By Corette Haf
■ Corporate Research
Consultancy (Cape) CC
■ Cape Town, South Africa
■ hafcrc@mweb.co.za

RESEARCH
BLIND SPOTS:

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CULTURE AND LITERACY LEVELS

Towards the end of 2015, two of my QRCA colleagues—**Susan Abbott** from Canada and **Ilka Kuhagen** from Germany—presented a creativity workshop to qualitative researchers in South Africa. At the Johannesburg session, one of the attendees mentioned that some of the techniques covered may not work well among lower economic segments of our population due to limited literacy. His comment intrigued my two colleagues, both from developed countries. This incident made me think more consciously about the need to adapt the way we conduct grass-roots research in my country and how this may be similar or different in other emerging countries.

Accordingly, I conferred with 21 fellow qualitative research consultants in 12 different countries. I focused on emerging economies, the BRICS siblings (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) but also included colleagues who specialize in multi-cultural research in the U.S. and Australia.

I was surprised to hear from colleagues in non-African countries, including those who attended my session about this topic at the 2017 QRCA Annual Conference, that they are seldom asked to research the lower end of their market. It is well documented that middle-class growth is

exploding in emerging economies. This growth is likely to come from advancements up the consumer ladder. Is it wise to focus research on those who are already established middle class while neglecting the feeder market, the future middle class?

Lower-income segments can offer new growth opportunities for marketers only if they bother to understand these potential customers' unmet needs. This is a win-win for marketers and the public, as better access to products and services uplifts these consumers and enables their advancement to middle

class. But, we cannot assume that their needs and priorities are necessarily the same as the established middle class that forms the focus of most commissioned research. In some markets, there may be a huge HDTV dominating a home that may not have a refrigerator, a bathroom or even running water. In South Africa, we are used to the sight of satellite TV dishes on the rooftops in informal settlements. The cost of consumption is higher for these targets—they have fewer resources and less disposable income and must use these smartly. Every market is unique; there are great differences in the way consumers cook or do laundry across South America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia.

If we agree that it is important to understand the needs of lower income segments on their journey towards becoming emerging middle class, there are factors to consider to ensure that we truly hear and understand them. These include the impact of literacy levels and culture.

In some markets, **literacy** is a problem among the lower socio-economic groups due to attenuated or poor education. Their limited abstract conceptual skills impact the way moderators can engage with them, so complex stimuli don't work. Their limited verbal skills and

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shortcomings in expressing their thoughts and feelings make written formats unusable.

In other markets, such as Russia and China, the regimes placed greater emphasis on education, so low literacy is not a factor. Russia has a literacy rate of 99.7%, while in China the literacy rate is 96%.

Language is crucial and has implications with regard to both culture and literacy. The level of English used in communication (such as discussion guides, concepts and test materials) needs to be simplified in many local languages. The vocabulary of many languages is not as granular as English. African vernacular languages, for example, don't have separate words for love and like. Another example was provided by **Pia Mollback-Verbic**. In communication testing in India for a deodorant brand, the word "cleavage" was used. Pia said, "The Hindi translation is 'a valley between two mountains.' The moderator didn't know how to correct the language into something more 'culturally appropriate,' and the poor consumers were mighty perplexed about the entire thing."

One of the "cardinal sins" of global research is clients insisting that respondents be recruited who are fluent in English in non-English or multi-lingual countries. It is not realistic to ask for English-fluent consumers except in the highest socio-economic classes (including business-to-business) and depends on the target market and type of study. My South African colleague, **Lesley Croskery**, presented the findings of her research about this topic at the 2016 QRCA Worldwide Conference, which vividly illustrated the different quality of feedback, described by participants as "the inner me" versus "the deeper me" elicited when one frees a person to express themselves in their first language rather than insisting that they speak English. In the words of the late statesman Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Dress is another important consideration for visiting research teams when they conduct research in certain markets. It is important to blend in with the target group you are researching by dressing modestly. Listen to your local partners if they suggest that you remove your jewelry or tone down your outfit. It is also necessary to respect the cultural norms of a society. Examples of this include cultures where women wearing trousers is frowned upon or where women are expected to cover their heads. If you don't respect these norms you run the risk of offending your participants or being dismissed by a tribal leader, both of which will endanger the quality of engagement with your participants.

Comments from colleagues I interviewed reiterated insights from the presentation "Water Wows" by **Piyul Mukherjee** and Pia Mollback-Verbic. It illustrated why multi-country research design cannot be "one size fits all." Although Piyul and Pia's paper referred to Western versus Eastern culture, the principles they highlighted apply to other emerging markets as well. Differences between the individualistic society of the West vs. the collectivist society of most emerging markets must be understood and respected. People in the Third World are more gregarious and used to solving problems within the community rather than individually. The way people share their opinions differs. In Western culture, direct questions will elicit direct answers. Criticism and scepticism are more easily expressed without holding back. In Eastern cultures and other emerging markets, questions are answered in an indirect, organic, roundabout way. People are inherently polite and, per their cultural norms, will not be critical to your face.

TIPS

Limited literacy or cultural factors can make it difficult to keep engagement high and get quality insights. Here are a few tips from the field:

1. Involve a local researcher/moderator to help you to close or minimize the cultural gap.

2. Avoid complexity and simplify anything with the potential to cause confusion.

3. Avoid writing exercises. Instead use visual stimuli to encourage verbalization.

4. Make questions, exercises and metaphors relevant and familiar to their culture.

5. Create a situation and environment so participants feel comfortable and relaxed enough to reveal their "deeper me."

6. Treat participants with dignity by respecting their cultural norms and personal environment.

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What are the practical implications of these literacy and culture factors when we conduct global research with lower income groups? What impact does literacy and culture have on the way we word and structure the discussion guide, the methodology we choose and the projective techniques we use?

Time management is very important, and it is wise to build in extra time. Allow more time for introductions and ice-breakers for respondents to feel comfortable and to build trust. Allow more time for each field event, as it simply takes longer to recruit than in Western cultures. In a group discussion, everyone wants to be heard, and the language may be more verbose so that it takes longer to express thoughts and feelings.

Simplify the discussion guide to its essentials, and make it clear what the "must have" information is. Simplify language by using words that are relevant and understandable to the culture. Modify exercises to something participants can relate to as relevant to their culture and traditions.

Avoid or take care with written tasks such as bubble drawings, sentence completion and letters. Scales and ratings are also tricky and easily misunderstood.

Limit the number of concepts being tested—too many can confuse consumers, especially if the differences between concepts are too subtle or too abstract. **Raji Bonala** recommended reducing the number of concepts tested per session, eliminating ones clearly not working, or rewriting language to be more meaningful to the culture.

Which methods work best for these targets? Many of the colleagues I interviewed in different parts of the world mentioned **ethnography** first when I asked this question. Ethnographic methods bring us closer to reality to observe actual behavior rather than relying on verbalization of reported behavior. Participants are more at ease in their own home with familiar objects and can express themselves better when they can "show and tell." Ethnography is also ideal for clients to get firsthand exposure to the lifestyle and consumer behavior of target segments. Client teams should be kept as small as possible because a large entourage can be intimidating and impractical in small homes. **Nandi Mswane** believes it feels more natural and less threatening to participants in South Africa when client observers also take part in the conversation, rather than acting like a silent jury.

When the cultures are more collectivistic and community oriented, **friendship groups** and **paired interviews** work very well. Respondents feel more comfortable in the presence of a friend, colleague or family member. The informal, relaxed chatting between them yields rich language and reveals true feelings and actions.

Cultural norms need to be considered when planning **group discussions.** In some cultures, it is unacceptable for younger people to speak before older people, so it is better to recruit a homogenous age range in the same group. Groups in people's own environment (e.g., township) may work better than in an upmarket facility. Ideal group size can differ from culture to culture. In India, smaller groups of six are ideal because participants tolerate multiple people talking at the same time.

What about **digital methods?** Do they work? This depends on consumers' access to mobile devices versus computers, Internet penetration and data costs. For example, most digital platforms work well with China's tech savvy participants.

Mobile works well in South America, Africa and India. Most people there have mobile phones, and smart phone ownership is rising rapidly with Android devices

FIGURE 1

still more common than Apple iPhones. Often participants in South Africa and India already have WhatsApp on their phones. Their familiarity with WhatsApp can make it a better choice than traditional market research platforms and apps.

Many colleagues invite participants to reply by video rather than text. Some cultures (such as Brazil) like selfie videos. In India it may be more comfortable if someone, perhaps a family member, asks questions to the participant. Showing something by sharing a picture or video clip minimizes the need for too much text typing.

Which **projective techniques** work well to reveal richer insights for these lower socio-economic groups? Personification emerged as a favourite tool, but it is necessary to adapt the metaphor to be relevant to the specific culture. Brand party can work but needs to be adapted to social occasions relevant to the culture. In collectivistic societies, relationships are important and can offer rich metaphors: which of the brands in a category is the grandfather, the mother, the wealthy uncle, the naïve child? With

projective techniques, it is important to simplify the technique and adapt it to a situation that participants can relate to.

When using projective techniques, add visual stimuli like pictures, photos, mood boards or physical objects that help respondents express themselves and compensate for limited verbal skills.

Desleigh Dunnett shared a wonderful example with me of tactile ranking used in the Northern Territory of Australia (see Figure 1). Community members discuss social problems in their community and sort nuts into different sized heaps to indicate the prevalence and impact of different social problems in their community. This physical ranking activity goes hand-in-hand with much debate of which problems are greater than others and why, an enabling technique in the true sense of the word. ✎

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