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Lawrence Soley
Marquette University, lawrence.soley@marquette.edu

Post-print. *American Academy of Advertising Newsletter*, Volume 6, No. 2 (June 2010), http://www.aaasite.org/newsletter/2010-06.pdf. Used with permission.

Projective Techniques for Advertising and Consumer Research

By Lawrence Soley

Although my current research — which is focused on projective techniques for advertising and consumer research — differs from the research that I did during much of the 1980s and 1990s, it was actually inspired by my interactions while a Ph.D. student at Michigan State University (MSU). During the late 1970s, when I attended MSU, the psychology department, and several others, had developed national reputations for researching and using projective techniques. A couple of the "big names" in projective techniques research at MSU during this era were Albert Rabin and Joel Aronoff. A few years before I arrived at MSU, Everett Rogers had been there, and pioneered the use of projective techniques for studies of the diffusion of innovation.

It was at MSU, in a Ph.D. class in political psychology that I was first exposed to more sophisticated psychoanalytic theories and their corresponding research methods, projective techniques. At that time, the College of Communication was largely positivistic in its research approach, but there were a few dissidents. The most notable was Len Reid, who frequently voiced his objections to the mainstream MSU paradigm, but who was also practical enough to recognize that using positivist methods was necessary if one were to get published. At that time, Len and Charles Frazer of the University of Oregon were adherents to symbolic interactionism, and published articles in *Journal of Advertising* and other journals that advocated this research perspective. Len actually prepared me to abandon positivism—at least its reliance on semantic differential scales and similar dubious attitude measures—at about the same time he embraced that paradigm.

There were several research projects that I worked on at MSU that were based on projective techniques, but were so laden with statistical jargon that it took me a while to recognize the nature of these studies. For example, Bruce VandenBerg, Len and I published a study in *Journalism Quarterly,* titled "Dimensions of Advertiser Credibility," that used word association to assess the meaning of credibility. Word association is an important, but not widely used, projective technique. Subjects for our study were simply asked to produce associative terms that came to their mind when they thought of a "credible advertiser." We analyzed the factors underlying these terms.

At the end of the 1990s, I returned to conducting research using projective techniques. However, I now regard myself as an advocate of this research perspective, rather than a mere researcher. This is because I discovered that many communication researchers are ignorant of

the techniques. A recent survey about the teaching of graduate level research methods courses that Bob Craig of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul and I conducted—and presented at the 2009 AAA conference in Cincinnati—showed that projective techniques are rarely covered in graduate level research courses, particularly in graduate courses in communication schools. (The techniques are still described in most marketing research texts, so researchers in this discipline are somewhat more informed about the methods than those coming out of communication schools. In contrast, most communication research methods texts do not even mention projective techniques.)

There are many notable exceptions to this ignorance – the collective advertising faculty of the University of Tennessee (U of T); Ron Faber of the University of Minnesota, who has used the techniques in a number of research studies; Kendra Gale of the University of Colorado, who has noted and decried the absence of these techniques in communication research courses; marketing professor Mary Ann McGrath of Loyola University-Chicago, who used the techniques to study gift-giving; and Elizabeth Crisp Crawford of North Dakota State University, a graduate of the U of T Ph.D. program, who has used projective techniques in several innovative ways, to name just a few.

As an advocate rather than researcher, I decided to chronicle the use of these techniques, rather than just publish studies employing them. Knowing that we live in an increasingly visual environment, I teamed up with former Marquette University graduate student Will Gartside (now a PhD student at the University of Illinois at Chicago) to make two documentaries on projective techniques: *Research with Projective Techniques* (Insight Media no. PTS6907) and *Research with Photoelicitation* (IM No. UTS 6056). The former examines Thematic Apperception Tests, sentence completion tests, word association and pictorial tests; the latter focuses entirely on photo interviewing methods. Because these were the first documentary films about these methods, we were successful in obtaining a distributor for the films—Insight Media in New York.

The documentaries were made on a shoestring budget, so we were forced to restrict our interviews to researchers in the Great Lakes region. Fortunately for us, many of the researchers who use projective technique, such as Ron Faber, Mary Ann McGarth, and Elizabeth Crisp Crawford, are within driving distance of Milwaukee. Unfortunately, we didn't have the budget to travel to Tennessee, Colorado or other states to shoot interviews there.

Will Gartside's and my travels to film Ron, Mary Ann, Elizabeth and others quickly became legend among other communication graduate students at Marquette: our giving a ride to a young, hippiesque hitchhiker, who seemed to smell so bad that we kept the windows open

all the time he was in the car; driving through a lake-effect blizzard in Indiana and Michigan en route to interview MSU sociologist Steve Gold about photoelicitation; and drinking wine in a hotel room near Minneapolis en route to interviewing Ron Faber, where we discussed the pros and cons of the edits in one of Will's blood-and-gore films, *Knife Fight*.

Although U.S. culture has become more visual, verbal communication remains extremely important, particularly for communicating complex information. Aware of this, I teamed up with several Marquette University graduate students to do research on, and write about, projective techniques. One such student was Jin Seong Park, who recently finished the Ph.D. program at the University of Florida and is teaching at Temple University. He and I spent considerable time discussing and debating these techniques, and presented a paper using them at the 2005 AAA conference. Another was Aaron Lee Smith, with whom I wrote, *Projective Techniques for Social Science and Business Research* (ISBN no. 978-0972051613). Aaron taught for a few semesters at Marquette as a part-time instructor after completing his M.A. degree.

Our book is the first to review and synthesize the research studies in advertising, journalism, marketing, sociology, education and anthropology that have been conducted using research projective techniques. The book describes Ron Faber's, Mary Ann McGrath's and even Everett Roger's research methods, using them to demonstrate the untapped potential of these techniques. However, the book is not uncritical boosterism for projective techniques and does discuss the techniques' shortcomings, particularly in the ways they are used for clinical, psychological assessment, which is how the techniques began.

One thing that I learned from working on *Projective Techniques for Social Science and Business Research* is that the techniques are more widely used for research in Asia and Eastern Europe than in the U.S. or Western Europe. As a result of writing the book, I have come into contact with researchers in other countries, something I had not been before.

Another thing I learned from writing the book and shooting the documentaries is that the number of journals that review books and documentary films has shrunk, and is now abysmally small. In the past, the *Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Advertising* carried book reviews. This is no longer the case. A few journals still carry reviews, and Aaron and my book was review by *Journal of Consumer Marketing* and *Visual Studies*, among others. Not surprisingly, the review in *Journal of Consumer Marketing* was written by a European-based researcher, Ozlem Hesapci Sanaktekin of Istanbul Bilgi University.

Biography

Larry Soley teaches at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He was previously on the marketing faculty of Baruch College (City University of New York). In addition to doing advertising research, Soley has worked as an alternative journalist. He received the Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award for a cover story in *Mother Jones* magazine, and the Project Censored Award ("10 Top Alternative News Stories") for an investigative report in *Dollars & Sense* magazine.