Method of empathy based stories

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Added value by sensory approach
XV Nordic Workshop in Sensory Science
on the 22nd – 23rd of May 2013 in Helsinki, Finland
NCRC was founded 1990 and it operates under the Ministry of Employment and the Economy.

NCRC studies, forecasts, and identifies factors contributing to change and risk in consumer society, consumer behaviour and markets, and provides consumer research data.

In addition the Research Centre participates in researcher training and promotes the operation of research networks as well as national and international co-operation among researchers.

NCRC yields information to:

- Public administration (parliament, ministries, civil service departments, municipalities, Nordic co-operation, EU), consumer administration, economic life
- Research, education, guidance, libraries
- Organisations, media, consumers
Presentation structure

1) What is Method of empathy based stories?
2) How it was applied in research concerning development of food products, meals and packages tailored for senior consumers?
3) Closing remarks
A beloved child has many names...

Method of empathy based stories
or
Story telling
or
Role playing method
What does method of empathy based stories mean?

- The method of empathy based stories means writing short stories according to instructions that the researcher has given in a frame story.
- The respondent writes a short story based on images that the frame story has raised.
- Stories are not necessarily accounts of reality, but possible descriptions about what might happen and what different things mean.
- The method of empathy based stories makes it possible to break away from present, because stories can deal with future.
- According to the basic idea of the method of empathy based stories, the respondents can observe, analyze and interpret different kind of situations.
The history of this method...

- The roots of the method of empathy based stories originate in 1960s when concerns about the ethical questions were roused in socialpsychology.
- In laboratory circumstances, because of quite trivial scientific results, the testees were cheated to do things that drove them to emotionally heavy situations.
- Even though the testees were told after the experiments their real nature, it didn’t eliminate the fact that an experiment always leaves a memory trace in mind of testees.
- The method of empathy based stories was created in order to solve ethical problems and improve the situation of testees.
- The method of empathy based stories doesn’t manipulate or bluff testees.
...The history of this method

- The roots of the method of empathy based stories are in Anglo-American research, but during last decades it has been developed specifically in Finland.
- The experiments with the method of empathy based stories began here in the beginning of 1980s.
- Especially Jari Eskola, social scientist in Tampere university, has had an essential role in guidebooks and manuals that have been written about the method of empathy based stories.
- This method has an established role as qualitative research method in especially sociology, social psychology and pedagogy.
- Among other disciplines the method of empathy based stories is less known.
Active role playing vs. passive role playing

There are two alternatives in the method of empathy based stories:

- In active form (active role playing) the respondents are described a certain situation and their role in it is defined.
- The situation proceeds as a role play based on the interpretations about the situation by respondents.

- In passive form (passive role playing) the respondents are described a situation and they write a short story according to instructions:
  - If writing a story feels difficult, the respondent can also list his/her thoughts based on empathy.
  - The quality of written text is not important but the content.

The Finnish development of the method of empathy based stories is linked with passive form and active form is applied abroad.
Variation

- One essential feature of this method is variation = at least two different kind of frame stories is created that deviate as for an essential thing
- Every respondent is given only one kind of frame story
- By comparing the stories is found out what kind of effect the varied feature has concerning the research subject
  - The respondents may also vary such things that the researcher has not thought when creating the frame stories.
  - Short frame stories are recommended
- The function of different frame stories is important to test beforehand
  - All description, that is not necessary concerning the research problem, should be excluded from the frame stories
Data collection

- It is typical to collect the data so that the respondents are chosen from assembled group such as pupils from school class or students from lecture.
- Everybody is given an A4-paper where the frame story is written on top of the paper.
- Every variation of frame stories is shared out equally.
- Respondents have e.g. 20 minutes time to write a short story.
- The data can also be collected by mail or by e-mail, but the response rate may be low.
How the method of empathy based stories was applied in research concerning development of food products, meals and packages tailored for senior consumers?
Choosing appropriate research methods

Aim was to get qualitative information that helps to understand the preferences of seniors in terms of enjoyable eating.

There are problems related to the present situation:
- Seniors are of necessity used to current selection of ready meals.
- Seniors are not able to choose such alternative ready meal that they prefer.
- External conditions have an influence on seniors’ choices.
- So how to study from seniors’ point of view, what is a good meal like?
Creating the frame stories

We had two frame stories in our research

In the first frame story respondents were asked to empathise in situation where they describe good food

In the second frame story respondents were asked to empathise in situation where they describe bad food

In the frame stories the variation was connected to the quality of food

The respondents were given frame stories that were short but provided with enough stimulation

The functionality of frame stories were tested before data collection by NCRC personnel.
Frame story 1

You are retired. It’s an ordinary weekday. This was an excellent meal you think with content after you have finished your meal. Why was it so excellent? Empathise in the situation and describe the meal that you just have eaten: what did you eat and what did it look, smell, feel and taste like? What was the situation like where you ate the meal? Were you alone or did you have company? Were you at home or somewhere else? Did you eat your meal by kitchen table or did you perhaps watch television? Did you prepare it yourself or was it ready-made?
Frame story 2

You are retired. It's an ordinary weekday. This was a lousy meal you think with disappointment after you have finished your meal. Why was it so lousy? Empathise in the situation and describe the meal that you just have eaten: what did you eat and what did it look, smell, feel and taste like? What was the situation like where you ate the meal? Were you alone or did you have company? Were you at home or somewhere else? Did you eat your meal by kitchen table or did you perhaps watch television? Did you prepare it yourself or was it ready-made?
Data collection…

Frame stories were sent to 600 persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age: 55-64 years</th>
<th>Frame story 1</th>
<th>Frame story 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>150 copies</td>
<td>150 copies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age: 64+ years</td>
<td>150 copies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The respondents were picked from NCRC’s Consumer Panel and from Population Information System

The data were collected in October 2011

211 responses were returned, response rate was 35 %
...Data collection

- 56 stories describe good meal, 155 stories describe lousy meal
- According to previous studies 15-20 stories is enough for saturation point
  - In this research 10-15 stories were enough for saturation point
- 62% of respondents were women, 38% of respondents were men
- Youngest respondent was 54 years old and oldest 81 years old
Data collection

Stories that describe what lousy meal is like are verbally much more descriptive than stories that describe what good meal is like.

- Unwanted features are also described much more in detail than desired features.

Surprising feature in data is that some respondents who were supposed to write a story about lousy meal, wrote a story about good meal.

- Can this be interpreted as intentional rebellion against lousy meal?
- According to the eldest respondent, there is no bad food except rotten food.
The data based on the method of empathy based stories can be analysed in several ways. The data was analysed by theme identification. By discovering themes in texts we analysed what features are related to good or bad meal and food package. Only one frame story would have resulted in one-sided results. Eliminating features related to bad food don’t result in good food. Good meal and bad meal were two separate things that were reasonable to study from different basis.
The method of empathy based stories is worth trying
Respondent friendly research method

The method of empathy based stories is future oriented.
This method is welcomed choice for researcher because it helps to reveal weak signals
This method is welcomed choice for respondents too
  - Surveys are conservative
  - Strange new research method may be surprising
Method of empathy based stories vs. focus group discussions?

1. Implementation of focus group discussions and leading the discussion may be hard
   - The data based on the method of empathy based stories is relatively quick and easy to collect, but the analysis is hard

2. The method of empathy based stories is based on written material
   - In focus group discussions there are only limited time to express own opinions and views

3. The method of empathy based stories helps respondents to express freely their views and opinions about the research subject
   - In focus group discussions opinion leaders have an influence to whole discussion
Thank you and
Have a nice day!