

COMMENTARY

Morris B. Holbrook, Subjective Personal Introspection, and the Hunger Games:

A Young Researcher's Introspective Perspective

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“And may the odds be always in your favour!”
(Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008)

In Collins’ popular novel, the future state Panem’s authorities use these words as a cynical means to cheer up the districts’ unfortunate teenagers twice in the run-up to the *The Hunger Games* – a televised game of life and death. The first time is at the “Reaping,” where a boy and a girl between 12 and 18 years of age are drawn in a public lottery as tributes to represent their districts, to remind them of their chances not to be selected; the second time is at the opening ceremony to remind the 24 tributes of the riches that await the winner. The point is that, depending on your social and regional background, the odds usually tend to be stacked against you. Not only does the number of their names in the lottery increase by one for each year they get older, but poor teenagers can also buy a person’s annual food ration for each additional time they enter their name into the lottery, and these entries are then carried over to all subsequent years. Thus, the poorer the family, the more mouths to feed, and the older the teenager, the more often is his name in the lottery and the bigger is his chance to be drawn. And while rich rewards await the winner, each of the 24 tributes knows only too well that only one can win while the other 23 will be dead. The odds are even less in favor of most tributes, as the teenagers from two well-off districts, the so-called “careers,” are essentially raised and trained all their lives to take part in and win the *Hunger Games*, which involves knowing not only how to kill your competitors but also how to win the favors of sponsors that supply contestants in the arena with the urgently required food, water, medicine, and weapons. Needless to say, the tributes from poorer districts lack the preparations and survival skills of the careers and are at a severe disadvantage from the start!

You might be wondering by now what this first paragraph about *The Hunger Games* has to do with Morris Holbrook’s contribution to the marketing literature and/or with Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) – the innovative but also controversial methodology

that he has championed since his ACR trilogy (Holbrook 1986, 1987, 1988). Well, I think that Suzanne Collins' trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) provides (among other things) an excellent analogy for "The Publishing Games" that are central to today's academia, its assessment of research quality, and the review process at the leading academic journals. For some time now, academics around the world have bought into the dogma that only studies published in our field's top-tier journals could be regarded as world-leading, original, novel, and innovative research of the highest quality. Moreover, not only are young researchers advised at the conferences' doctoral colloquia to submit their work only to those few journals, but they are actually encouraged to believe that they all have an equal chance of getting their work published in these prestigious outlets – assuming, of course, that it is original, novel, and "high in quality." From here, it doesn't take much extrapolation to arrive at the ironic slogan: "*And may the odds be always in your favour.*" However, similar to *The Hunger Games*, the truth is that – unless you are one of the fortunate "careers," enrolled at one of the select self-styled "elite" institutions that prepare their doctoral students for the publishing game by training them in how to tick the right boxes with editors and reviewers and how to adopt the methodological approaches that are popular with the journals – the odds are generally stacked against most new researchers, who are not affiliated with this tightly-knit inner circle or who even come from a different cultural background. But, sad to say, the odds are even worse for those (new) researchers whose preferred methodological approach (Heaven forbid!) departs from the mainstream paradigms and conventions espoused by the editors and reviewers of the field's leading academic journals – which is a curse especially true in case of SPI.

Personally, I have never really bought into the belief that our "top-tier" journals such as *JCR*, *JM*, *MS*, or *JMR* would actually publish any truly original, novel, and innovative research. Indeed, there are numerous cases where methodological approaches, conceptual

ideas, or theories that appeared in those journals and were heralded as original and groundbreaking had already been published years earlier, either in a lower-ranked journal or in a publication like *Advances in Consumer Research*. Thus, the main role of the leading journals, as I see it, is to act as gatekeepers for the academic discipline's establishment, so as to assign official approval to new ideas, concepts, theories, or methodologies and, thereby, to signify and legitimize their acceptance by the mainstream. From this point of view, it is quite telling that Gould's (1991) famous *JCR* paper still remains to this very day the only paper using SPI that has ever appeared in one of our top journals and, subsequently, has faced stern criticism from all sides (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Renu 2011; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). Indeed, it can safely be said that SPI is considered today as much a controversial detour pursued by a few mavericks as was the case when Holbrook began his ACR trilogy in 1986. Much worse than the official published criticism, however, are the hidden prejudices and ideology-driven obstacles that arise as roadblocks when submitting an introspective paper for review. While the review process purports to evaluate the quality of each submitted paper *on its own merits*, the common habits of editors and reviewers ensure the rejection of SPI papers by strategies that range from assessing their quality based on quantitative research criteria to requesting that researchers turn their papers that study phenomena using SPI into conceptual treatises that provide a philosophical defense for using SPI. Of course, the implied changes to such a paper loom too large to permit even the most lukewarm invitation to revise and resubmit. Indeed, with the exception of Holbrook (2005, 2006a) and a recent special issue in *JBR*, hardly any study using SPI as a methodology has been published in higher-ranked journals without being a conceptual defense of SPI (i.e., Shankar 2000). No, if you are using SPI, the odds are clearly not in your favor.

So the question is why – despite all this – I have still taken the risky step of following in the footsteps of Holbrook (1995, 2006b) and Gould (2008). After all, from an academic

career perspective, this move could be described as the equivalent of entering the *Hunger Games* arena without any basic weapon and survival training – in other words, plain suicide. Why, then, have I put my faith in SPI? Is it a reflection of my rebellious streak and “difficult” anti-establishment attitudes? Well, I can assure you that I’m definitely not a mockingjay (Collins 2010). No, the answer is actually much simpler and more personal than that. The truth is that, at a time when I had become disillusioned with the traditional scientific research approaches and their detached artificial depictions of consumers that had guided my earlier MBS research (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006, 2007), it was Holbrook’s introspective work, more than anyone else’s, that inspired and influenced the new direction of my own research, my way of thinking, and my personal style of academic writing; and I owe a lot of gratitude to him for his patience and for the tons of constructive advice he has given me over the past years. In fact, neither my PhD thesis (Wohlfeil 2011) nor any of my publications (Batat and Wohlfeil 2009; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008, 2010, 2012) – of which I’m genuinely proud (not because they were published in journals but because I truly believe that they are well-written papers) – would have ever seen the light of day if it weren’t for Holbrook’s ACR trilogy (1986, 1987, 1988) and his book *Consumer Research: Introspective Essays on the Study of Consumption* (1995). Apart from introducing me to SPI as an alternative methodology for understanding consumer behavior, these were actually the first academic publications in marketing and consumer research that touched something inside me, that truly spoke to me, and that genuinely opened my eyes to the everyday wonders in a consumer’s mundane consumption experiences and practices. The presented narrative and voice of an individual consumer’s personal consumption experiences feels more real, natural, true, and insightful than the various artificial or imposed consumer depictions provided by the traditional “scientific” (often scientific) scholarship (Holbrook 1988).

In particular, Holbrook's (1987) "25-Cent Tour of a Jazz Collector's Home" was possibly the one paper that most captured my imagination early on and inspired my current research path. Its simplicity, its honesty, and its subjective writing style "felt good to read" (Holbrook 1991) and allowed me, as a reader, to mentally and emotionally relate to the narrative account of how the role of jazz music in his everyday life is manifested by a collection of jazz records that have slowly invaded his physical living-space. This rang true to me, as I just needed to replace jazz records with films-on-DVD for him to be effectively describing the role of film in my everyday life. Just as Holbrook's introspective writing was inspired by his Grandfather's Log (Holbrook 1991), I knew instinctively that I "would like to try something similar" as well. Allowing the reader to engage personally with the presented consumer narrative is one factor that sets SPI apart from other academic approaches. Beyond that, SPI allows access and insights into essential facets of human consumption experiences that remain inaccessible to traditional scientific and interpretive methodologies, thereby promoting a natural and integrated representation of consumers and their voices (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2012). And this is also true of human phenomena outside our own discipline, as Carol Rambo's (1996, 2005; Rambo and Ellis 1989) intense accounts of child abuse, prostitution, and erotic dancing show. Perhaps Brown (1998) was right all along when he suggested that introspective research has more in common with the tradition of autobiographic or even fictional writing and, thus, that its quality should be judged based on artistic rather than scientific criteria. But because of this, I doubt that SPI will gain the badge of approval from the powers at our (conservative) top journals anytime soon. So why do certain mavericks like Holbrook or I stick with SPI rather than opting for less controversial and more "career-friendly" methodologies? Well, I suppose, it's a question of academic integrity (Holbrook 1998). If I must play the publishing game, then – like Kadniss or Peeta –

I would rather do it on my own terms and stay true to myself and to my research ideals rather than pandering to “popular demand” and turning into someone else that I’m not.

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