Positivism and Paradigm Dominance in Consumer Research: Toward Critical Pluralism and Rapprochement

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As spirited debate continues on the appropriate philosophical and methodological foundations for consumer research, participants clam the literature has been full of misconceptions, misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and mischaracterizations. Through historical methodology, this article shows that these "misses" stem, at least in part, from the debate's having been historically ill informed about the origins and fundamental beliefs of a group of philosophers called logical positivists. After addressing a fundamental premise of the entire debate (i.e., that contemporary social science and consumer research are dominated by positivism), this article advocates critical pluralism and documents a favorable prognosis for rapprochement.

For the philosopher, clarity is a matter of good faith.

[Marquis de Vauvenargues,
   *Oeuvres Completes*
]

I ask for greater acceptance of poetic insights in consumer research . . .

[Morris Holbrook,
   "Farewell Address"]

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

[Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"]

The 1980s witnessed a spirited debate on the appropriate philosophical and methodological foundations for consumer research. Many writers attacked the philosophical and methodological foundations of contemporary social science and offered alternative "ways of knowing," including that of naturalistic inquiry (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989); humanistic inquiry (Hirschman 1986), ethnographic methods (Sherry 1983), historical methods (Fullerton 1987), "enchantment inquiry" (Monieson 1988), critical theory (Dholakia 1988), semiotics (Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Mick 1986), literary explication (Stern 1989a, 1989b), existential-phenomenological methods (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), relativism/construc-

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and fundamental beliefs of a group of philosophers called logical positivists. Thus, in accordance with those advocating historical method, this article uses historical sources to illuminate and clarify certain aspects of the ongoing debate. I first discuss the historical development of logical positivism and then use this historical material to clarify some of the "misses" in the debate. The purpose here is to move the debate to a more productive, historically informed level, not to end it; to clarify issues, not to conquer opponents. In short, the goal is to move toward rapprochement by punching a hole in the present wall that separates consumer researchers.\(^2\)

**MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT POSITIVISM**

In the 1920s and 1930s, a group of German philosophers in Vienna (hence, Vienna Circle) developed a philosophy—later given the label "logical positivism"—that relied heavily on Machian neopositivism, Humean skepticism, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and Russell's *Principia Mathematica*.\(^3\) From Mach, the positivists drew their conviction that science should avoid metaphysical concepts and rely exclusively on observables. From Hume, they derived their belief that inductive reasoning is impermissible. (For Hume, only the conclusions of deductive logic and the beliefs derived from direct observational experience could be known with certainty. Since, according to "foundationalism," science should restrict itself to knowledge with certainty, inductive reasoning is therefore impermissible.) From Wittgenstein, the positivists developed both their famous "verifiability principle" (only statements that can be shown conclusively to be true or false are "cognitively meaningful") and the belief that the objective of philosophical inquiry should be the "critique of language" or "meaning analysis." From Russell, they adopted formal (symbolic) logic as an analytical tool for their meaning analyses.

The objectives of the logical positivists were to (1) help science make sense of the indeterministic nature of quantum mechanics, (2) help science avoid another Newtonian debacle, (3) help draw together or "unify" the various scientific disciplines, and (4) effect a rapprochement between science and the discipline of philosophy. (Under Hegelian idealism in the preceding half-century, philosophy had been, at best, irrelevant to modern science and, at worst, openly hostile to it.) The positivists were successful in effecting a rapprochement between large portions of the philosophical and scientific communities, and they did explicate and emphasize the commonalities of apparently diverse scientific disciplines. They did, indeed, develop a philosophy that could accommodate a major interpretation of the indeterminism of quantum mechanics, the "Copenhagen view"), and, to at least the present, there has been nothing in science comparable to the Newtonian debacle (Stove 1982, p. 51). However, misconceptions about the logical positivists and their philosophy abound in the current consumer research literature. Here, I focus on three major ones: causality, the machine metaphor, and the nature of reality.

**Causality**

The consumer research literature claims that the search for causal relations or causal explanations figures prominently in "positivist social science." For example, in delineating "alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research," Hudson and Ozanne (1988, p. 512) state: "The positivists, with their goal of explanation and prediction, place a high priority on identifying causal linkages." Hirschman (1986, pp. 239, 241) contrasts the "positivist metaphysic" with the "humanistic metaphysic" and claims that the former implies that "elements of reality can be segregated into causes and effects," "first stage causes," "second stage causes," and "third stage causes." Thompson et al. (1989, p. 134) believe that a broad "set of assumptions underlies the use of positivist methods" and that "these assumptions are manifested in many normative methodological prescriptions," including the prescription that "science should uncover causal laws that explain the functioning of phenomena." Ryan and Bristor (1987, p. 193) claim that the "positivist approach" emphasizes "causal explanation," and Lutz (1989, pp. 4, 7) asserts that "whereas, the Positivist aspires to causal explanation, the Naturalist eschews notions of linear causality." He further notes that "positivist consumer research" will seek "causal explanation" because the assumption of "real causes" is an "axiom" of the "Positivist paradigm."

Ozanne and Hudson (1989, p. 3) claim that a "basic assumption" of positivism is that "real causes exist." Anderson (1989, p. 17), in discussing the "implications for positivism and interpretivism" of Wittgenstein's philosophy, asserts that "perhaps the most damaging implication for positivist psychology is Wittgenstein's acausality." Positivistic research is discredited because, "on a Wittgensteinian construal, there can be no question of invoking a memory as a cause of behavior" (p. 18). Finally, Wallendorf and Belk (1989, p. 74), in developing criteria for assessing trustworthiness in naturalistic consumer research, point out that "triangulation

\(^2\)To avoid mischaracterization, I make maximum use of direct quotations to the extent that journal space allows. Moreover, when a view is attributed to a particular author by paraphrase, page numbers will be included in the citation. This style, regrettably absent in the marketing and consumer literature, shows readers and original authors where to look for attributed views; they can then determine whether there might possibly be misinterpretations or mischaracterizations.

\(^3\)Except where noted, this article's historical material draws from Ayer (1959), Bergmann (1967), Joergensen (1970), Manicas (1987), and Suppe (1977). Space limitations dictate that only major themes of the logical positivist movement related to the present debate be developed. For a more complete treatment, see Hunt (1991, pp. 266-278).
Determinism and the Machine Metaphor

A second major misconception about “positivist social science” is that such a science would necessarily be deterministic, machine-like, or mechanistic. Thus, Ozanne and Hudson (1989, pp. 3, 7) contend that a “basic assumption” of the “positivist approach” is that the “nature of social beings” is “deterministic” or, even more strongly, “entirely deterministic.” Similarly, Thompson et al. (1989, pp. 134, 137) believe that one of the assumptions that “underlies the use of positivist methods” is the “machine metaphor”; “Cartesianism’s world view is a mechanistic view in which reality is perceived as a machine-like event determined by forces and constraints.” Like the view that positivism implies causality, these views also are ahistorical.

“Determinism” is “the view that every event has a cause. . . . All things in the universe are ‘governed’ by, or operate in accordance with, causal laws” (Angeles 1981, p. 60). Because of the success of Newtonian mechanics, the philosophy of mechanistic materialism, with its Laplacian, deterministic “machine metaphor,” was a prominent one at the close of the 19th century. In tracing the historical origins of logical positivism, Suppe (1977, p. 10) notes that “by the turn of the century, the three main philosophic positions held in the German scientific community were mechanistic materialism, neo-Kantianism, and Machian neo-Positivism. . . . [However,] relativity theory and quantum theory were thought to be incompatible with all three of these philosophies of science.” Since the logical positivists were all German-speaking scientists, primarily mathematicians and physicists, they were well aware that quantum mechanics was incompatible with mechanistic materialism, the machine metaphor, and Laplacian determinism. Indeed, a primary objective of the Vienna Circle was to develop an alternative to such a view. They did so by creating one that replaced the Newtonian machine metaphor with the view that indeterministic, probabilistic prediction was appropriate for science (Carnap 1966). In short, since the best that could be accomplished with quantum mechanics is probabilistic prediction (the positivist “Copenhagen view”), such an accomplishment must be an acceptable goal for all science. Again, it should be emphasized that only prediction is sought, not “deeper” or causal explanations. Theories and laws, therefore, must be treated solely as calculation instruments for making predictions. Any research motivated by the “positivist metaphysic” would view as naively misguided the belief that ultimate reality, either physical or social, follows the Newtonian/Laplacian “machine metaphor.” Steven Hawking, originator of the big bang theory and probably the most prominent theoretical physicist living today, specifically acknowledges the debt his (non―“machine metaphor”) position owes to the positivists. “You can say that the use of imaginary time [to explain the origins of the universe] is just a mathematical trick that doesn’t tell us anything about reality. . . . But if you take a positivist position, as I do, questions about reality don’t have any meaning. All one can ask is whether imaginary time is useful in formulating mathematical models that describe what we observe” (Strong 1990, p. 71; italics added).

Reality

How the positivists viewed the nature of reality (their “ontology”) is a third confused area in the debate. Hirschman (1986, p. 239) contends that the “humanistic metaphysic” proposes that “human beings construct multiple realities,” while the “positivistic metaphysic” believes that “there is a single reality composed of discrete elements.” Similarly, Hudson and Ozanne
(1988, p. 509) claim, “The positivists tend to take a realist [italics added] position and assume that a single, objective reality exists independently of what individuals perceive. . . . In contrast, the interpretivists deny that one real world exists; that is, reality is essentially mental and perceived.”

The concept “reification” also figures prominently in the debate on reality: “Positivists reify subjective states and treat them like objects,” according to Hudson and Oznane (1988, p. 515). In much stronger terms, Monieson (1988, p. 7) claims that “positivist social science” is pernicious because it “reifies social relations so that they . . . are forged into marketable traits, into commodities.” Again, these claims are ahistorical.

In philosophy, the study of ontology asks, “What does ‘to be,’ ‘to exist’ mean?” (Angeles 1981, p. 198). Although ontology has been perhaps the most prominent area of philosophical inquiry for millennia, space limitations dictate that the analysis here be restricted to certain fundamental issues regarding idealism, realism, and reification.

Although many different philosophies are “idealistic,” all share the fundamental belief that the material world of tangible objects, such as trees and rocks, does not exist unperceived: “All reality is mental [spiritual, psychical]. Matter, the physical, does not exist” (Angeles 1981, p. 120). In direct contrast, “realism” holds that the world of tangible objects exists unperceived: “Philosophical idealism is . . . opposed to realism and is thus the denial of the common-sense realist view that material things exist independently of being perceived” (Acton 1967, p. 110). “Reification” is inextricably associated with the concept “reality.” (Both words have the common Latin root res, meaning “thing.”) Reification implies treating an abstract concept as having a real existence in the same sense that a “thing” exists: It is “the fallacy of taking abstractions and regarding them as actual existing entities that are causally efficacious and ontologically prior and superior to their referents” (Angeles 1981, p. 243). Given that it is a fallacy by definition, “reification” is customarily used pejoratively in philosophy to indicate that one has somehow improperly treated an abstraction as having a “thinglike” reality. With the preceding distinctions in mind, we can now investigate the ontology of logical positivism.

Were the positivists realists? If, by “realist,” we mean only the minimal position that tangible objects, such as what we call “trees” and “rocks,” exist independently of our perception and labeling (i.e., they exist “out there”), then the logical positivists were definitely realists. Recognizing that idealism always degenerates into nihilism, sophistry, and/or solipsism,4 the positivists embraced a minimal realism called “empirical realism” (Manicas 1987, p. 247). But, when philosophers today refer to their own positions or to science as “realist,” they customarily mean something much stronger than the minimal belief that the existence of trees and rocks is independent of human thought.

Although operating under the common rubric of “scientific realism,” there are almost as many versions of realism today as there are realist philosophers.3 Nevertheless, all realists, either explicitly or implicitly, reject Humean skepticism with respect to the ontology of scientific theories: “The basic claim made by scientific realism . . . is that the long-term success of a scientific theory gives reason to believe that something like the entities and structure postulated by the theory actually exists” (McMullin 1984, p. 26). Thus, scientific realism contends that the explanatory, predictive, and pragmatic success of a theory provides evidence for the existence of its associated entities, be they observable or unobservable, tangible or intangible, “thinglike” or “non-thinglike.” The evidence is not presumed conclusive. In that “success” does not enable us to know with certainty that the entities and structure exist. For example, the long-term success of viral theory in explaining, predicting, and solving pragmatic problems with respect to diseases provides evidence warranting our belief in the existence of the entity labeled “virus” (a tangible unobservable). Similarly, to the extent that theories in consumer research incorporating latent constructs, such as “attitude,” “intentions,” and “beliefs” (intangible unobservables), have been successful in explaining, predicting, and solving pragmatic problems, such evidence provides warrant for believing that these psychological states of consumers exist independently of researchers’ labeling of them, that is, they are real.

Did the positivists adopt a realist ontological view? According to how “realism” is most commonly used today in the philosophy of science (i.e., unobservables can exist and are appropriate for theory construction), the positivists were, most definitely, not realists. The positivists, guided by the views of Mach and Hume, viewed unobservables as metaphysical concepts to be strictly avoided. In fact, many philosophers of science actually use positivism’s opposition to realism as its major defining characteristic: “A philosophy [of science] [is] positivist if it holds that a scientific explanation must thoroughly eschew appeal to what is in principle beyond experience. . . . By contrast, a realist holds that a valid

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4Nihilism is “the theory that nothing is knowable. All knowledge is illusory, worthless, meaningless, relative, and insignificant.” Sophistry holds that “victory in argumentation at whatever cost, outwitting opponents, is the sole aim of disputation, no matter how bad the argument.” Solipsism is “the theory that no reality exists other than one’s self” (Angeles 1981, pp. 188, 265, 266).

3Indeed, “scientific realism is a majority position whose advocates are so divided as to appear a minority” (Lepin 1984, p. 1). Examples are: transcendental realism (Bhaskar 1979), ontic realism (MacKinnon 1979), methodology of realism (Lepin 1986), evolutionary naturalistic realism (Hooker 1985), referential realism (Harre 1986), and constructive realism (Giere 1988).
scientific explanation can appeal to the in principle non-observable” (Manicas 1987, pp. 9–10).

Did the positivists engage in reification? That is, did the positivists improperly treat abstract concepts as having a real existence in the sense that a “thing” has existence? Most assuredly, they did not. Their Humean skepticism and revulsion toward metaphysics led them to insist that theories must contain only observables, that is, labels for “things.” In contrast, those scientists and philosophers of science guided by scientific realism, because they contend (on the basis of “success”) that some unobservables may actually exist, could potentially be faulted for reification. Therefore, the claim that positivists engage in reification is historically false. Exactly the opposite is true; researchers adhering strictly to positivism cannot engage in reification.

In fairness, there is an alternative perspective that draws on Marxist social philosophy and that can potentially lend credence to the claim that positivistic social science engages in reification. Marxist philosophers (e.g., Berger and Pullberg 1966; Lukacs 1971) castigate contemporary social science on the basis of charges of “reification” and “commodification.” Marxist philosophers see “a general ‘drive to commoditization’ in capitalist society” (Belk et al. 1989, p. 24). This “commodity fetishism” is uniquely associated with capitalism. Marxists contend, because only in capitalism does the production of commodities dominate society. Such societies necessarily, then, reify social relations. For example, the relationship between two people called “love” becomes nothing more than a commodity, a “thing” to be bought and sold. This reification extends to Western science, particularly sociology, which reifies societal institutions so that they are taken to have the causal power to determine how humans behave. Thus, Western science and society assume that societal institutions (e.g., corporations, the Roman Catholic church, and “bourgeois science”) have an existence separate from the people that produce them and that, important for Marxist theory, individual human beings are thus powerless to change these “immutable” institutions. From the Marxist view, then, “positivistic social science” just means Western science or bourgeois science in toto and, therefore, it must engage in reification because this is an underlying characteristic of all aspects of Western societies. Since the objective of Marxist social philosophy is to “liberate the proletariat,” from the “false consciousness” that a market economy

serves their interests, Marxist philosophers offer the following argument: (1) social science is dominated by positivism, a “dead” philosophy; (2) positivism implies reification; (3) reification is pernicious; therefore, (4) contemporary (bourgeois) social science is not only fundamentally misguided (in adopting a “dead” philosophy), but pernicious as well (by reifying social relations). Among the many things wrong with this argument is that it is historically false. The positivists, insisting as they did that science restrict itself to observables, could not engage in reification; neither, therefore, could any social science guided by positivism. If social science is pernicious, it is not because its adoption of positivism has led to reification. If social science is misguided, it is not because it is dominated by positivism (as will be shown later in this article).

Rampant Antipositivism

In a section entitled “Rampant Antipositivism,” Phillips (1987, p. 94) reviews the social science literature and concludes that “there have been many exaggerated claims about the evils of positivism . . . [and] many factual errors are made when researchers refer to [it].” As we have seen, there have been similar errors in the consumer research literature. Antipositivist claims to the contrary, the positivists did not search for causal explanations or causal linkages; they did not adopt, nor hold that science should adopt, the machine metaphor; they did not have a realist view with respect to scientific theories; and they could not possibly have been guilty of reification. Phillips (p. 44) also compares the views of social science antipositivists with the actual positions of the positivists and concludes that “some of the most boisterous celebrants at positivism’s wake are actually more positivistic than they realize, or have more in common with the positivists than they would care to admit.” As we shall see, a similar situation prevails in the consumer research literature.

POSITIVISM VERSUS CONTEMPORARY ANTIPOSITIVISM

Although often reaching their positions by different routes, those who advocate alternatives to “positivistic social science” actually share many views with their supposed antagonists. It is important to note that we have seen that both the positivists and contemporary antipositivists reject the search for causal explanations...
and causal linkages. Second, the positivists explicitly embraced Humean skepticism, and, similarly, many antipositivists are strongly influenced by it (see, e.g., Anderson 1983, p. 19; Anderson 1989, p. 11; Hudson and Ozanne 1988, p. 515). Even those who (correctly) believe that "the term positivist is used much too loosely to be descriptive of any approach" (Calder and Tybout 1989, p. 200) embrace Humean skepticism. For example, in explaining why the "comparative" approach is superior to the "confirmatory" approach in testing theories, Sternthal, Tybout, and Calder (1987, p. 124) put forth the standard Humean position that it is impermissible to reason inductively from the successful predictions of a theory to its truth content: "The goal of the confirmatory approach cannot be realized because theories cannot be proven." Similarly, Calder and Tybout (1987, p. 137) argue in favor of "sophisticated falsificationist methodology" by contrasting their view with the "common view of science . . . that empirical data are used to accumulate evidence for a theory until it is proven. This view of science is, of course, unacceptable . . . because, in part) inductive proof is logically impossible."^{10}

As a third similarity, many antipositivists specifically reject the realist view with respect to unobservables, as did the positivists. Thus, Anderson (1989, p. 14) believes realism is "bankrupt": "As such, a position of 'ontological agnosticism' is strongly recommended."

Fourth, and finally, antipositivist methodology shares a striking similarity to that of the positivists in the use of meaning analysis. The positivists adopted the tool of formal logic and the goal of meaning analysis to clarify the language employed in the scientific community. Contemporary antipositivists, often under the rubric of "interpretivism," explore how the language of consumers consists of "shared meanings" (Ozanne and Hudson 1989, p. 2). As Hirschman (1989, p. ix) puts it, "The best definition I have encountered of interpretive consumer research is that presented recently by Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy (1988). They view interpretation as 'the critical analysis of a text for the purpose of determining its single or multiple meaning(s).'

**Differences**

Numerous similarities notwithstanding, contemporary antipositivists diverge from positivism on several issues. Not only did the positivists, in contrast to contemporary antipositivists, use formal logic, but they also held mathematics and statistics in high regard. Given the positivists' view that quantum mechanics is "just" mathematics,^{11} they were sympathetic to quantification in science. In contrast, contemporary antipositivists not only avoid the use of mathematics and statistics, but (consistent with Hegelian idealism) at times seem hostile to these tools. Some commentators even characterize the very essence of the debate as being between advocates of quantitative and qualitative methods: "Very simply, the logical positivist view of the world is synonymous with the quantitative paradigm." (Deshpande 1983, p. 102). In like manner, others claim the "opposing research camps" to be the "relevant researchers" versus the "rigorous researchers" and contend that the latter value the "quantifiable results" of "positive empiricism" (Dholakia 1985, p. 3). Similarly, Beck, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989, p. 13) state that "we have not called for the development of quantitative measures because the nature and experience of the sacred may be antithetical to such measurement. The ontological and epistemological assumptions of positivist methods are not sympathetic to the mystical and experiential nature of sacredness."

However, equating positivism with quantitative methods is ahistorical: "A positivist, qua positivist, is not committed to any particular research design. There is nothing in the doctrines of positivism that necessitates a love of statistics or a distaste for case studies" (Phillips 1987, p. 96). Indeed, contemporary antipositivists could draw upon positivist writings to buttress their case for qualitative methods.^{12} According to Brodbeck (1968, pp. 573–574), "The qualitative-quantitative dichotomy is spurious. . . . Although quantification has considerable merit, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for science."

Because the positivists were sympathetic toward both philosophy and science as institutions, a major part of their program was to effect a rapprochement between them. In contrast, some contemporary antipositivists are openly hostile to the institution of science, relying on the views of such bitterly antiscience authors as Feynabend (1987, p. 297), who contends that "Western

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^{10}For an evaluation of using "proof" as a criterion for "acceptable" science, see Hunt (1990), especially the sections on "inductive realism," the "philosophers' fallacy," and Popper.

^{11}The ontology and structure of quantum mechanics, at least in the positivist "Copenhagen view," are exclusively a series of mathematical equations, i.e., they are just mathematics: "The fact is that although the underlying quantum mechanical view of the world is extraordinarily confusing—Bohr is said to have remarked that if it doesn't make you dizzy then you don't understand it—quantum mechanics as a computational tool is entirely straightforward. . . . The problem is that although the formalism of the quantum theory fits nature like a glove, nobody, not even Bohr or Heisenberg, has ever really understood what it means. The only concise picture the formalism offers the world prior to an act of measurement is the formalism itself" (Mermin 1983, pp. 655–656).

^{12}August Comte (1798–1857) and his colleague Saint-Simon (1760–1825), the nineteenth-century originators of the word "positivism" to describe a philosophical position, actually opposed the use of statistics in sociology. In fact, Comte coined a new word, "sociology," to distance his own work from the statistical emphasis of what was then called "social physics" (Comte 1877, p. 15). (See also Hunt [1998b] for more on the fallaciousness of the quantitative/qualitative and rigor/relevance dichotomies.)
science has now infected the whole world like a contagious disease.” Discussing the history of science, Firtat (1989, pp. 95–96) asks, “Is science an institution we want to preserve?” He concludes that it may be desirable to “erase the accumulation of scientific knowledge” because “science is a political institution...[that] has lost its relevance for the solution of present human problems. Thus, the scientific establishment has become anti-change and reactionary.” Not only would Firtat’s assessment of science differ from that of the positivists, the “book burning” implicit in “erasing the accumulation of scientific knowledge” would have been repugnant to them (as well as to most scholars). A final difference between positivism and contemporary antipositivism centers on two different meanings of “meaning analysis.” The English word “meaning” (and, therefore, “meaning analysis”) suffers from systematic ambiguity. It can refer to the communicative characteristics of a word, phrase, or “text” and “meaning analysis” can then explore how such expressions serve this communicative role. However, “meaning” is also used in an evaluational sense, referring to something’s importance, value, or significance. The positivists recognized this systematic ambiguity (Rudner 1966, pp. 75–83) and restricted their meaning analyses to communicative meaning. Similarly, as previously mentioned, those referring to their research as “interpretivist” often define their area of inquiry as exploring communicative meaning, as do those using the label “semiotics”; “Semioticians investigate the sign systems or codes essential to all types of communication for the latent rules that facilitate sign production and interpretive responses” (Mick 1986, p. 197). However, contemporary antipositivists, in contrast to the positivists, have not restricted their meaning analyses to communicative meaning only. In fact, most of their published works have actually focused on evaluational meaning. The most obvious example is the extensive work of Belk et al. (1989), which explores how things become either “sacred” or “profane” and thereby acquire “personal meaningfulness” (p. 31), “transcendent meaning in their lives” (p. 32), or “significance” (p. 32) through a “process of meaning investment and divestment” (p. 2).

Paradigm Dominance in Consumer Research

The preceding enables us to reexamine a premise underlying the entire debate, namely, that positivism dominates contemporary social science and consumer research. To this point, our analysis reveals not only that “positivism” does not imply “quantitative,” but also: (1) Mesmerized as they were by Humean skepticism, the positivists considered the concept “cause” to be metaphysical and (at best) superfluous to science. (2) Absorbed as they were with quantum mechanics, they did not contend that science should adopt the machine metaphor. (3) Obsessed as they were with restricting scientific theories to nonmetaphysical observables, the positivists did not adopt a “realist view” with respect to scientific theories and could not possibly have been guilty of reification. Therefore, if antipositivist writers are correct on these issues (i.e., that consumer research is dominated by the search for causality, by the machine metaphor, by reification, and by the realist view with respect to unobservables), then consumer research is “antipositivist” or, more accurately, “nonpositivist.” Thus, the entire debate has had a demonstrably false underlying premise. Contemporary social science and consumer research are neither motivated by the “positivist metaphysic” nor, most assuredly, “dominated by logical positivism.”

The Domination of Positivism: An Alternative View

Fairness dictates that an alternative perspective of “positivism” be acknowledged. Firtat (1989, p. 94) discusses the major themes of “postmodern culture” and, drawing on the Marxist social philosophy of Baudrillard, advocates adopting “hyperreality”:

A second major reason for the attacks on science is clarified in the postmodernist critique and analysis of culture. ... Currently, the most powerful articulator of this recognition [that social reality is produced or constructed] in the postmodernist literature seems to be Baudrillard. ... His theory articulates the creation of the culture of “hyperreality,” a reality that is constructed based on signifiers that become separated from their original referents and “free floating,” [to] which, then, are attached new meanings. Thus, new symbols are created as well as a new reality independent of the original referents or foundations. Hyperreality is produced when these new symbols are accepted as real and so acted upon by the social actors.

On the basis of postmodernism, then, one might attempt to sanction the use of the term “positivism” stripped from its “original referents” (what the positivists actually believed in and advocated) and use it to refer to any set of beliefs or methods one chooses. The only restraint is rhetorical success, that is, whether this new “constructed reality” is “accepted as real and so acted upon by the social actors.” Thus construed, “positivism” becomes a pejorative term of rhetorical abuse that can effectively stifle discussion and critique. If one’s

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13For the record, I believe that causality and the realist view with respect to unobservables are prominent—but not dominant—in social science and consumer research, but reject the charges of determinism, adoption of the machine metaphor, and reification.

14The author is indebted to Jerry Goolsby of the University of South Florida for pointing out this alternative perspective.
work is subjected to critical evaluation, rather than defending the research on its merits, one can shut down all discussion by retorting, “You’re just using outmoded positivist criteria to evaluate my post-positivist, postmodern study.” Phillips (1987, p. 94) reviews the debate in the social sciences and concludes that many writers do appear to be socially constructing a hyperreality: “Without suggesting that those who make the errors are deliberately dishonest, it seems as if the word “positivism” arouses such negative feelings that it is often used in a blanket way to condemn any position at all that the writer disagrees with, irrespective of how positivistic that position really is.”

A major problem with the current use of “positivism” as a socially constructed hyperreality dominating consumer research is that it violates the integrity of history. Lavin and Archdeacon (1989, p. 62) review the advantages of historical method and discuss its two “central imperatives”: “Respect the integrity of the past and . . . call attention to what was unique about it.” No one disputes that the positivists were real people in an identifiable historical period and that they shared some common views. One may argue that some of their views were correct and others incorrect, or some well reasoned and others poorly thought out. One may further argue that some of the consequences of positivism were good for science and society and others were bad for both. Nevertheless, historical integrity and respect for those who can no longer speak for themselves obligate us (at the very least) to criticize the positivists for the beliefs they actually held and the views they actually espoused. As Hirschman (1989, p. 209) movingly reminds us, “Researchers, whether empiricist or interpretivist, are people, too.” So also, we might add, were the positivists.

On the Dominant Paradigm in Consumer Research

If logical positivism is not the dominant paradigm in consumer research, what is? Some might be tempted to conclude that, if not logical positivism, then surely logical empiricism must dominate consumer research. History, however, shows that this position is also untenable.

Logical empiricism was (in Lakatosian terms) a “research program” that emerged directly from the logical positivist movement. Indeed, prominent logical empiricists, such as Carnap and Feigl, had themselves been logical positivists. The major characteristic distinguishing logical empiricism from logical positivism was the substitution of the “testability principle” for the “verifiability principle.” Because they accepted Humean skepticism with respect to induction, the positivists came to realize that the generalized nature of scientific laws rendered them “unverifiable,” that is, incapable of being proved conclusively true. Therefore, Carnap (1936) replaced the verifiability principle with the “testability principle,” which requires that all statements must be observationally “testable” to be “cognitively meaningful” (for them to have done otherwise would have implied the absurd claim that scientific laws were “meaningless”). However, what is most important for our purposes here is that the logical empiricists continued to embrace Humean skepticism, continued to reject “realism” with regard to theories, laws, and explanations, and continued to consider “causality” to be a metaphysical concept that (at best) was superfluous to science. Therefore, on the very same grounds as for logical positivism, we may conclude with great assurance that logical empiricism does not dominate consumer research.

The issue of the dominant paradigm in consumer research can be best addressed by first returning to the work of Kuhn, whose Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) originated the view that each “mature” science has a dominant paradigm, consisting of (1) a knowledge content (i.e., theories, laws, concepts, symbolic generalizations, and “exemplars”), (2) a methodology (i.e., procedures by which knowledge is to be generated), and (3) an epistemology (i.e., criteria for evaluating knowledge claims). The construct “dominant paradigm” assisted Kuhn in his efforts to explain, among other things, why “mature” sciences progressed and others (e.g., the social sciences) did not. For Kuhn, each “mature” science has a dominant paradigm and, rather than engage in endless, unproductive disputation on methodological and epistemological issues, researchers spend their time making progress by “fleshing the dominant paradigm out” through “puzzle-solving.” Like almost all the major views in Structure, that of the “dominant paradigm” or Weltanschauung has been totally discredited. For example, Laudan (1977, pp. 74 and 151) reviews the history of science and concludes, “Virtually every major period in the history of science is characterized both by the co-existence of numerous competing paradigms, with none exerting hegemony over the field, and by the persistent and continuous manner in which the foundational assumptions of every paradigm are debated within the scientific community. . . . Kuhn can point to no major science in which paradigm monopoly has been the rule, nor in which foundational debate has been absent.”

If paradigm dominance has been found to be absent in the historical development of even mature sciences, one would hardly expect to find a dominant paradigm in consumer research, an area of inquiry whose systematic study is only several decades old. Indeed, as pointed out by numerous observers (e.g., Jacoby 1978), consumer research’s history is best characterized by the open, often indiscriminate, borrowing of disparate methods and theories from everywhere. Most recently, Kassarjian (1989, pp. 124, 126) reviews the history of consumer research and points out: “In actuality, change and resistance to change, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, have always been present—the media and survey researchers of the 1940s, the motivation re-
searchers of the 1950s, the marketing science and cog-
nitive types of the 1960s, consumer protection and
public policy people of the 1970s and in the 1980s the
proponents of the consumer behavior odyssey, relativ-
ism, and the approaches promulgated in this volume.
\\ldots The appropriate question is whether or not it is
good science, rather than what kind of science it is. Is it
making a contribution to knowledge?" (italics added).

In conclusion, neither logical positivism nor logical
empiricism dominates consumer research. Yes, the history
of consumer research, like that of other disciplines
(Hunt 1991, p. 3), reveals periods when a particular
method or theory becomes so popular as to be almost
faddish. Yes, the proposers of new methods and theo-
ries, Kassarjian's "revolutionaries," must defend the
trustworthiness of their methods and the veracity of
their theories and other knowledge claims. And yes,
other consumer researchers, Kassarjian's "counter-
revolutionaries," will critically evaluate every new
method and theory proposed. But no, the problems of
the revolutionaries of the 1980s have not stemmed from
their being victims of consumer research's "dominant
paradigm." In truth, consumer research has no such
paradigm: no paradigm or philosophical "ism" domi-
nates consumer research. Given the prominent roles
that "dominant paradigm" and "positivism" have
played in the ongoing debate, it is no wonder that par-
ticipants on both sides have complained about "misses"
(i.e., mischaracterizations, etc.).

The preceding should not be interpreted to mean that
there are no genuine differences between antipositivists
and their colleagues in contemporary social science, for
there are. For example, many consumer researchers do
indeed believe that it is important to try to separate
genuine, "causal" relationships from those that are
purely accidental or "spurious." In contrast, many an-
tipositivists disclaim any interest in this activity. Fur-
thermore, much contemporary social science makes
extensive use of mathematics and statistics, whereas
many antipositivists see these tools as inappropriate or
unnecessary for their scholarship. These differences
notwithstanding, there is nothing on either side of the
current debate resembling a monolithic, dominant par-
adigm. Indeed, much work needs to be done to fully
explicate and clarify the actual differences between the
two sides, as an extension of our previous discussion of
the "realism" issue will demonstrate.

Consider the pluralistic manner by which contem-
porary social science addresses the ontology of concepts
like "intelligence." Many consumer researchers accept
the realist view that the long-run success of the intel-
ligence-testing research program gives us reason to be-
lieve that what we label "intelligence" is a real, cognitive
aptitude that manifests itself in a variety of problem-
solving tasks and that such measures as IQ tests are
(either good or bad) "indicators" of this real, underlying,
"latent construct." In contrast, other consumer re-
searchers agree with measurement theorist Nunnally's
(1978, p. 108) positivist view: "The words that scientists
use to denote constructs, e.g., anxiety and intelligence,
have no real counterparts in the world of observables;
they are only heuristic devices for exploring observables.
\ldots Although words relating to constructs are undeni-
ablely helpful to the scientist, they also can be real trouble.
Such words are only symbols for collections of observ-
ables" (italics added).

Now consider the intended ontological status of con-
cepts like "extended self," "sacred," and "profane,"
which have been prominent in antipositivist scholar-
ship. Do researchers intend these concepts to be con-
sidered as real? If yes, on the basis of what criteria, and
do these criteria differ from those of contemporary so-
cial science? If no, what is the ontology of such concepts,
and how does it differ from contemporary social sci-
ence? Surely, concepts such as "extended self," "sa-
cred," and "profane" are not meant to be interpreted
as positivist "collections of observables." However,
many antipositivists have positioned their work (per-
haps unnecessarily?) as being opposed to realism and,
by implication, the realist view that the success of the-
tories in which "unobservable" concepts are imbedded
negates or in the reality of the concepts.

Three points need to be emphasized with respect to
my brief exposition on ontology and realism. First, since
the intended ontological status of many concepts in an-
tipositivist writings is unclear, much work needs to be
done to clarify the status of such concepts before anyone
could confidently claim that the ontology implicit in
antipositivist scholarship significantly differs (or does
not differ) from that in contemporary social science.
Second, the rhetoric of the "dominance of logical pos-
itivism" has, if anything, delayed and obscured real
progress in identifying and clarifying the substantive
differences between antipositivist views and contem-
porary social science. And third, rapprochement in
consumer research need not await the complete artic-
ulation of supposed differences, for, indeed, significant
steps toward rapprochement have already been taken.

TOWARD RAPPROCHEMENT

Holbrook (1989, p. 4) analogizes that the current sit-
uation in consumer research is similar to the "rappro-
chement between science and poetics." With respect
to this insight, I ask, is rapprochement possible in con-
sumer research? Is the disciplinary wall separating re-
searchers already so tall, so thick, that it is unreach-
able? Moving the discussion away from "dominant
paradigms" and "positivism" and toward historically
informed debate will undoubtedly augment other recent
trends toward rapprochement, as we shall see.

A major concern has been that those advocating al-
ternative methodologies seemed to be adopting relativ-
ism (Calder and Tybout 1987). Since most philosophers
of science associate relativism with nihilism, sophistry,
and solipsism, any methodology grounded on it is highly
suspect. However, even avowedly relativist writers concede that "interpretive" research need not be relativistic (Anderson 1989, p. 13). Moreover, there is an emerging consensus among the debate's participants for pluralism, not relativism: "There can be little doubt that, at this stage in the development of consumer research, methodological pluralism is desirable" (Calder and Tybout 1989, p. 199). In like manner, Hirschman (1986, p. 428) calls out for "conscious pluralism in research practice" and Lutz (1989) adopts the position of "critical pluralism." Lutz's clarion call for critical pluralism provides the key for developing our prognosis on rapprochement.

"Critical pluralism" is a label originally suggested by Siegel (1988) to characterize how scholars should view their own and others' theories and methods. The "pluralism" part reminds us that dogmatism is antithetical to science; we should adopt a tolerant, open posture toward new theories and methods. The "critical" half stresses that nonevaluational, nonjudgmental, noncritical, or mindless pluralism (viewing the supposed encapsulation of rival theories and new methods as thwarting comparison and evaluation) is just as bad as dogmatism. All methods, theories, and their respective knowledge claims can (and must) be subjected to critical scrutiny; nothing is exempt.

The importance of any inquiry's being "critical" can be traced to Plato's method of critical discussion, the very cornerstone of Western philosophy (Popper 1968, p. 16). By necessity, all critical methods must have appraisal standards. It is important and appropriate for rapprochement that advocates of alternative methodologies have been actively developing such standards. As an exemplary example, Wallendorf and Belk (1989, p. 69) rightly point out that any research approach requires standards to assess its "trustworthiness," the importance of which is "postulated to be a scientific universal." They encourage naturalistic consumer researchers to pursue "triangulation of sources, methods, and researchers" (p. 70) to evaluate the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of their findings. Their efforts and those of Hirschman (1986) toward developing appraisal standards constitute a significant and positive step, but rapprochement could still be thwarted if these standards should render the findings incommensurable with those of contemporary social science. However, as we shall see, "incommensurability" is no longer considered a major problem in the philosophy of science and, therefore, it should pose no problem for rapprochement here.

Kuhn introduced "paradigm incommensurability" into the philosophy of science in 1962, and Feyerabend (1965) continued to develop it. Because paradigm incommensurability seemed to imply relativism, irrationalism, and nihilism, it became one of the most thoroughly investigated topics in the philosophy of science. Those investigations uniformly concluded that no coherent, interesting, nontrivial version of "paradigm incommensurability" could be justified: "The frequent arguments that strive to use the absolute or relative incommensurability of scientific theories as a reason for thinking that they are inaccessible to purely scientific (rational) comparisons are simply fallacious" (Hintikka 1988, p. 38). Only eight years after introducing "paradigm incommensurability," Kuhn retreated from his "Gestalt shift" views on paradigm change and incommensurability because he recognized that such views implied relativism (1970a, pp. 234, 260) and solipsism (1970b, p. 193). Since then, Kuhn's (1978) most prominent scholarly work has focused on exploring the history of the shift in physics toward quantum mechanics. It is most telling that he finds no use for either "paradigm" or "incommensurability," let alone, "paradigm incommensurability." Today, even the relativist Feyerabend (1987, p. 81) concedes that incommensurability is a "rare event" and "is a difficulty for philosophers, not scientists." Considering that "paradigm incommensurability" has been so thoroughly discredited in philosophy as to be virtually abandoned by Kuhn, its originator, and considering that even a relativist philosopher such as Feyerabend now concedes it poses no difficulty for science, one must conclude that a priori grounds for believing that "incommensurability" is a problem in consumer research are nonexistent. Examining the actual appraisal criteria currently being developed provides additional proof.

As previously discussed, advocates of alternative methodologies propose triangulation of sources, methods, and researchers to evaluate the credibility, trans-

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16 For evaluations of incommensurability see Shapere (1964, 1966), Scheffler (1967, chap. 3; 1986, chap. 13), Kordig (1971, chaps. 2, 3), Kitcher (1978), Moberg (1979), Levin (1979), Laudan (1976, 1977), and Putnam (1981). In marketing, see Hunt (1991, pp. 327-330). No one in consumer research has produced a single, valid example of "incommensurable" knowledge claims. Hunt (1989a, p. 195) points out that some consumer researchers have, unfortunately, confused "different" knowledge claims with "incommensurable" ones. For incommensurability to be a problem, at the minimum, knowledge claims must be rivals, and "different" does not imply "rival." For example, Darwinian theory is different from Newton's laws, but neither is a rival of the other.

17 Philosophers now acknowledge that the reason they mistakenly saw "paradigm incommensurability" in science was, in Bernstein's (1990, p. 85) words, the "Babel in philosophy". A primary reason why there has been so much concern with problems of incommensurability and relativism is because this is the condition that we find ourselves in as philosophers, where we speak such radically different tongues that we are unable to understand what even our closest neighbors are saying. Consumer research need not mimic philosophy by lapsing into Babel.
ferability, dependability, and confirmability—in short, the trustworthiness of research. Three conclusions may be drawn from these efforts. First, the use of triangulation should again assuage those who may be concerned that advocates of alternative methods embrace reality relativism. There would be absolutely no reason to triangulate if researchers genuinely believed the relativistic position that rival “multiple realities” were incapable of comparison and evaluation, which is a view necessarily implying all “multiple realities” are equally valid, likely, and trustworthy. Second, the position that all so-called multiple realities are not equally valid, likely, and trustworthy appears to converge with that of advocates of contemporary social science who in the past have been (mis)labeled as “positivists,” that is, all perceptions of reality are not equally valid, equally likely, equally true. In other words, “multiple realities” appears to be more a preferred form of discourse, a figure of speech, than a substantive, differentiating position. Third, the specific appraisal criteria being developed by advocates of alternative methodologies, far from being “paradigm encapsulated,” or “incommensurable,” actually seem very consistent or commensurate with contemporary research views, a conclusion readily acknowledged by Hirschman (1986, p. 244). Thus, these factors imply the total absence of objective grounds for the contention that “paradigm incommensurability” prevents rapprochement in consumer research.

What should be our prognosis? Will rapprochement succeed? If the positivists could effect a rapprochement between communities as diverse as science and philosophy at the beginning of this century, cannot those in the single community of consumer research do the same at the century’s close? If truth tellers in the 1980s could destroy political walls so tall, so thick, that many believed they would never fall, cannot truth seekers in the 1990s breach puny intradisciplinary walls? Even Holbrook’s (1989) instructive call for accepting “poetic insights” gives grounds for optimism. As Robert Frost reminds us in the epigraph, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

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20This optimistic conclusion notwithstanding, there may be those who wish to stop debate rather than encourage it, freeze positions rather than thaw them, encapsulate research programs rather than open them up, or build disciplinary walls rather than tear them down. “Paradigm incommensurability” can continue to be a useful rhetorical tool for such purposes.


