opportunities well beyond purely linguistic ones. As McCracken (1986) has highlighted, culture constitutes the world by supplying it with meaning; it serves as both lens and blueprint, shaping how the world is seen as well as how it is made. Motherhood, as an institution and as a lived experience, is certainly shaped by culture, and there were marked differences in practices and norms between our respective countries. For example, 64 percent of mothers in the US and 71 percent in the UK (National Breastfeeding Campaign, 2003) breastfeed their babies, while according to the World Health Organisation, Ireland has one of the lowest rates in Europe. In contrast, 98-99 percent of Danish mothers breastfeed when they leave the hospital and at four months the rate remains around 60 percent (Sundhedsstyrelsen – www.sst.dk). Cultural differences were also highlighted by an apparently simple e-mail request to the team when one member was translating an interview:

In Denmark you can buy a special comb at the pharmacy. It’s for combing your baby in order to get rid of this special kind of baby dandruff (the yellow/brownish crust that often grows on their head while they are infants). In Denmark it is called “arp-kam.” Translated directly: “arp”-comb. Does that ring a bell? Or is this a special Danish phenomenon?” (T.T.).

One of the British researchers replied that to her knowledge in the UK and Ireland this technique was frowned upon by health professionals, for fear that such combing would cause infections, so parents were advised to simply wait until this “dandruff” cleared naturally. Thus, a simple translation of a word highlighted differences in parenting activities, health systems, and the availability of babycare products.

We hoped that juxtaposing the understandings of cultural “insiders” and cultural “outsiders” in relation to the data we generated would offer insights into different experiences of motherhood-related consumption across our four countries. Our introspective accounts of our own transition to motherhood sought to make explicit our respective cultural frames and traditions, and they undoubtedly alerted us to comments, practices or opinions that were alien to us. Several examples of this are drawn from our personal research diaries. Thus, a Danish team member noted her unfamiliarity with the term “yummy mummy” used by British and American team members and also observed that:

[…] the way doctors and midwives organise and collaborate in my own country, was certainly not universal. I found out that there were other ways and that there were other agendas around this issue[…]
At the same time, our e-mail communications also highlighted the diversity of views within countries and cultures.

Academic perspectives
Discussing the challenges facing their international research team, Sauquet and Jacobs (1998, p. 174) observe that:

[p]aradigmatic positions are not just intellectual convictions which can be stripped off after leaving the university building. They have a highly binding character for the respective researcher [...] In this respect cross-cultural teams such as ours are twice as painful: the members had to question both their cultural and their academic positions.

Our research team operates under a loose interpretive label, with individual inflections ranging from social constructionist to feminist. Whilst these are not incompatible, the range of perspectives introduces a level of reflexivity into the research process that may not naturally surface in projects conducted by one or two researchers. The diversity of the group members’ research interests beyond this project added another analytical layer to the study. Group members’ familiarity with other research areas (including relationship marketing, advertising, gift-giving, marketing’s societal impact and many others) allow emergent themes and issues to be considered from many different theoretical perspectives and related to quite different research contexts. For instance, the discussions in a recent conference paper (Davies et al., 2007) of new mothers escaping the market was informed by a team members’ research on consumer resistance, whilst discussion of used goods passed on to new mothers as forms of inalienable wealth drew on another’s reading of literature related to consumption symbolism in bereavement.

The challenge of working from a range of philosophical and theoretical traditions can be seen as a unique opportunity in offering an additional layer of perspectives to the issues encountered in the field. If cast in a positive light, the question no longer is whether one can possibly conduct the “same” interviews if coming from a feminist or from a social constructionist perspective, or look at the “same” data in the “same” light. Instead, we echo the stance of Tishelman et al. (1999, p. 54), in that:

We chose not to attempt to minimize our differences but to stand firm in an interpretation of an interview situation as a social situation in which meaning is contextually grounded and jointly negotiated.

Personal experiences
As Thomas et al. (2000, p. 819) note, “variation in the experience histories of researchers on the team broaden the available perspectives and maximize the potential interpretations of observed behaviors.”

Although all of us are white, middle class mothers, in relatively longstanding marriages or partnerships with the fathers of our children, our introspections revealed some diversity in terms of our upbringing and different paths to and through motherhood. Indeed, as one of the group commented:

In my naivety I had thought that my own way of becoming a mother was pretty close to that of all others — and that others’ experiences would be some sort of straightforward variation over the same theme. I found out it was not so! Some of their concerns and worries had been in
completely different corners than my own [...] It really opened my eyes also for what I could meet in my interviews (E.S.).

Our families of origin differed in terms of size, wealth, health and harmony, for example. We have had different experiences of fertility, pregnancy and childbirth, and for some of us these memories are more recent than others; the time elapsed since giving birth ourselves ranges from several months to six years, and the eldest of our children is ten. We also have varied experiences, values and concerns as parents, for example, over issues such as weaning, immunization, co-sleeping or the use of disposable nappies (or diapers). We believe that airing and sharing these experiences prepared us for a range of interview situations, and also allowed us to interpret our data from a range of perspectives. For many of us our introspections and diaries comment on the importance of openness that developed within the group, about infertility, miscarriages, or other family tragedies, for example. Encountering and responding to such disclosures within the group helped us anticipate or deal with occasions where research participants talked about such experiences, as discussed below. Bringing these experiences out into the open from the outset also reduced the tension that could otherwise have existed when team discussion turned to literature or interviews which referred to such problems.

Team structure and processes
Exploring the “murky process of team research,” Mountz et al. (2003, p. 32) show how research group relationships are inevitably embedded in:

[...] cloudy fields of power influenced but not exhausted by sex, age, professional rank, language ability, institutional affiliation, job status, access to resources, time and manner of entry into the project, and research and life experiences.

While management and marketing research have seen some successful cross-cultural team co-operations – Hofstede’s value research groupings and more currently the Contemporary Marketing Practice Group (www.cmp.auckland.ac.nz) come to mind – many of these have been “nomothetic” (Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999), led by a core member or members who designed a research methodology to be replicated in other countries. The literature on national and international academic research collaborations tends to recommend (or assume) a clear hierarchy within the team (Milliman and von Glinow, 1998; Bournois and Chevalier, 1998; Turati et al., 1998). Such hierarchies have been criticized for creating and maintaining a “politics of difference” (Young, 1990), however, since any structure where power is wielded will exclude certain groups.

Several research groups have documented their attempts to break away from this hierarchical model (McGinn et al., 2005; Mountz et al., 2003). Since knowledge claims are embedded in social and political processes, a democratic structure facilitates the emergence of different perspectives that is so crucial in interpretive research. Such an approach, however, brings a fresh set of challenges and opportunities. How can a democratic group structure accommodate, for instance, divergent professional agendas and career imperatives? How can it account for differences in knowledge, experiences and access to data while simultaneously empowering each group member? Can a research project afford to include all group members in decision making and communication, and if so how can this be achieved?
Borrowing Lindblom’s (1965) concept of “coordination through mutual adjustment,” Hall et al. (2005, p. 395) describe how their research team was characterized by the flow of information and decision making “between and among independent entities engaged in a joint enterprise without imposing central co-ordination.” A very similar approach emerged within this research project. The issue of team structure was dealt with early and explicitly. Although Andrea Prothero acted as the primary point of contact and facilitator of the project, for the first year (primarily because she had “established” the group and was also on a research sabbatical devoted to the project), the group took a democratic shape from the outset, with no formal project leader. An explicit social contract (Peterson, 2001) was agreed at the first face-to-face meeting in October 2005: the team was to be governed by equity, inclusiveness, tolerance and openness. This is not to say that group harmony was prioritized above all, since this could lead us into the “consensus collusion” trap identified by Reason (1981, p. 244), whereas divergent views could lead to more rigorous analysis and more carefully considered arguments. Clearly, our personal and professional similarities made it easier to agree and implement this social contract. We also recognized that there may be natural ebbs and flows in the intensity with which group members would be able to devote themselves to the project at different times, due to other professional as well as personal commitments, but that each member had something valuable to offer and would seek to make an equal contribution overall. This in turn requires clear communication about the scheduling of tasks and the availability of team members to work on them at different times. Our organic process has been an important factor contributing to the group and its output. Of course, it takes time for democratic decisions to be reached and in that sense the group’s productivity may be hindered in terms of output.

Time and geography have also hindered the team’s communications. Many other accounts of qualitative collaboration emphasize the importance of shared physical space, regular face-to-face meetings and opportunities for informal contact, all of which is compromised when a project is spread over several sites (Thomas et al., 2000; Barry et al., 1999). Several accounts point to the value of “retreats,” extending over several days, for team building or immersion in data analysis; indeed, Liggett et al. (1994, p. 79) report that their project “began with a convivial week-long retreat.” In our case, time and geographic constraints mean that the entire team has yet to come together in one place; someone has always been missing at the three “group” meetings we have had to date. We now try to schedule formal full-day meetings around particular conferences, so that these can be combined with shorter and more informal interactions. These meetings have been used to review progress, explore themes and issues arising from literature or primary data, set priorities and allocate tasks. A retreat dedicated to analysis and writing is an appealing prospect, but we have had to recognize that both professional and personal commitments has not allowed this so far, and may not do so in the future either. This means that much of our group communication is by e-mail, supplemented with occasional telephone calls as well as meetings between team members who work closer to each other. Although this builds some asymmetry into the team, it has not created any obvious tensions. The general lack of regular face-to-face contact creates its own anxieties, however, when emails are sent out into the ether and deadlines loom or sensitive issues are being addressed. We have used an online group space to develop some papers, but as a group been slow to explore the potential of technology to enhance our communication and participate in
virtual meetings. Despite these limitations, meeting before or after a conference has always been productive for us, and we have managed to maintain the momentum of working together at a distance.

Even in its virtual form, a growing sense of trust within the group meant that it soon became a space where, as Wasser and Bresler (1996) put it, the collective self and the individual self could join together. We could approach this project, and our communications with each other, as working mothers and as researchers, with all the tensions, compromises and porous boundaries that these roles involved. Thus, group e-mails and conversations often blend progress reports, suggestions for further reading or revised drafts merged with dispatches from the frontline of family life. Clearly, many research collaborations strengthen personal ties and involve communications about life beyond work. In this case, however, the fusion of research topic with our identities as working mothers and researchers has been central to the process of co-ordination through mutual adjustment. In fact, one member of the group joined the team several months into the project as she had been on maternity leave, while three have stepped back from it temporarily for the same reason. Far from representing a problem for the group, this has offered considerable benefits in terms of insider/outside dynamics, not least when interviewing research participants. In general, family as well as other professional commitments are factored into negotiations about task responsibilities and deadlines, and these are typically renegotiated in response to particular family contingencies. Thus, like Hall et al. (2005), responding to events in each others’ lives is an important part of our mutual adjustment.

The team also represented a resource and support structure when individual researchers were faced with ethical questions in the course of the fieldwork – something that matters particularly when the research topic can touch on very sensitive and significant issues in the life of participants and their families. For example, the research design involved approaching potential research participants only once their pregnancies were well established. Despite this precaution, one woman recruited to take part in the study withdrew because she suffered a miscarriage. This distressing experience was shared with the group and there was some discussion as to how the researcher involved could acknowledge the woman’s loss without intruding on her grief. This discussion was less difficult and perhaps more constructive than it might have been in the absence of openness about team members’ own experiences of miscarriage; the focus was on drawing on those experiences to help the affected team member respond. Another potential participant went into early labour, a few days before meeting her interviewer for the first time, and delivered a very premature baby (thankfully now thriving) and the sadness and anxiety the interviewer felt could be discussed and shared within the group.

Analysis, writing and dissemination
Just as Thompson et al. (1989) discuss the value of the interpretive group in analyzing qualitative data, several accounts of qualitative collaboration have emphasized the distinctive contribution of teamwork, and different perspectives, during the analysis phase of a project. According to Barry et al. (1999, p. 36), for example:

If we had all shared the same views, there may have been a cozy, complacent lack of self-questioning, we might have become lazy in our thinking, and we would not have broadened our individual thinking.
Since we are currently in the process of analyzing our data, we have yet to explore the full implications of negotiating the “interpretive zone” (Wasser and Bresler, 1996). Relatively few exemplars exist to guide us in this process, particularly in relation to cross-cultural analysis. Belk et al. (2003) studied meanings of desire in America, Denmark and Turkey. Their rationale for choosing a multi-site inquiry “was to avoid the narrow confines of a single, usually US context” (p. 332). These authors moved from independent (i.e. site-specific) analysis to joint analysis, but do not elaborate on the challenges of this process. More recently, Hogg et al. (2004) have explored the consumption experiences of British and American “empty nest” mothers, while Cova et al. (2007) compared the meanings of Warhammer amongst French and American brand community members. In each of these cases, projects involve researchers and research sites from different cultures, but relatively little detail is provided on the process of negotiating these cultural boundaries.

Although Gow (1991, in Barry et al., 1999, p. 36) argues that “the team that speaks with more than one voice is doomed,” a challenge for us is to represent the voices of new mothers from different cultures whilst acknowledging that their accounts are mediated by our own individual and collective experiences as mothers and researchers. Preliminary analysis involved all researchers reading and comparing interpretations of the same transcripts. Although this highlighted different theoretical and cultural frames within the group, we initially expected that we would ultimately develop a common analytical framework. Over time, the limitations of this approach have become more evident. We do not want to strip the situatedness from our participants’ voices, but seek to provide a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional account of consumption in the transition to motherhood. We are currently exploring other analytical strategies that could foreground the diversity within our data and the reflexivity of our approach.

Since analysis and writing are so closely connected, this raises questions about how our writing can accommodate multiple voices and narratives (see Thompson et al., 1997 for a powerful exemplar of this approach). In a recent special issue of Advertising & Society Review, members of the group wrote individual essays on advertising’s portrayal of motherhood that were juxtaposed with commentaries from at least two other members of the group[2]. Collectively and individually, we found this in-built dialogue satisfying and stimulating, not least because different voices were counterpoised and engaged directly with each other, as indicated by the e-mail below:

If you read my commentaries and Susan’s commentary on our paper, this [our cultural differences] becomes apparent. The idealization of motherhood might be a universal theme, but on the other hand we (the authors) also seem to live in different motherhood cultures. I didn’t know about Yummy Mummies and I interpreted Susan’s Clorox ad in a different way than she did. Susan on the other hand was surprised when she read about pram practices in Denmark (T.T.).

How, or whether, such an approach will work in other contexts remains to be seen. Preparing conference presentations and literature-based papers arising from this project have to date used more conventional linear narratives. Here, too trust has been important, since group members need to circulate rough notes or unpolished drafts for others to work on, allow others to modify their arguments, ideas or expressions, and to relinquish individual control over the final version. While it is never easy to see one’s own favoured passages, ideas or expressions deleted from a document, all team members have experienced the give-and-take of co-authorship across other projects,
and a strong sense of collective ownership also mitigates against preciousness. Major rewrites of a document tend to be signalled and negotiated in advance, but editing of other people’s work is accepted as routine practice, and documents typically circulate with numerous edits, comments, queries, and suggestions embedded in them.

Finally, writing and publishing entails negotiations over authorship credits. A paper entitled “Only if I’m first author: conflict over credit in management scholarship” (Floyd et al., 1994) indicates the issues at stake here. In a publish or perish culture, particularly at key points in an academic’s career, authorship credits clearly matter and failing to indicate lead authors or sharing credits for a paper across a large group may lead to research output being discounted by others. This issue has been discussed on a regular basis within the group and was indeed raised by Andrea Prothero in her very first e-mail to the group as an issue to be discussed. Initially, we thought that while joint authorship across all papers would reflect the group’s ideals, we would probably split into smaller groups at least some of the time, taking responsibility for, and claiming authorship of, papers on particular aspects of the study. The challenge we anticipated in such a case was to ensure the equitable distribution of material or themes between the group members. As the work progressed, we became more committed to joint publications, and were concerned that the group ethos could be compromised by constant renegotiations over the sequence of authors. Our initial solution was to list authors in alphabetical order, but this risked obscuring the collective, collaborative nature of our work by representing seven of us as a supporting cast subsumed under the “et al” rubric, while also making our first-named author Andrea Davies feel uncomfortable. Gradually, we formed the view that the collective nature of this work called for a group name and identity rather than a series of individual author names, hence the authorship credit being given to “The VOICE Group” with our individual names listed in a footnote. This decision was reached collectively after much debate and discussion about authorship, and has implications for us all, not least because this is not normal practice in our discipline or at our respective universities.

Discussion and conclusions
As Martı´nez-Salgado (1999, p. 22) notes, while some team compositions may be more suitable than others, “the perfect team does not exist.” Whilst we believe that the approach we have developed suits this particular research group and topic, we neither see nor wish to present ourselves as paragons of team working; indeed this paper identifies several problem areas and likely inefficiencies in our approach, as well as highlighting key benefits to our particular methods of researching and working together. One such inefficiency relates to our handling of teamwork itself; whilst we believe that we have developed an approach that works well for us, we could perhaps have short-circuited this process by searching for, circulating and discussing at the outset some of the papers on collaboration that we draw upon here. That we did not do this lends weight to our argument that such issues tend to be addressed implicitly within our discipline.

As the project is ongoing, any judgment concerning the implications of our approach for research outcomes may be somewhat premature; like Barry et al. (1999, p. 42) we acknowledge that:
We have yet to complete the writing of the findings. A whole new set of conflicting agendas will probably surface as we continue to develop further articles.

Indeed, some may argue that our approach counts for nothing until we can demonstrate its value in terms of published findings. Whilst we have some sympathy with this view, and have not lost sight of ends as well as means, our purpose here is to articulate a set of issues and choices arising from qualitative collaboration that have been largely neglected in accounts of research within our discipline. There is also, we believe, some value in a real-time dispatch from the front rather than the post-hoc rationalization that may come when a project has been completed and its findings disseminated. Similarly, while we have been reflexive as a group in our personal motherhood experiences, we have been less reflexive about our different experiences and perspectives as academics (Barry et al., 1999) and this is something we may wish to address in the future.

Issues of emotion have been threaded through our account of collaborating on this project. Again, it may be easy for some readers to dismiss their presence by attributing them to this specific research topic and/or (all-female) research team. Certainly emotions are more likely to run closer to the surface in a qualitative project that bridges personal and professional experiences (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998), but they have also been reported in other research contexts and by mixed-gender teams (Liggett et al., 1994; Barry et al., 1999; Mountz et al., 2003). The organizational studies literature has increasingly recognized the pervasiveness of emotional labour and emotions in the workplace (Bolton, 2000; Fineman, 2002), and it should not be surprising that they make their presence felt in research teams and settings.

As this project evolves, our own motherhood trajectories, professional careers and other research interests, as well as our relationships with each, other will develop and we may need to negotiate team or project boundaries, entrances and exits. Whilst we acknowledge the uncertainties ahead, this team and project has offered its members a rare “space of belonging” (McGinn et al., 2005, p. 552) for both our personal and professional selves. Cross-cultural interchanges, drawing on diverse bodies of knowledge, have proven to be intellectually, as much as personally, enriching for the group members. In this sense, participation in this project has re-enchanted our individual and collective research activities. Similar unintended consequences of collaboration have been noted by Liggett et al. (1994) and Barry et al. (1999), whilst Wasser and Bresler (1996, p. 7) note that a research group can serve not only as a “critical methodological tool” but also as an epistemological crucible where interpretive knowledge is created.

We hope that the accounts of research collaboration provided here will encourage other researchers and research teams, both academic and practitioner, to reflect on and articulate this important but often invisible aspect of interpretive research, and of course, to engage in collaborative research themselves.

Notes
1. This paper is the result of collective, collaborative research undertaken by members of The VOICE Group. The members of this group, in alphabetical order, are Andrea Davies, Susan Dobscha, Susi Geiger, Stephanie O’Donohoe, Lisa O’Malley, Andrea Prothero, Elin Brandi Sorensen, Thyra Uth Thomsen.
2. Advertising & Society Review, Volume 7, Issues 3 and 4, 2006, on Advertising and Motherhood. We are grateful to the editor of Advertising & Society Review, Dr Linda Scott, for encouraging and facilitating this publication format and for her personal involvement in the two special issues.

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**Further reading**


**About the authors**

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Susi Geiger is a Senior Lecturer at the University College Dublin. Her academic work touches upon notions of human agency in both business-to-business and consumer contexts. As a member of The VOICE Group, she explores the interface of motherhood and consumption, and she also participates in an international interdisciplinary group studying market phenomena. Her work has appeared in a wide range of international journals such as *European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Industrial Marketing Management,* and *Consumption, Markets and Culture.* She is on the Editorial Board of *Industrial Marketing Management* and acts as a regular reviewer for a range of international marketing journals.

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