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Rejoinders

On the Scientific Status of Consumer Research and the Need for an Interpretive Approach to Studying Consumption Behavior*

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In their reply to Holbrook's 1987 inquiry, "What Is Consumer Research?," Calder and Tybout (1987) proclaim the advantages of falsificationism (Popper 1959) and question the scientific status of interpretive approaches such as that represented by Holbrook and Grayson's 1986 analysis of symbolic consumption in the movie *Out of Africa*. Briefly, Calder and Tybout's 1987 argument reduces to the early Popperian claim that science can advance only by means of a hypothetico-deductive method involving "the confrontation of theory with data" (p. 138). For Calder and Tybout, interpretive approaches can provide "provocative and entertaining reading" (p. 139) but "must stand apart . . . from science" (p. 140) so that interpretivism can contribute to scientific knowledge only by suggesting hypotheses suitable for testing in empirical studies (p. 139):

There is no reason that the conceptualizations of interpretive knowledge cannot be submitted to sophisticated falsificationist methodology; they may, in fact, be a good source of scientifically testable hypotheses. But unless such testing in fact occurs, such conceptualizations should not be equated with scientific knowledge.

We believe that, in arrogating the term "scientific" to characterize their own preferred philosophical po-

sition, the proponents of falsificationism have made claims that can only confuse and mislead the community of scholars working in the area of consumer research. This conclusion depends on recognizing five important points, which will form the basis of our argument against Calder and Tybout's (1987) position.

1. The authors misrepresent the nature of sophisticated falsificationism.
2. Sophisticated falsificationism does not provide an adequate account of the natural sciences.
3. As a social science rather than a natural science, consumer research needs an interpretive perspective.
4. Interpretation does not inherently contradict the possibility of falsification.
5. All knowledge and all science depend on interpretation.

ARGUMENT

A Misrepresentation of Sophisticated Falsificationism

In effect, Calder and Tybout claim that only by adhering to Popper's particular philosophy of science can consumer researchers hope to attain scientific knowledge. Specifically, Calder and Tybout recommend sophisticated falsificationism, which Lakatos (1968) called the Popper₂ stage in Popper's thinking (cf. Leong 1985).

Lakatos (1968) distinguished three such stages in all: Popper₀, the dogmatic falsificationist; Popper₁, the methodological falsificationist; and Popper₂, the sophisticated methodological falsificationist. However, for purposes of their arguments against the scientific status of interpretive approaches, Calder and

*This article is a rejoinder to Calder and Tybout (1987). *JCR*'s current policy is to publish comments on previous *JCR* articles together with any accompanying rejoinders in the same issue. This policy was not in place under the previous editors, resulting in delayed publication of this article. *JCR* regrets the circumstances that led to the delay in affording Professor Holbrook and Professor O'Shaughnessy the opportunity to publish their rejoinder.

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Tybout (1987) define “sophisticated falsificationism” (repeatedly) as involving “the goal . . . to expose a theory to possible refutation” (p. 138), as resting on “the implications of empirical data for theory” (p. 138), as maintaining “the primacy of empirical data in confronting theory” (p. 138), as “confronting theories with data” (p. 138), as embodying “the logic . . . that scientific knowledge comes from the confrontation of theory with data” (p. 138), and as seeking knowledge via a process in which “the data are the means of exposing a theory to refutation” (pp. 139–140). This oft repeated definition appears most indebted to the dogmatic falsificationism of Popper₀ (1959). For Popper₀, it was falsifiability that separated the genuine scientific hypothesis from the counterfeit because a genuine scientific hypothesis must run the risk of refutation. But even at the time Popper₀ wrote (in Germany during the early 1930s), the simple appeal of dogmatic falsificationism had already been undermined. Specifically, at the beginning of the century, Duhem (1954, orig. 1906) pointed out that a physicist can never subject an isolated hypothesis to experimental test but can only test a group of hypotheses. When experimental results disagree with predictions, the physicist learns only that at least one of the hypotheses in the group is unacceptable. But the experiment does not indicate which of the hypotheses must be rejected.

Popper₁ accepted that any refuting facts can be queried as problematic because there is always room for dispute over the interpretation of the so-called facts. Hence, deciding whether certain outcomes of (say) an experiment should count as disproof always involves scientific judgment.

The Popper₂ stage of sophisticated falsificationism (Popper 1979) gives more prominence to recognizing that the refuting facts are never known independently from the theory in which their observation is embedded. In other words, when some alleged facts turn out to contradict a hypothesis, one must choose whether to refute that part of the theory or simply to reject the purported facts. Further, one can always immunize any theory from refutation by some ad hoc hypothesis such that falsification in one domain or application may not apply to another.

An Inadequate Account of the Natural Sciences

Unfortunately, whether one pursues Calder and Tybout’s literal focus on Popper₀ or enlarges their viewpoint to embrace Popper₂, one must ultimately question whether falsificationism provides an adequate account of even those scientific areas that it appears best equipped to handle—namely, the natural sciences (e.g., astronomy, physics, chemistry). Certainly, one might question whether sophisticated fal-

sificationism represents any sort of orthodoxy in the natural sciences.

If there was ever such a thing as an orthodox philosophy of science at the time of its publication, it was Nagel’s (1961) *The Structure of Science*. Yet, therein, Nagel presented a view of science very different from that of Popper. More recently, while agreeing that science is an honest search for evidence to eliminate rival hypotheses, Nagel has rejected Popper’s particular conception of the role for falsification in theory development as an oversimplification that he finds “close to being a caricature of scientific procedure,” and he has expressed doubt whether the substance of Popper’s later ideas on science, even when understood to be prescriptive, are “any less dubious than when they are taken to be descriptive” (1979, pp. 76–77).

Meanwhile, other eminent philosophers have criticized Popper’s integral concept of verisimilitude as a potential source of scientific stultification in that verisimilitude “could be increased or even maximized by a policy of incurious repetition of safe experiments” (Robinson 1971, p. 195).

We present these criticisms of Popper because they emphasize that, even in the natural sciences where Popper’s views make the most sense, many different viewpoints coexist in the philosophy of science. Thus, both Nagel (1979) and Brodbeck (1982) deny the existence of any one “received view” (cf. Suppe 1977). Nagel condemns as mistaken the idea of one purely formal approach to the task of evaluating knowledge: “In general, techniques differ with subject matter and may be altered with advances in technology” (1979, p. 12). Today, as Putnam (1981) points out, virtually no philosopher of science believes in a purely formal scientific method.

As for scientific practice (as opposed to philosophy), Kuhn (1970) finds no methodological unity even within the natural sciences where many distinct methods are used depending on the nature of the inquiry. Furthermore, in Kuhn’s historical view of the development of science, data that conflict with a theory are treated less as falsifications than as puzzles to be solved within the existing paradigm. Thus, Kuhn claims that scientific progress occurs in the absence of tests for falsification.

Contrary to the impression gained from reading Calder and Tybout (1987), Lakatos (1968) intended to update Popper₂ in light of this work by Kuhn (1970). In his concept of a scientific research program, Lakatos borrows from Popper the idea of assessing an interrelated sequence of theories rather than one theory in isolation. But the program’s “hard core” (which corresponds to Kuhn’s “paradigm”) remains beyond attempts at falsification, providing as it does the basic direction for doing research within the field.

Good reviews of the postpositivistic critiques addressed against logical empiricism in general and so-

phisticated falsificationism in particular have appeared widely. Further, various authors have explicitly extended these and related arguments to the area of consumer research (Anderson 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). The moral, inevitably, is that even if we regard natural science as a model for consumer research, we should not feel obliged to cling to a neopositivistic, falsificationist, logical empiricist, or any other "received view" of science.

Moreover, though one finds many different accounts of what constitutes the "received view" of how science structures and tests its theories, such philosophies generally do share one central tenet—namely, methodological monism or the insistence that the social sciences should conform to the methods of the natural sciences if they aspire to being regarded as truly scientific. Although Nagel sought to demonstrate the logical possibility of this goal, Bernstein (1976) argues for its practical unattainability. Here, however, we object less to the utopian nature of the monistic ambition than to the danger of restricting the social sciences in a way that would impoverish them beyond repair.

The Need For An Interpretive Perspective in Consumer Research

Even if we did accept a "received view" as the plausible account of natural science, we must recognize the difference between the physical sciences and the human or social sciences. This contrast echoes Dilthey's distinction between the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (human studies) and cuts across the entire structure by which we have come to organize knowledge (Makkreel 1975). American educators typically array academic disciplines along a broad spectrum with the physical sciences at one end, the humanities at the other end, and the social sciences somewhere in between (e.g., Adelson 1985). Clearly, consumer research belongs to this latter group. Like the other social sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on), it aspires to some degree of rigor and empirical warrant (associated with the physical sciences) but also to some degree of understanding or "Verstehen" (associated with the humanities).

In search of understanding, the humanities typically rely on a type of approach often referred to as "interpretive." Pursuing the focus of the present discussion and following Ricoeur (1976, 1981), among others, we shall define *interpretation* here as the critical analysis of a text for the purpose of determining its single or multiple meaning(s). In the humanities, the meanings of interest might refer to those intended by an author, those inferred by the author's original audience in its historical context, those handed down by tradition, those sanctioned by the contemporary interpretive community, or those extracted by a par-

ticular reader, critic, or other investigator. Construed with similar breadth, the text at hand might consist of a literary work, some other artistic creation, any artifact of popular culture, or even some type of behavioral action. In the social sciences, the text of interest would generally comprise data concerning human behavior.

Indeed, like the humanities, the social sciences in general and consumer research in particular deal with people. One quintessential characteristic of humans entails their unremitting tendency to seek meaning in their lives. Humans live embedded within a shared system of signs based upon public language and other symbolic objects that confer a sense of social existence and identity. Good general statements of this viewpoint appear in the papers edited by Hirschman and Holbrook (1981), by Umiker-Sebeok (1987), and by Hirschman (1989). The recognition that people in general and human consumers in particular differ from atoms and molecules in their endless quest for meaning dictates the need for interpretation in our attempt to explicate the meanings embedded in consumer behavior.

Interpretation and Falsification

Having accepted the need for interpretation in the human or social sciences (including consumer research), we must avoid repeating Calder and Tybout's (1987) error of assuming that interpretation somehow stands in opposition to the possibility of falsification. (Their implication that interpretive approaches are distinct from or even alien to what they call "qualitative methodology" or "everyday knowledge" appears equally misleading but, given our focus, need not concern us here.)

Probably Calder and Tybout's most serious objection to interpretation involves the implication that it rests on a self-fulfilling prophecy in which "the conceptual argument is used to give an account of the data . . . and . . . there is no intention of comparing interpretations in order to *choose* among them" (p. 139). In claiming that the interpretive approach focuses on showing that the data fit some pre-established conceptualization rather than on seeking falsification, Calder and Tybout echo Popper's objections to self-confirming methods. However, in this, they misrepresent interpretive social science by neglecting some important qualifications that depend upon the nature of the Hermeneutic Circle

In the Hermeneutic Circle, an interpreter's tentative grasp of the whole text guides an initial reading of its parts. The detailed reading, in turn, leads toward a revision of the original overview. This dialogue between reader and text then proceeds through subsequent iterations of a circular process that, far from being vicious, tends toward its own correction in the direction of increasing validity. Typically, the reader

does not report each cycle of this interpretive process (any more than one usually presents every iteration, say, of a principal components analysis). Rather, for purposes of exposition, the reader tends to discuss the final interpretation chosen from among various competing interpretations on the basis of the evidence provided by a close reading of the textual details.

Gadamer (1975) has described this self-corrective interpretive process as a “fusion of horizons” that brings the reader’s interpretation into closer alignment with the tradition, historical context, social situation, and authorial intention of the text at hand. In defending and extending Gadamer, the work of Ricoeur (1976, 1981) has regarded human behavior as a text requiring interpretation. Further, Ricoeur (1976) has followed Hirsch (1967) in appealing to Popper’s (1959) emphasis on potential falsification as a model for interpretation. According to this logic, one’s initial holistic appraisal (reflecting, among other things, one’s preconceptions) suggests inferences that require corroboration via a close scrutiny of the text or behavior of interest, with potential subsequent revisions or reformulations based on the detailed evidence extracted via careful analysis and exegesis (Bernstein 1983).

This conception of hermeneutics aligns closely with the semiotician’s reliance on Peirce’s logic of abduction (as opposed to deduction or induction), by which a general rule and the particular details of textual signs suggest inferences concerning the nature of a case. Such abductive inferences then require testing and possible revision based on further close examination of the textual evidence. An inspired collection of readings by Eco and Sebeok (1983) has demonstrated the pervasiveness and viability of this inferential process in areas as diverse as esthetics, psychoanalysis, and criminology (with Sherlock Holmes serving as a prime illustration of the abductive approach). Only tiny modifications are needed to extend this logic of abduction to the case of consumer research (Mick 1986).

Interpretation Everywhere

Finally and most importantly, it appears fortunate for those of us who share Calder and Tybout’s enthusiasm for scientific knowledge that interpretation always admits and generally requires an intrinsically empirical approach via what we have just described as the self-corrective circle of hermeneutics or abductive semiotics. We call this view of the Hermeneutic Circle “fortunate” because, fundamentally, all scientific enterprises—including those of the stripe envisioned by Calder and Tybout—are themselves grounded in interpretation. When one collects a body of empirical evidence, whether in a laboratory experiment, a field survey, or some other kind of text, one can extract valid meaning from it only by means of some sort of

interpretive analysis. Further, as in any hermeneutic process, the evidence itself comes to us already cloaked in an interpretive shroud. Indeed, the whole weight of modern Western philosophy—from Descartes, through the British Empiricists to Kant, and culminating in Wittgenstein and more recent constructionists such as Nelson Goodman—confirms that there is simply no such thing as an objective fact, pure and simple. Rather, there are only “facts”—as-interpreted, that is, data as socially, linguistically, or personally constructed (e.g., Bruner 1986).

This means that, unlike the simplistic formula suggested by Calder and Tybout (1987), one cannot just pursue “the confrontation of theory with data” (p. 138). Instead, one can only “confront” one’s theory with observations that themselves reflect that theory via a conceptualization of reality that tells one what to look for and how to look for it. Thus, in any sort of scientific enterprise, one inevitably finds oneself engaged in exactly the sort of Hermeneutic Circle that Calder and Tybout have taken such pains to discredit. Rather than impugning the scientific status of interpretive knowledge, these authors might better have stood firm on Gadamer’s (1975) clear demonstration that *all* knowledge and *all* science rest on interpretation (e.g., Bernstein 1983; Hekman 1986).

CONCLUSION

A final irony appears in Popper’s intellectual autobiography when he explains how he happened to arrive at his concept of objective knowledge. Apparently, Popper based his distinction between objectivism and subjectivism on “an interpretation of the difference between Bach’s and Beethoven’s music” (1976, p. 60). Specifically, his love of music and deep familiarity with compositional techniques led him to reject the subjectivist theory of art as self-expression and to argue instead for the objectivist view that great artists, like Bach, work primarily by *testing* the emotional impact of their artistic creations *on themselves*. In other words, for Popper, artworks provide just one more example of the falsificationist or hypothetico-deductive method in action. Hence, to say that Popper himself embraces the role of interpretation in understanding works of art would be an understatement (p. 67):

According to my objectivist theory . . . the really interesting function of the composer’s emotions is not that they are to be expressed, but that they may be used to test the success or the fittingness or the impact of the (objective) work: the composer may use himself as a kind of test body, and he may modify and rewrite his composition . . . when he is dissatisfied by his own reaction to it; or he may even discard it altogether.

In this, interpretation reaches its apotheosis in the midst of a falsificationist appeal.

In the last analysis, then, many different but potentially constructive viewpoints coexist in the philosophy of science—sometimes, indeed, within the same individual. Some researchers may wish to seek scientific respectability in the rigid categories encouraged by positivism. But we prefer to remain content with a less scientific, more postpositivistic approach to consumer research. Here, we can take comfort in the emerging consensus that any hope for the scientific study of consumption hinges on our abilities, however fragile and however variegated, to construct meaningful interpretations of consumer behavior.

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