Revitalizing the Critical Imagination: Unleashing the Crouched Tiger

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The purpose of this article is to further the "critical imagination project" that we began in 1991. The goal of this project has always been to inspire researchers to engage in action-oriented programs of research aimed at improving society and the lives of consumers. On the basis of a dialogue with Hetrick and Lozada's thoughtful work, we suggest that the critical imagination project can still empower both consumers and consumer researchers. Toward this end, we respond to four important issues: First, what is a reasonable interpretation of critical theory? Second, does an accurate interpretation of critical theory necessarily involve a capitalist critique? Third, what are the core ideas of critical theory? And finally, what kinds of methods will justify a critical theory?

Hope is neither passive waiting nor is it the unrealistic forming of circumstances that cannot occur. It is like the crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come. [ERICH FROMM]

In 1991, we published "The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research" in the Journal of Consumer Research (JCR). The purpose of this article was to introduce critical theory and present an interpretation that was relevant and accessible to consumer researchers. Our motivation was to suggest a "critical" direction for consumer research that went beyond cognitive and behavioral issues surrounding acquisition, consumption, disposition, and marketing of consumer goods. Specifically, we wanted to propose a framework that would enable consumer researchers to participate in theory-driven social change aimed at resolving pressing social problems. In some small way, we wanted to help unleash the crouched tiger. Toward this end, we stressed the connection between science and emancipation. We presented a brief history of the Frankfurt School, the normative structure of critical theory, and a workbench method.

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It is interesting to note that, in the last three years, "The Critical Imagination" has generated a wide range of responses. These responses have rarely occupied a middle-of-the-road position (Goldberg 1994; Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Larsen and Wright 1993). In reflecting on the wide range of criticisms and praise, it becomes clear that the most critical group consists of well-informed theorists who are interested in theory-borrowing issues in the context of being true to critical theory. Hetrick and Lozada (1994) fit solidly within this camp and their paper is exactly the type of dialogue that we had hoped would emerge from our original paper. Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) critique focuses heavily on issues of being consistent with the original Frankfurt School theorists. We agree with many of their points. For example, we agree that critical research must include a critique of capitalism. However, we advocate a broader position and believe that critique must include all forms of domination. Similarly, we agree that many other critical approaches exist and are worthy of attention. (For example, Hirschman's [1993] Marxist-feminist approach or Peñaloza's [1994] critical ethnography are two exciting possibilities.) We had always envisioned critical theory as a useful starting point and believed that this approach had to be revitalized to deal with the problems of a postmodern society.

Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) comment raises four important issues. First, what is a reasonable interpretation of critical theory? Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that our interpretation was inaccurate or inconsistent with a correct account of critical theory. Especially prevalent were suggestions that we had "watered down" or "sanitized" critical theory. Second, does
an accurate interpretation of critical theory necessarily involve a capitalist critique? Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that our interpretation was conservative because it may "sustain social groups sympathetic to capitalism" (p. 549). Third, what are the core ideas of critical theory? Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that because we lack a capitalist critique, we set forth vague or unfinished explanations and conceptualizations of emancipation, freedom, oppressor, oppressed, and ideology. Finally, what kinds of methods will justify a critical theory? Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that our workbench method perpetuates capitalism and is therefore inappropriate and inconsistent with critical theory.

RESPONDING TO THE CRITIQUE

Interpretation and Social Context

According to Jay (1973), the work of the Frankfurt School covered such a wide range of topics that a final analysis of critical theory would require a team of scholars "expert in everything from musicology to sinology" (p. xvi). To present critical theory as a unified philosophical system is to "distort its essentially open-ended, probing, unfinished quality" (Jay 1973, p. 41). Murray and Ozanne (1991, p. 129) suggest: "Since critical theory does not represent a single or unified approach, it cannot be described with a single definition (Held 1980; Tar 1977). The term usually refers to the group of researchers that coalesced around the Frankfurt Institute (Fuhrman and Snizek 1979/1980)." If a text is open ended, then it can be used by future generations to understand social contexts not yet realized. This is, given that understanding is a hermeneutical event, interpretation cannot be detached completely from the social context. Thus, if we are to energize critical theory in contemporary society, we must consider the current social conditions.

The original Frankfurt critics were describing a phase of capitalist development that has now been superseded. The interpretation that we presented in our 1991 article reflects our efforts to create a more contemporary, revitalized critical theory. Here, the internal contradictions of bureaucratic, statist models can serve as a potential force for change. For example, the Clinton administration encourages workplace democracy and is supportive of things like the buyout of United Airlines by its employees (McCarthy 1993). Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) interpretation would suggest that this "soft" form of emancipation is just another way of controlling workers. An alternative interpretation is that workplace democracy and employee-owned companies point to taken-for-granted contradictions in traditional social arrangements. Thus, these new social arrangements should be discussed, analyzed, and explored with an open mind. As we stated in 1991: "according to Adorno, one must not only see the old in the new, but also the new in the old" (p. 135; our emphasis). So the buyout of United Airlines might inspire workers in other industries to question the traditional structure of ownership in their industry and perhaps move to change to a new structure.

Thus, when Hetrick and Lozada (1994, p. 548) "suggest first and foremost that Murray and Ozanne (1991) have represented and used critical theory in a number of ways that are inconsistent with that of the Frankfurt Circle," they are assuming that a correct interpretation exists that they have found and we have not. Our interpretation of critical theory proposes that critical theory is not a unified approach and to present it this way distorts its open-ended, unfinished quality. In addition, interpretation is a creative interaction between the text and the reader (i.e., a hermeneutic event). We believe that the power of critical theory resides in a broadened, revitalized interpretation.

A Broadened View of Domination

Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that meaningful social change would not result from our version of critical theory and, thus, we have "defanged" (i.e., rendered powerless) critical theory. Central to their argument is that the tiger's bite comes from the critique of capitalism. We agree that a critical approach should include a critique of capitalism, but the power of critical theory resides in its ability to critique all forms of domination. In this section, we explore Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) interpretation of critical theory that restricts emancipatory impulses to the proletariat and compare it to our broader vision of critical theory.

Specifically, we agree that while critical theory defies a single definition, one can certainly come up with reasonable and unreasonable interpretations of specific works. If we compare Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) interpretation of Horkheimer (1937) 1972, with our own, different emphases can be identified and discussed. This work is particularly relevant because Horkheimer tries to explicate critical theory by comparing it to traditional theory.

Hetrick and Lozada (1994) draw on Geuss's (1981) interpretation of Horkheimer's classic essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1972). According to Geuss (1981), traditional and critical theory differ along three dimensions: (a) "aims or goals, and the way agents can use them," (b) "logical or cognitive structure" (i.e.,
"critical theories are 'self-reflective'"), and (c) "confirmation" (i.e., evaluation must include a "reflectively acceptable" criterion) (as cited by Hetrick and Lozada [1994], p. 549). Although we find this interpretation plausible, turning to the primary source (i.e., Horkheimer 1972), we formed a different interpretation in our 1991 article.

First, critical theory acknowledges that all theory has political motivations (Horkheimer 1972, p. 222). Second, the task of critical theory is to present societal contradictions in the hopes of emerging as a "force to stimulate change" (Horkheimer 1972, p. 215). Third, the task of critical theory is to encourage awareness of potential alternatives: "Yet, as far as the role of experience is concerned, there is a difference between traditional and critical theory. The viewpoints which the latter derives from historical analysis as the goals of human activity, especially the idea of a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community, are immanent in human work but are not correctly grasped by individuals or by the common mind" (Horkheimer 1972, p. 213; our emphasis).

Fourth, although critical theory has an emancipatory interest, it does not commit us to the proletarian vision. Our interpretation of critical theory (Murray and Ozanne 1991) would pass muster with either Geuss's criteria or our interpretation of Horkheimer's.

When comparing the two interpretations of Horkheimer, our fourth criterion emerges as an important difference. If we agree with Hetrick and Lozada (1994) that critical theory should be restricted to a capitalist critique, then critical theory should always reflect the interests of the proletariat. Pertaining to the fourth criterion, Horkheimer (1972) states: "But it must be added that even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge. . . . If critical theory consisted essentially in formulations of the feelings and ideas of one class at any given moment, it would not be structurally different from the special branches of science" (pp. 213–214). If critical theory does not uniquely align with the proletariat, then its task cannot be restricted to only a critique of capitalism. Criticism needs to be expanded to include "consumerism, technology, scientism, relations of domination in everyday life, and personal freedom and fulfillment" (Piccone 1978, p. 54). Clearly, domination exists in capitalist, socialist, or any other form of bureaucratic organization. As we stated in our 1991 article: "Research should focus on both a critique . . . of society (i.e., the structure of authority and the emergence of mass culture) . . . and the ways in which society is known (i.e., positivism and interpretivism)" (p. 131).

The above discussion and interpretations of Horkheimer (1972) illustrate an important point about the power of critical theory. The critical theorists wrote so much, over such a long period of time, that it is extremely difficult (and probably inappropriate) to summarize their work in a single article. We chose to deal with this problem by trying to recognize general, underlying assumptions pertaining to ontology, axiology, and epistemology. For example, an agnosticism regarding the nature of social beings led the critical theorists to a position emphasizing potential: "When critical theorists reflect on the nature of human beings, human potential becomes the measure of all things" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 133). Thus, in our original article, we stressed this ontological assumption because it represents a connecting thread, whether we are discussing their work in authority, prejudice, philosophy, art, or music. It is interesting to note that in the same essay that is often used for establishing a reasonable criterion for the difference between traditional and critical theory, Horkheimer states: "There are no general criteria for judging the critical theory as a whole, for it is always based on the recurrence of events and thus on a self-reproducing totality. Nor is there a social class by whose acceptance of the theory one could be guided" (1972, p. 242). As discussed in the last section, our position is that multiple, plausible interpretations of critical theory exist. It is difficult to defend the position that a precise, correct interpretation exists that limits critique to specific forms of complex organizations, and that other interpretations lose their critical edge because they are inconsistent with this view. Critical theory's power resides in its ability to critique all forms of domination.

Essential Tensions

Hetrick and Lozada (1994) also suggest that we failed to explain key concepts such as the meaning of ideology and the relationships between oppressor and oppressed and between emancipation and freedom. While these concepts are explored in the heart of our 1991 piece (see "The Normative Structure of Critical Theory" [Murray and Ozanne, pp. 132–136]), we welcome the opportunity to develop these ideas further. Because critical theory does not commit itself to the proletarian vision, it is left with "no identifiable agent of social transformation . . . only an anonymous subject—[human]kind as such" (Benhabib 1981, p. 55). Thus, oppression does not flow from a single, unified source (i.e., capitalism), but from a complicated net-

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1Although a capitalist critique was an important emphasis of the Frankfurt School, it is interesting to note that Geuss's (1981) criteria do not include a capitalist critique or any mention of alignment with specific progressive forces in society as a definitive feature of critical theory. Critical theory can be used to critique any form of bureaucratic organization that is driven by instrumental rationality.

2For example, only during the 1940s, the institute published 76 studies in authority, 43 articles in philosophy, 38 studies in literature, music, and art, 17 studies in social prejudices, and 22 other empirical articles that are difficult to categorize (Jay 1973, p. 342, endnote 4).
work of power relations and struggles. Admittedly, this interpretation makes concepts like the oppressor and oppressed less precise. For example, we identified the oppressor with what Hetrick and Lozada call constraining social structures (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 139) and with "powerful sectors" (p. 133), "unrecognized social constraints" (p. 139), and "people who own and manage technology, finance capital, and the communication and transportation infrastructure" (p. 133). The oppressed were discussed in terms of "humans [who] are confined by social structures" (p. 135) or "social actors who are constrained" (p. 135).

Our interpretation emphasizes the "interplay between subject (meanings and object (social structures)" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 132), or what Habermas refers to as the "inner, private world" and the "outer, public world" (Levin 1991, p. 179). The psychoanalyst Winnicott called this intermediate area "potential space" (Levin 1991, p. 178). This space has "potential" in the sense that the interplay represents oppression but also the possibility of freedom and emancipation. Our ontology and methodology are organized around discovering the tensions and contradictions between these poles. If, through self-reflection, participants become aware of contradictions between subjective understandings and the outer public world, then we are optimistic about their abilities to act: "If people become aware that their ideas about reality are not congruent with reality, this awareness may serve as an impetus for rational social development and change" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 133). While the researchers can work with social actors to discover alternative paths, the "social actors must freely chart their own course" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 138) lest they be oppressed by some outside decision maker.

Hetrick and Lozada (1994) are pessimistic about the use of instrumental rationality or any other method of emancipation. We see in Habermas a more optimistic, forward-looking approach (see Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 141). According to Habermas (1975), the process of rationalization can also be used to question the legitimation of domination. As the process of rational administrative control extends into all domains of life, it becomes more difficult for the sources of domination to remain anonymous. As dominant relations are revealed, they will be "subjected to increased legitimation demands" (Benhabib 1981, p. 50). Inevitably, these demands will lead to a legitimation crisis and the opportunity to join crisis and critique. A legitimation crisis therefore opens the door to "new modes of interaction, experience and cognition, new forms of life and experimental institutional structures" (Benhabib 1981, p. 58).

In short, if we are to use critique for reconstruction, we need a critical imagination.

The latter interpretation clearly diverges from a Marxist perspective. However, the degree to which critical theory reflects its Marxist roots is controversial.

From the founding of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1922 to the beginning of the Morhemeyer era in 1931, the Frankfurt School was clearly Marxist, emphasizing "scientific historical materialism" (Jay 1973). Felix J. Weil, who provided the initial endowment, Kurt Albert Geirach, the first head of the institute, and Carl Grunberg, the first director to succeed Geirach, were all Marxists in orientation. During this time the institute assumed an interpretation of economic determinism and positivism. It was not until Max Horkheimer assumed the directorship that in Grunberg that the institute started to diverge from its Marxist roots and we see the beginning of critical theory. It was the left-wing authoritarianism of Stalin's Russia coupled with the intellectual backgrounds of Horkheimer, Adorno, and other essential figures of the Frankfurt School that led them to a new perspective. Adorno and Horkheimer had worked together since 1922 when they were in a seminar on Husserl taught by Hans Cornelius (in 1924 Adorno defended his dissertation under Cornelius on Husserl's phenomenology; Jay 1973, pp. 23–24). Over time, Horkheimer, Lowenthal, and Adorno were all heavily influenced by Cornelius, husserl, and Kant. Husserl and Heidegger were also important influences on Marcuse. Then, in the early 1930s, due to Lowenthal's friendship with Fromm, the Frankfurt School established an association with the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute. With the introduction of psychoanalysis to the institute, the Grunberg era was clearly over and we have the beginning of what would later be referred to as critical theory (Jay 1973, p. 28).

From our perspective, the arguments of the critical theorists (beginning with Horkheimer) most closely parallel not Marx, but Weber (see Waters 1994, pp. 187–191). Just as Weber argued that value rationality is slowly replaced by instrumental rationality, the critical theorists argue that critical reason is slowly replaced by instrumental reason. Instrumental reason leads to a preoccupation with means rather than ends. This preoccupation becomes most apparent when looking at the relationship between technology and economic production. The success of technology has led to an overproduction of commodities. These commodities need to be successfully marketed and consumed in order to maintain and develop the new technology. This overproduction leads to constraints on human freedom in the workplace as well as constraints on human potential as people become slaves to consumption. "Human beings are motivated not by dreams of truth, or civilization, or peace, or freedom from hunger, but by: 'the dream of stepping up to the next level of automobile or the next better gadget' (Frankfurt Institute for Social Research 1973, p. 35)" (Waters 1994, p. 189).

To summarize, it should now be clear that we were not inconsistent with critical theory but with Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) Marxist interpretation of critical theory. Our interpretation does not limit critique to one form of domination—capitalism—but seeks to
broaden critique to explore the social production of bureaucratic indifference (Herzfeld 1992).

Critical Theory and Methodology

Hetrick and Lozada (1994) are critical of our methodology (see Murray and Ozanne 1991, pp. 136–138) in three ways. The first involves the role of the researcher; the second involves identification of a concrete, practical problem in everyday life; and the third involves constructing a methodology for social change.

The Role of the Researcher. Hetrick and Lozada (1994) argue that the critical researcher is not in a privileged position to determine how to improve human life: "Do critical theorists know better than the rest of us what our true and genuine needs and capacities are?" (p. 554). Yet by doing nothing, are we not shoring up the status quo and therefore also choosing a social vision? Critical researchers, like all teachers, administrators, or scientists, make judgments. These judgments are made in the form of knowledge claims that must be justified with conceptual and empirical evidence. This evidence must be made public because an open forum for dialogue and criticism is a necessary part of the process. Hetrick and Lozada (1994) seem to believe that by not acting, one can remain neutral. One of the fundamental tenets of critical theory is that all thought, theory, and action is value laden or politically motivated.

The process of critical research is complex and messy. Researchers cannot rely on research protocol or accepted practices to guide their research method. Concrete problems mean locally adapted research procedures and the appropriateness of these procedures ultimately is judged by the ability of the research results to reduce suffering or generate awareness. While the critical research task is challenging, it is also emancipatory for the researcher. Critical researchers should not be alienated from their work because this approach restored voice to the researcher. The researcher actively creates the research project. It is hoped that this empowerment of researchers will spawn the type of innovation and creativity so often found in feminist methodology (see, e.g., Reinharz 1992).

Identifying the Problem. In reading critical theory, it is clear that abstract theorizing has taken precedence over theory-driven social change. One way of reviving the potency of critical theory is to become less concerned with what Horkheimer "really said," and become more equipped to deal with concrete practical problems. However, nearly all practical concerns resulting in human suffering are understood within the constraints imposed by capitalism. According to Hetrick and Lozada (1994, p. 549), working to remedy these problems is counterproductive because it leaves the capitalist system intact. However, being preoccupied with the modern concerns of grand theorizing and creating universal statements also leaves the existing system intact. From our perspective, as researchers select and justify a concrete problem, they must reflect on the trade-offs between certain gains and certain losses in terms of the overall improvement of the human condition. We agree with Alvesson and Willmott (1992, p. 453) when they state: "Certainly, the idea of emancipation as myriad small-scale projects concentrates efforts on local problems and possibilities. But, in so doing, attention is paid to the social context and a view of the social macro-order as given and unproblematical is challenged." This perspective suggests that alleviating suffering and empowering people within a localized context may give them a different view of their reality and the larger "system." This view may then lead to other, more radical social changes. In taking the viewpoint that social structures can be confronted and changed, Hetrick and Lozada (1994) comment that we assume "a strict positivist stance by consistently viewing the social world as some objective phenomenon." (p. 549). We do view domination to be real, constraining, and identifiable. To this extent, we do align with positivist ontology. We differ from this ontology, however, in that we believe these structures are historical, social products and therefore can be changed. As stated in our 1991 interpretation, "positivists forget that our social world is a historical product, that we are the architects of our social world" (p. 132).

A Methodology for Social Change. Our workbench methodology assumes that the emancipatory interest in consumer research is not one large, revolutionary project, but rather a group of projects, each limited in terms of scope, duration, and success. On the basis of our experiences with ongoing research, we have found problems with our five-step method (Murray and Ozanne 1991, pp. 136–138). Specifically, this method is too rigid, static, and simplistic. We propose a new interpretation of this method, which is more flexible, dynamic, and better able to capture the complexity of domination and emancipation. This means that the research entry point need not be as clear-cut as we suggested previously. Research may begin with a clearly defined problem, a partial, interpretive understanding of some of the people involved in the problem, or an understanding of the social structures. More often than not, the process is circular and evolving. It is always the interplay between subject (meanings) and object (social structures) that enables one to understand both better.

Critical research differs from positivist and interpretive research in that the research is designed to change society, and knowledge claims are evaluated on the basis of this impact. Although no logical barriers keep traditional consumer research studies from generating a critique of society, as a field, we have not been critical. (For example, in Hirschman's [1993] analysis of the content of 1980 and 1990 volumes of JCR, she identified only four articles [5%] that espoused oppositional
ideologies.) In fact, consumer research has remained relatively encapsulated from the widespread criticism of marketing strategy, promotion, and advertising found in other fields (see, for instance, Ewen [1976, 1988] and Ewen and Ewen [1982]). One reason critical theory may be better equipped than traditional research to create successful programs of change is that the researcher captures both the subject and the object. For instance, rather than focusing only on public policies, critical research includes an interpretive understanding of these policies. The possibility of change, and therefore emancipation, exists in the potential space between subjective understandings and objective constraints.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To review, Hetrick and Lozada (1994) suggest that the "critical imagination" thesis is inconsistent with critical theory. They view our approach as conservative because, from their perspective, it lacks a critique of capitalism. We suggest that our interpretation of critical theory is one of many reasonable interpretations. We seek the broad goal of revealing all forms of domination, both localized and systemic.

Although we disagree with Hetrick and Lozada (1994) as to the role of critical theory in consumer research, we agree with several points they make in their comment. First, we applaud their critical spirit and believe that consumer research benefits from this type of dialogue. One of the reasons we wrote our 1991 article was to generate this type of debate. Their comment is a thoughtful critique. Second, we echo their call for criticism of "the capitalist value system and its impact on both the work and the consumption realms" (Hetrick and Lozada, 1994, p. 550). Our argument has not been that we should avoid criticism of capitalism, but that critical theory should not be restricted to a capitalist critique. Third, we agree that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School needs to be revitalized in fundamental ways. Both our 1991 interpretation and this reply have taken steps toward this end. Fourth, we concur that "critical theory . . . is only one conceptual position that offers the possibility for reflective and progressive moments for our discipline(s)" (Hetrick and Lozada 1994, p. 555). And finally, we would like to reinforce that critical theory, when coupled with "New French Thought" (i.e., postmodernism), may prompt consumer researchers to think in creative new directions. Indeed, the emphasis we placed on incremental, localized emancipation, changes in consumer capitalism, and our disenchantment with universalizing concepts, such as bourgeoisie/proletariat, are all consistent with postmodernism. In addition to Hetrick and Lozada's (1994) necessary diversions (p. 556), we would like to add a critical sociology of knowledge perspective. This would involve turning the optic of critical theory onto our own research communities. A critical-emanicipatory approach to knowledge, knowledge production, knowl-

edge evaluation, and knowledge dissemination within the ACR-JCR culture needs to be explored (see Murray and Ozanne 1994). After all, if barriers to accepting critical theory exist within our discipline, we need to identify these constraints, unchain our thinking, and rescue the critical imagination.

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