The construction of qualitative research articles: a conversation with Eileen Fischer

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ABSTRACT

Eileen Fischer, Professor of Marketing and Anne & Max Tanenbaum Chair in Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at the Schulich School of Business at York University, has published research on entrepreneurs, consumers, and markets in several leading management and marketing journals. Professor Fischer has served on the editorial review boards of Consumption Markets & Culture; Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice; Family Business Review; Journal of Business Venturing; and Journal of Small Business Management and is a current co-editor of the Journal of Consumer Research. In preparation for this conversation, the interviewers invited questions about the construction of qualitative research articles from multiple junior scholars in the field of consumer culture theory (CCT). This invitation yielded dozens of questions that were whittled down to the final questions you see here.

KEYWORDS

Consumer culture theory; interpretive research; literature review; qualitative research; theoretical contribution

Getting started

Bernardo Figueiredo and Ahir Gopaldas: Eileen, what advice do you have for junior scholars who are just beginning to select their first research topic?

Eileen Fischer: I think the primary advice that I would give would be to read, read, read, and then read some more. And the reading is not restricted to the academic literature, although that’s essential. I think that the reading falls into at least three categories.

Category one is the academic literature in the field that you’re hoping to be a member of. If it’s CCT, you should be reading stuff that falls under that broad rubric.

Category two is theories, often from outside the field, but that are relevant to the conversations you might join. You’ll end up reading more outside theory than you’ll use, but it’s important to just get a feel for the theories that matter in your area of inquiry.

Category three, I think, is non-academic reading, which alerts you to phenomena that might be worth studying. You may already have those in mind, but if you don’t, then reading the popular press can really help. Our topics can be ripped from the headlines, so to speak. Often, the best inspiration comes from paying close attention to emerging real-world phenomena going on around us.

Interviewers: How do you go about writing a paper?

Fischer: Frankly, a lot of papers start with puzzling over those real-world phenomena or contexts. As a scholar who seeks to build theory, however, you immediately need to ask about any context or
phenomenon you’re observing: “What abstract phenomenon is this particular case an instance of? Should we be surprised that this is happening? What else is it like? How is it different from that?”

Sometimes it goes the other way, though. Sometimes you’re reading the academic literature and you get a spark of insight. You’re going, “Could I find a context that would allow me to challenge this theory?”

The first, context-driven approach is more self-explanatory, but I’ll give you an example of the second, theory-driven approach. I was thinking about fads in markets the other day. Having done a lot of work with various colleagues on fashion markets, fads are obviously important there. But I think we underestimate the role of fads in other markets. We tend to treat market trends as though they were more, perhaps technology-driven. I’m thinking about the fitness context and whether or not it would add value to our literature if one was to do an investigation of the dynamics in the fitness market. Zumba, CrossFit, and Pilates – are those technological developments or just fads? This begs the question, what exactly is a market fad? Do we know enough, conceptually, about the role of fads in market dynamics?

Thinking along lines like these leads you to question taken-for-granted concepts and how they matter for the broader theories they are situated within. That’s the second option for getting started.

The roadmap

Interviewers: Before we dig into the craft of papers section by section, let’s begin with the questions we received about the connections among the different parts of a paper. What are the connections among gaps, questions, findings, and contributions?

Fischer: These line up in a very predictable order. I don’t think you necessarily write any one of them first, but they have to have a tight logical coupling with one another. The gap is what we don’t know. It’s advisable to formalize the gap into a problem statement or research question. The findings section should address the gap, and the discussion section should offer implications beyond the research questions.

Interviewers: Junior scholars often struggle with knowing what to put in the findings section and what to put in the discussion section. Could you elaborate on the distinctions between those sections a bit further?

Fischer: To me, it’s almost a formula. The formula is: Answer your research questions in your findings and don’t do it again in the discussion. The discussion should really not be devoted to reiterating how you answered the research questions. For most journals, and for reviewers who handle the kind of work that we do, they’re looking for value-added discussion. They’re often going to give you permission to go beyond the specific context you study or the specific conversations you said you’d add to. You’ve got to pull another contribution out of your hat over and above answering the research questions you identified in your discussion section. That’s what you do in your discussion section, you go beyond answering your research questions.

Interviewers: Let’s say our research gap is that we don’t have an adequate theoretical explanation for an important new phenomenon, say, social media use, and we develop a theory of social media use. If that’s presented in our findings, then can we or can we not claim it as our theoretical contribution in the discussion section?

Fischer: You can’t just reiterate that in your discussion section. You can claim it as a contribution, but you’ve done that by the end of your findings section, if you’ve done your findings section well. The discussion then becomes, how is understanding social media use going to help us to understand something else about conventional media use, or sociality, or marketing? You need to take the
discussion in a direction that’s distinct from your findings and put your ideas in a bigger, or different, conversation.

Interviewers: That’s helpful. You either speculate about what it means for a larger category of phenomena or for an adjacent category of phenomena.

Fischer: Right, and I think this is very specific to theoretically oriented journals like the *Journal of Consumer Research*, because that’s not what you’re going to do in a more applied journal where the discussion section often outlines implications for managers. More applied journals are playing a very different game.

### Writing the front end

Interviewers: The next set of questions is focused on writing the front end of a paper. For a senior scholar, what it means to find a gap in the literature is second nature, but do you have any advice for how a junior scholar might do that?

Fischer: One thing I’d emphasize, which we know from Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997), is that the gap is a rhetorical construction, not an act of mining, not a type of detective work where you discover something that everyone else has overlooked. You do have to look at the literature and read it incredibly carefully, but at the end of the day, you construct the gap.

Interviewers: Right, it’s not just waiting around to be discovered. Alright, next question. There are innumerable ways to organize a literature review. What should one be thinking about when deciding how to present the existing literature?

Fischer: One of the hardest things, and I struggle with this continuously in my own writing, is how to differentiate setting up the research questions from reviewing the literature. There’s no magic formula to this. But one thing I think is really essential to keep in mind is that a literature review is never literally a literature review. It’s always an exercise in (A) demonstrating familiarity with the conversation; (B) showing that some key things are already known and therefore not worth studying again, at least not by you; and (C) bolstering your case for studying things that aren’t known. These are the three purposes of the literature review. Often, those purposes can be very economically accomplished in the introduction and there won’t be a need for a separate literature review. Sometimes, that’s not the case.

Interviewers: When reviewers say, you’ve got research questions but no research motivations, what do they mean?

Fischer: Basically, they’re saying, “Why should I care that no one has written about this yet?” The most trivial examples are, “Why should I care that no one has written about identity management in country X or Y?” Less trivially, there are lots of instances of people posing more abstract questions that aren’t geographically or context-dependent, but which people don’t seem to care about. There’s no such thing as an inherently unimportant question. But there are lots of instances where people don’t put in the work to justify why the question is an important question.

Interviewers: Could you share some examples of strong theoretical motivations?

Fischer: One possible motivation is if you can demonstrate that an existing theory tells us to expect something other than what we observe. Then, we know there’s a problem with that theory. For example, in the case of my paper with Daiane (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), you would expect that
if there’s an unmet need (such as the need for fashionable plus-sized clothing), some players in the market would naturally fill that need. But in the real-world fashion market, we find that there are really limited fashionable apparel offerings for plus-sized women. When we find that the existing theory doesn’t really explain what’s happening in a real-world context, that’s a great motivation for a paper.

**Interviewers**: So, if existing theory does not explain a phenomenon, then that’s one good motivation. Are there others?

**Fischer**: Another good motivation is when there are elements in a theoretical conversation that haven’t been paid much attention. Let me elaborate on that with an example from my paper with Pierre-Yann (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). A lot of the market evolution literature up until then had been looking at market dynamics in terms of changes to product offerings. In our paper, we weren’t looking to explain changes in product or brands but changes in promotion and distribution within an industry. We observed that there were really important questions about non-product aspects of market evolution that people hadn’t been asking. We didn’t put it quite in those terms, but I felt really confident that we made a very valuable case for saying there are other marketing mix variables than what we’ve been talking about and markets don’t evolve only through their products.

So, I think that you can often motivate research by saying that there are variables, factors, or contextual issues that haven’t been considered and that aren’t unique to a given setting. That’s probably the biggest thing, being able to say that the new thing you’re explaining is not unique to your setting, because readers will care about your study when what you’re studying is a specific instance of a much larger category of phenomena about which we know little. You want to be able to convincingly convey that your study connects to, but is not encompassed within, existing conversations.

**Interviewers**: When an author does a lot of work to assemble a theoretical framework that will aid in the interpretation of the data, how should that framework be presented in the paper – as part of the theoretical background or as part of the findings?

**Fischer**: I think it depends on its originality. If you were using institutional theory, that’s obviously not a contribution. But there are certain cases where you could create very elegant theoretical explanations a priori and more or less use your data to illustrate your findings; that could probably go in the findings. I think it depends on how much of that theory is what you’re producing independently and how much of it is concepts and relationships that you’re taking off the shelf.

**Writing the methods**

**Interviewers**: A trend in consumer research seems to be toward voluminous primary and secondary data sets, sometimes described in quantitative terms such as numbers of images, downloads, and pages. This trend seems to be at odds with selecting theoretically purposive data and becoming intimately familiar with them. What are your thoughts?

**Fischer**: It’s interesting to know how one would theoretically select purposive data without knowing the broader data set from which they were selected. In other words, what I’m saying is, I think that the trend toward larger, richer databases is here to stay. I think the days of small sample sizes being justified as having reached the point of theoretical saturation are over, because it’s very difficult to know what’s out there that will help you conceptualize the context, the historical, cultural, and social situatedness of your data, if you haven’t done a whole lot more than eight to 10 interviews.

**Interviewers**: What you’re saying is that it might be wise to get a lot of data and different kinds of data, at least at first, and then as you get clearer about the specific theoretical points you want to make, you might do more purposive sampling?
**Fischer:** I don’t know. Is that purposive sampling or are you just selecting the cases to illustrate your insights?

**Interviewers:** Maybe it’s about being purposive at the point of writing?

**Fischer:** Exactly. Even then, I’ll tell you that many reviewers and associate editors say: “Don’t just pick four cases. At least give me a data table to show me how your cases would have compared to those you didn’t include.” But don’t fail to introduce to me all the 25 people that you’ve talked to. Bring their voices in, even if only as an appendix. Because I think there’s a growing perception that we need to be asking more about the voices left out.

What does purposive sampling really mean, anyway? I can understand purposive sampling at a higher the level of analysis such as the market level, but what about at the consumer level? The reason I can pick a market is because I can read something about that market to help me know its characteristics, but capturing one person in all their richness in an interview, or even four interviews with the same person, seems unrealistic. People are just more diverse.

**Interviewers:** While there’s quite a bit of published advice in consumer research and elsewhere on collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, there’s less advice on writing up interpretations. What constitutes a good write-up of an interpretation?

**Fischer:** I think a lot of the advice that has been published was born out of emulating some of the more naturalistic inquiry kinds of things that were more emergent, descriptive, and phenomenological. I think a lot of contemporary research is about finding answers to your research questions and analyzing your data to shed light on the things you said you were going to. If there’s a mismatch between your analysis or interpretation and what you said you were going to focus on in the beginning, then you’ve got a problem.

**Writing the findings**

**Interviewers:** Moving on to the findings, is it always necessary to have an aiding or enabling theory?

**Fischer:** Absolutely not. It’s great to have one and perfectly okay not to.

**Interviewers:** If you don’t have an enabling theory, what would you suggest the alternative approach be called?

**Fischer:** In my mind, theorizing is either emergent, enabled, or enfolded. So, one alternative to enabled theorizing is an approach I call emergent theorizing. I try to avoid using the term grounded theory, because of all the intellectual baggage that goes with it. Emergent theorizing is pretty much doing your analysis without any kind of imported theoretical construct, so, for example, you aren’t importing the notion of social capital and you aren’t importing the notion of legitimacy. You’re simply interpreting your data in light of your research questions and the topic-specific conversation that came before. Often, there will be a lot of literature that you’re already talking about. For example, at this point, somebody can write a paper about market system dynamics without invoking actor network theory, assemblage theory, institutional theory, or any of the other usual suspects. They could simply invoke the prior literature on market system dynamics, using consumer research concepts such as Martin and Schouten’s (2014) construct of customer-driven market emergence, and stick to that. I’m not saying emergent theorizing is atheoretical, but what it doesn’t use is some grand theory that lies outside of any given conversation.

**Interviewers:** And what was the third alternative?
Fischer: The third alternative I call enfolded theorizing, and by enfolded I mean you’re using a theory to contribute to that theory. In this case, the theory that you’re contributing to is usually a grand theory. The clearest examples of this would be Doug Holt’s (1998) work or Craig Thompson and Tuba Ustuner’s (2012) work where they amend Bourdieuan theories.

Interviewers: In enfolded theorizing, your literature review and your enabling theory are one and the same thing. You’re reviewing Bourdieu’s theory of capital and then amending that theory.

Fischer: Exactly. If you look at papers in the Academy of Management Journal or Administrative Science Quarterly, that’s what their papers on institutional theory are doing.

Interviewers: There’s no distinction between their literature review and their enabling theory because it’s all institutional theory.

Fischer: Yes, exactly. Although to be clear, it’s usually some portion of a grand theory that’s invoked and contributed to. I should also note that there’s a similarity between emergent and enfolded theorizing. The difference really lies in the status, or stature, of the body of concepts that you’re working with. When I talk about market systems theory, it’s pretty under-developed compared with something as elaborate as institutional theory, but there’s a similarity between emergent theorizing, which is situated within and contributes to a body of concepts, and enfolded theorizing, which is situated within and contributes to a portion of a grand theory. You may be doing emergent theorizing if you start with the prior literature on market systems and end up amending or extending the set of concepts we use to understand market systems. If you’re doing enfolded theorizing, you’re starting with a more general or grand theory, which explains a whole lot more things, and you’re amending or extending it. Does that make sense?

Interviewers: We haven’t personally attempted that third alternative before, but yes, it does make sense.

Fischer: We don’t often see enfolded theorizing in the marketing literature, and I think there may be a reason for that: fewer grand theories are native to consumer behavior or marketing per se. In organizational theory, people do it more, perhaps because more grand theories have been developed to explain central aspects of organizations and organizing, such as theories of power, theories of the firm, and theories of institutional organization. These are big theories that apply to the exact phenomenon being studied. When it comes to consumption, I find Bourdieu to be one of our few grand theorists.

Interviewers: If the enabling theory is not novel – if you’re using institutional theory or actor network theory or other theories that have been used in a journal a couple of times already – does that detract from the perceived novelty of the paper? In other words, is it important to use new enabling theories?

Fischer: I don’t think so at all. I think it’s important that you not arbitrarily draw on an enabling theory that doesn’t really work. I sometimes see researchers hauling out a shiny new theory that they hope is going to sell their paper simply because it’s not been discussed much before and, often, it actually distracts them from understanding a phenomenon. For instance, sometimes researchers have wanted to use a theory other than Bourdieu, and thought they had something better, but the reviewers told them to use Bourdieu. They weren’t being given credit for drawing on a theory not previously imported into consumer research.

Interviewers: Reviewers sometimes complain about papers having too little data or too little interpretation. What’s an appropriate balance between data and interpretation?
Fischer: That’s really hard to give an abstract answer too: There’s no magic formula. I see people saying, “This data is under-interpreted.” But I just don’t think that’s a function of the amount of data or interpretation, because you can have a whole lot of commentary in front of the quote and a whole lot of commentary after the quote and still not be doing a great job of interpretation. It’s about the quality of interpretation, not the quantity. Reviewers want to see you trace out the implications. Data does not speak for itself. Data does not reveal something; your analysis reveals something. You really have to take the reader by the hand and say, “This is how this quote helps to answer my research questions. Here’s the theoretical bottom line. This is why I gave you this quote. This is how you should understand it.”

Interviewers: I think you’ve already implicitly addressed this next question. What are your thoughts on providing additional qualitative data in tables? Should one try to show as much data as possible?

Fischer: I think it can really help. I think you’ll never lose by doing that. The more you can assure readers that you have ample evidence, the better, as long as you’re not up against a page length constraint. Online appendices are becoming increasingly common; I think that’s good. Do you know what? I also think it helps you as an author to put data tables together because if you can’t find another quote, you need to be asking yourself, “Is this interpretation robust? Or did I cherry-pick?”

Writing the discussion

Interviewers: Why do you think so many junior scholars struggle with making a theoretical contribution?

Fischer: I actually don’t think it’s because of the discussion section. I think it’s because the questions that are asked up front often don’t lend themselves to answers that contribute to theory. Questions are often overly descriptive, and that’s a problem.

Interviewers: Are there patterns for what constitutes a theoretical contribution?

Fischer: Certainly, one form of a contribution is identifying a construct that hasn’t been identified before, and another form of a contribution is identifying relationships between constructs that haven’t been identified before. I think process theorizing is also a possibility. I find it more complex but also likely to be more rewarding. But I’m not sure I’d say this is an exhaustive set of strategies.

Interviewers: In David Whetten’s (1989) famous editorial, “What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution?” he suggests using the five Ws to generate contributions: who, what, when, where, and why, or how, is your phenomenon happening?

Fischer: The fundamental question is why. The questions of how or when (or under what circumstances) can be conducive to creating theoretical contributions as well, because answering them helps to understand why something happens. And just to be clear here, I’m not talking about determinism. I’m talking about a probabilistic understanding of why something is likely to happen or not.

Interviewers: Right, so if you identify a new construct or relationship, the key question is why does that construct or relationship exist.

Fischer: Yes, it helps to explain why the relationship exists, but identifying a new construct doesn’t generally answer why questions. Nonetheless, I think coming up with a robust new construct, or a clarification of an existing one, is a valid contribution. As an example of a great new construct paper, consider Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel’s (2006) doppelganger brand image construct. Or in
terms of clarifying an existing construct, I find Belk, Ger, and Askegaard’s (2003) paper on desire useful for illustrative purposes. It not only helps us better understand the construct of desire, it also helps explain why we see variance in manifestations of the construct across settings, and processes in which the construct is embedded. The paper has three distinct forms of theoretical contribution.

**Interviewers:** How important is it for CCT researchers to consider the practical implications of their research, for consumers, policymakers, or managers?

**Fischer:** If we’re just talking about getting published, then it completely depends on the journal. But if we’re talking about a career, then I think it’s really important to think about that. If you can’t talk to real people about why your research is interesting, it’s a whole lot less fun. The practical implications matter if you’re talking to your dean or your mother. You need to be able to explain to people why you do the research you do.

**Interviewers:** Over time, how has the construction of CCT articles evolved and more importantly, where are we headed next?

**Fischer:** I think that in the 1980s, findings were couched in a much more descriptive manner than today.

**Interviewers:** Now the findings tend to be theoretical answers to theoretical questions.

**Fischer:** Conceptual answers to theoretical questions, yes, and with greater levels of conceptual abstraction than before. There are lots of things that I think are changing – phenomenology, individual-level analysis, and strict reliance on interview data, those approaches have fallen out of favor. I think we now see papers making more use of more data. I think we see more theoretical attention to variety within concepts. I think we’re also seeing more attempts to join in theoretical conversations within the journal, but not necessarily just within the CCT literature. There are some really interesting papers offering sociological takes on psychological phenomena. A great example is Ahir’s sociological take on consumer emotion in terms of marketplace sentiments (Gopaldas 2014).

**Interviewers:** Last question. What are the hot topics in CCT today, and what’s next?

**Fischer:** I’m not even going to try to answer that one! Because I see topics go in and out of fashion. Who can predict what’s next? There are new things popping up all the time. It’s a truism, but you can’t pick topics according to what’s hot. You need to study what interests you.

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