

# The Birth of Consumer Behavior: Motivation Research in the 1950s

Ronald A. Fullerton  
*KIMEP, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – To show how 1950s Motivation Research laid the foundations of present day Consumer Behavior as a discipline

**Design/methodology/approach** – Standard historical methodology – heavy reliance upon primary sources, avoidance of anachronism, heavy use of contemporary quotations.

**Findings** – Using sociology, anthropology, and clinical psychology to explain how and why consumers buy, 1950s Motivation Research provided business with valuable information, and, in the long run, began today's Consumer Behavior.

**Originality and Value** – Offers a different view of Motivation Research, stressing its use of sociology and anthropology. Offers a corrective to the prevailing over-emphasis on Ernest Dichter.

**Keywords** – Motivation Research, Social Research Incorporated, product symbolism, social class, culture.

**Paper Type** – Research Paper

Six years ago at this conference I reported on the early development of Motivation Research. In this paper I want to explain what happened to Motivation Research during the 1950s and into the 1960s. I am not interested, however, in the controversies that swirled around Motivation Research (Tadajewski, 2006) even before the brouhaha set loose by Vance Packard's 1957 *The Hidden Persuaders*, but rather in the research itself, which was considerably broader and more multi-faceted than conventional portraits of Motivation Research portray. I am interested in what the research represented—how it vastly enriched understanding of consumers—and how it kept developing under the public surface.

I am particularly interested in exploring what happened to Motivation Research after its time of great media attention, when it disappeared from public sight. I soon realized that it did not disappear at all, but continued on, ever growing, in the work of marketing practitioners, and then was developed by university researchers. In concluding a major monograph study of Motivation Research, Newman (1957) wrote:

“In our examination of...motivation research, we found a number of systematic efforts to make use of the behavioral fields...Together, they constitute a movement, now young, which promises important conceptual growth and therefore appears destined to be a major landmark in the history of marketing” (Newman, 1957, p.504).

That field eventually became known as Consumer Behavior. This paper will show that its roots are clearly in the Motivation Research work done in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Before that, as even a perusal of one of the encyclopedic marketing texts of the 1920s through 1950s will show (e.g., Converse and Huegy, 1952), marketing covered a great many subjects, including ones today left to other disciplines (e.g., hedging)—yet it had almost nothing to say about consumer behavior. That came later, after the 1950s, but its origins lay in Motivation Research.

## Methodology

I used standard historical methodology as taught to me through undergraduate and graduate (MA, Ph.D.) courses. In particular, I relied almost exclusively on sources written at the time of the events discussed, and did not read into these sources things that did not exist at the time they were done—in other words, avoiding the sin of “anachronism”. Thus I have intentionally used few sources written after 1961, and most of those are the remembrances of a major Motivation Researcher. Where the Marketing discipline eschews long quotations, History relishes them, and thus I have used several long

quotations to let contemporaries speak to us, avoiding the sin of “anachronism”. It is pointed out what these quotations represent.

### **Motivation Research**

Motivation Research drew upon work that had been developed over decades in several of the behavioral sciences: in the depth psychology of Freud, Adler, and others, but also in sociology and anthropology and even in some areas of economics. Consultants picked up this diverse university-generated work and directed it towards answering “why”: why does a consumer buy or not buy a product.

Motivation Research “represents the introduction into consumer or market research of new concepts drawn from the whole range of the social sciences, especially clinical psychology, sociology, and anthropology” (Gardner, 1959, p. 36). It introduced new methods to marketing research “by applying methods which have been used successfully in other branches of social science and psychology,...turning away from...the mere collection of facts without interpreting them,” according to a typical definition (Schrrier and Wood, 1948). A committee convened by the American Marketing Association in 1950 concluded that: “Motivational research is so important to the development of the applied science of marketing that a constant effort should be made to see that the truest insights of the other social sciences be made available to marketing in a form in which they can be made to bear on marketing problems” (Woodward et.al., 1950). “The case for making greater use of the behavioral fields,” wrote Newman (1957, p. 386), “rests on the recognition that buying and consumption are human acts serving human purposes about which marketing has known too little. ...They can be better understood if...behavioral theories concepts, and methods enter the picture.”

Motivation Research especially attempted to uncover underlying motivations. It attempted to “focus attention on the whole battery of inner conditions that play a dynamic part in a person’s buying or not buying, responding favorably or unfavorably to some communication” (Smith, 1954, p. 5). “In motivational research,” explained one of its founders in 1943, “we change our focus...to sub-surface phenomena” (Lazarsfeld, 1943). This was essential, he continued, because some buyer motivations were unconscious, others only partly conscious; buyers might have forgotten, or they might well have rationalized their motives. Mainstream economic thought, which then heavily influenced marketing thought, posited “economic man,” a totally rational decision maker as the buyer. People would have been embarrassed to admit to anything but rational thinking in their purchases.

Motivation Research drew upon several social sciences, which represented differing perspectives. No one captured this better than Martineau (1957):

However, psychology is only one of the approaches in Motivation Research. The human individual doesn’t live alone. He develops as a personality through his interactions with the other people around him....That is why he has to be viewed as a member of various groups. ...He will be influenced in large measure by what his friends and associates think. Several sciences like sociology, social psychology, and social anthropology, are important for turning up these group attitudes. ...It is also important to consider the individual as a member of a much larger society. He is an American; therefore he inherits a whole set of values. ...

Anthropologists also approach the problem of personality differently than the psychologists. They want to know most of all how does the individual get along with other people.

The point is that all of these disciplines belong in Motivation Research because, each in a different way and yet concurrently through a closely overlapping relationship, they contribute some light on that obscure and complex thing we call human nature (Martineau, 1957, pp. 30-31).

### **Academia and Consumer Behavior**

Academia produced a great deal of social science research in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s; indeed, the feeling was that the social sciences had come of age and were progressing rapidly. But aside from a few scholars, mainly at the University of Chicago, the application of social science to understanding consumer behavior was done by for-profit organizations. Inevitably, much of the research was proprietary hence not made public. But a fair amount of it was disseminated; there are, for example, complete explanations of projects in Newman (1957) and Martineau (1957), who relied heavily upon the findings of the SRI researchers at the University of Chicago.

A branch of the discipline of economics did address consumer behavior. There was a short-lived movement which published a journal called *Consumer Behavior* (1952-1954); the movement was

dominated by economists but also contained industry people and diverse university social scientists, and was financially supported by the Consumers' Union. It favored standard empirical work based upon surveys. In 1954 there was a symposium at the University of Nebraska resulting in an important monograph (Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1954). A few years later Clark (1958) published a monograph that contained a lengthy bibliographic essay by Morgan. Much of the literature cited was by economists, for example George Katona, and much of that was extremely specific, e.g., sales of potatoes and eggs in small geographic markets, but Morgan was open to and listed contributions from other disciplines, even psychoanalysis.

### The Motivation Research Community in the 1950s

Both the popular (e.g., *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Printer's Ink*) and the academic (e.g., *Journal of Marketing*, *Harvard Business Review*) press devoted considerable attention to Motivation Research during the 1950s. The attention climaxed in 1957-1958 with the tremendous public reception given to Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, a thoroughly researched yet deeply biased book. Despite all the attention, the number of firms actually doing much real Motivation Research was relatively small, although it grew as the decade proceeded. It was hard to find well trained analysts (Wolf, 1955; Brown, 1958). Some university-trained analysts found it difficult to work with businesspeople (Carlson, 1953). For a while Motivation Research was so hot that many market researchers absurdly claimed to be doing it. Universities did not teach the subject, but they did teach a growing number of social science courses (Wolf, 1955, pp. 35-37, 49-50).

### Who Were the Major Motivation Researchers?

The researchers included university social scientists and independent marketing consultants; among the later were Louis Cheskin and James Vicary, who were later made notorious by Vance Packard. Several organizations operated on a large scale. Ernest Dichter's Institute for Motivational Research was one of them, of course. Others are presented in Table 1 below. These were generally highly respected figures; names such as Britt, and Gardner will be familiar to many marketing academics. People of stature assured client companies that they were getting MR expertise from estimable sources.

**Table 1: Major MR Research Leaders and Organizations**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR	ORGANIZATION AFFILIATION	LOCATION
Banks, Seymour	Leo Burnett, Inc.	Chicago
Britt, Dr. Stuart Henderson	Needham, Lewis, Brorby	Chicago
Dichter, Dr. Ernest	Institute for Motivational Research	Croton, NY
Cheskin, Louis	Color Research Institute	Chicago
Gardner, Dr. Burleigh B.	University of Chicago; Social Research, Inc.	Chicago
Henry, William E.	University of Chicago; Social Research, Inc.	Chicago
Herzog, Dr. Herta	McCann-Erickson	New York
Stevens, William	Young and Rubicam	New York
Smith, George Horsley	Rutgers University, Grey Advertising	N.Y., New Jersey
Twedt, Dr. Dik Warren	Needham, Lewis, Brorby	Chicago
Warner, Dr. W. Lloyd	University of Chicago; Social Research, Inc.	Chicago
Vicary, James M.	James M. Vicary Corporation	

**Table 1.**  
Major MR  
Research  
Leaders and  
Organizations

### Conceptualization During the 1950s

In 1954 the Advertising Research Foundation published *The Language of Dynamic Psychology as Related to Motivation Research*, part of its ongoing series of publications, which included five on Motivation Research. The book was a dictionary of terms from dynamic psychology and other social science fields; it was intended to guide advertising practitioners. While some of the book consists of Freudian terms that have since passed out of general use—e.g., “castration complex” and “penis envy”—much also consists of social science terms that feature large in today's consumer behavior texts. Table 2 lists these.

**Table 2:**  
**Terms from Wulfeck and Bennett’s The Language of Dynamic Psychology**

accommodation	social mores
acculturalization	motivation
affect	need
aided recall	persuasion
apperception	perception
attitude	social pressures
character/ personality	reaction (to a stimulus)
(social) class	recall method (unaided, aided)
closure	recognition
compulsion	reference group
conditioned response	retention (in memory)
cultural deviance	ritual
culture	role playing behavior
drive	self concept
eidetic imagery	social control
frame of reference	socialization
group analysis	subliminal stimulus
identification	symbol
body image	trait
(physiological) impression	
memory	

**Table 2.**  
Terms from  
Wulfeck and  
Bennett’s The  
Language of  
Dynamic  
Psychology

Morgan (1958) discusses reference groups, status roles, theories of consumer learning, and personality; he distinguishes between extensive and casual decision making by consumers much as we would today, although the terms high and low involvement had not yet come into use. He argues that more research is needed on attitudes and changes in them, and on family and reference group influences (Morgan 1958, pp. 101-102, 119, 121)

A typical use of several of these terms used by Wulfeck and Bennett and by Morgan was made by Smith (1954): “Frames of reference thus merge with personality traits and habit systems. ...Attitudes are important because they tell us not only what people will accept or reject, but how something can be presented to them” (Smith 1954, p.7). Smith continued:

“Sensations, Images, Feelings  
These three terms have played a classic role in the development of psychology. Sensation is the experience which follows the application of a stimulus—seeing the blue in a Wedgewood vase...  
Feelings refer to the pleasant-unpleasant, excitement-depression qualities of experience. Emotions are more complex states (anger, hate, pity) which contain feelings and attitudes as well as sensations from pounding heart, drying mouth, tightening muscles, and churning viscera.  
Sensations, images, and feelings, together with unspoken words and many minute muscle movements, seem to make up the content of consciousness at any particular time” (Smith, 1954, p. 8).

To these terms, Martineau (1957) added “style of life”, or lifestyle, and combined it with “self-ideal”, or self-concept: “In an intelligent, normal person, virtually everything is motivated by subtle reference to the person’s self-ideal—the kind of character ideal he wants to become. ...In this yearning for self expression, we reach for products, for brands, for institutions which will be compatible with our schemes of what we are or want to be” (Martineau, 1957, pp. 45-46).

### **Social Class**

The famous sociologist and journalist Whyte (1953) noted how residents of then-new suburbs tended to share and conform to the same values and attitudes, which included a strong dogma of not showing off. Another article by Whyte emphasized the influence of the neighborhood social group's word of mouth on the buying decisions of its members for air conditioners (Whyte 1954). The social class scheme devised by W. Lloyd Warner and Pierre Martineau was used in textbooks for decades. Martineau stressed that membership in a particular social class meant adhering to a code of values, which in turn heavily influenced consumption (Martineau 1957, chapter 14). Writing of class differences, Martineau (1957, p. 165) said: "We must realize that between us and the vast majority of the market there are vast differences in communication skills, differences in moral viewpoint, differences in what constitutes humor, differences in sophistication. ...The symbols we use for communication are often meaningless to the class we are trying to sell".

Product symbolism, a topic which features large in at least some consumer behavior texts today, was extensively discussed by Martineau (1957), by Newman (1957), and by Levy (1959). Martineau, who relied heavily upon the findings of the SRI researchers at the University of Chicago, emphasized that consumers often buy the symbols that products represent to them rather than just the products (Martineau, 1957, chapter 11). "We don't just want any toothpaste, any cigarette. We want the brand which emphasizes our identity—our status, sex, personality, age group" (Martineau, 1957, p. 189).

### **Use of Motivation Research**

Motivation Research was used for product design, trade relations, training of salespeople, and store layout (Newman, 1957, p. 393); it was especially used by advertising agencies in stimulating creativity (Evans, 1957; Krugman, 1956-1957; Martineau, 1957, p. 8). Such lifestyle values as the worship of youthfulness, the search for individuality, and the trend towards more casual and informal living; need to be emphasized in successful advertising, stressed Martineau (1957, chapter 13). Martineau pointed out that: "By contrast with the dismal deficits of railroad passenger operations, every airport is bulging with travelers, who see present air transportation as what they want in their style of living: excitement, adventure, super up-todateness,..." (Martineau, 1957, p. 157). This was written before jet passenger airplanes were introduced.

The extensive case examples discussed by Newman (1957, chapters 5-10) each produced findings that were used in several ways, from changed advertising appeals through training and the design of premiums and installment plans.

### **Research Methods**

The most-used research methods were the "depth" (today "long") interview and the several projective techniques. But a variety of other methods were also used, sometimes in the same study, reflecting the overall breadth and diversity of Motivation Research. This is illustrated by the in-depth reports of Motivation Research studies presented by Newman in his 1957 book. Table 3 will illustrate.

**Table 3:**  
**Techniques Employed in Some Major MR Projects**  
 (Source: Newman 1957)

<b>PROJECT and MR FIRM</b>	<b>TECHNIQUE(S)</b>
State Farm Auto Insurance/ Needham, Louis, and Brorby	Questionnaire (qualitative) random sample of 7500 Focus group interviews Incomplete sentences (Projection) Narrative projection Balloon tests (Projection)
Automobiles / Chicago Tribune	Attitude and Opinion (open-ended) Questions Cartoon Tests (Projection) Depth Interviews Sentence Completion (Projection) Thematic Apperception (Projection) Analysis of social class
Donahue Sales/ Young and Rubicam	Cartoon Tests (Projection) Depth Interviews Word Association Tests (Projection)
Dieting/ Young and Rubicam	Qualitative questionnaire Social class and status analysis
Jewell Tea (1953)/ Social Research, Inc.	Detailed (depth) interviews Observations Sentence Completion (Projection) Thematic Apperception (Projection)

**Table 3.**  
 Techniques  
 Employed in  
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 MR Projects

Although widely used, depth interviews presented several problems. The greatest was that there were relatively few really good depth interviewers, hence the quality of results was erratic. Probably writing of Ernest Dichter’s firm, Brown (1958, p. 79) wrote: “There is no doubt that the head of this organization can conduct extremely productive depth interviews himself. It is found, however, that other staff interviewers are unable to develop the same quality of penetrating information, in spite of the fact that they have studied extensively in the field of psychology. Depth interviewing...is a highly personal matter.”

Focus groups, then a relatively new social science technique, were used more as the decade went on. But survey research with statistical analysis was also used (Ferber, 1958; Scriven, 1958; Gustafson, 1958; Wolf, 1955). Herta Herzog, for example, after using depth interviews, checked their results by using structured questionnaires on samples up to three thousand people (Packard, 1957, p. 203). Many experts came to accept that the qualitative methods were important at the idea gathering or hypothesis generation stages of research (Ferber, 1958).

**The Value of Motivation Research**

At its best, Motivation Research vastly increased understanding of consumers. This was appreciated by business; many businesses profited from results engendered by implementing Motivation Research studies. Martineau reported studies, for example, showing that gasoline station cleanliness was the most important determinant of whether drivers would stop there; or that instant coffee was even consumed by coffee connoisseurs who were in a hurry; or that smoking had an enormous variety of meanings that could overweigh its negative associations (Martineau, pp. 35, 55-61). The Young and Rubicam study of dieting described by Newman (1957) found that weight consciousness increased as one went up the social status scale. The State Farm Insurance study described by Newman (1957) found that buyers of automobile insurance considered price important, but also that they wanted assurance that the insurance company cared, that it would support them in case of a problem. The State Farm senior executives were tremendously impressed and influenced by the psychological dimensions

uncovered by the study. One practitioner-oriented article stressed that “you can gauge [your] customers’ wants” by Motivation Research studies (Gustafson, 1958).

### Enter the 1960s: The Birth of Consumer Behavior

As the 1960s entered, Motivation Research received considerably less media attention. The academic journals, for example, came to prefer more quantitative approaches; they were newer—and they were on the mode. The practitioner publications avoided Motivation Research as old hat. One could think that it had died out—but that would be very wrong. Motivation Research continued to be used by practitioners; in fact, its use increased (Collins, 1970; Levy, 2003, 2005). The feeling that some had articulated in the mid to late 1950s—the feeling that Motivation Research was just getting started, that it had a great deal of growth ahead of it (Brown, 1957; Newman, 1957)—was proven accurate.

In 1961 a young academic published an article praising Motivation Research in a regional journal (Engel, 1961). His name was James Engel, who was seven years later to be lead author on the pioneering textbook on Consumer Behavior. The book’s organization of topics has continued to be used by most consumer behavior texts. This organization of topics was taken from Motivation Research.

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