

## 소비자 연구방법론으로서의 Positivism과 Relativism의 절충주의 모색에 관한 소고

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소비자 연구는 매우 다양한 방법론을 적용하는 분야로서 이론정립이나 실증분석에 대한 접근방식의 차이에 따라 positivism과 relativism에 근거한 연구로 분류할 수 있다. 객관적 현실(objective reality)의 존재여부, 실증자료의 객관성, 연구 결과의 일반화 가능성 등에 대한 가정이 서로 다른 이유로, positivism이나 relativism을 연구방법론으로 수용한 학자들 간의 긴장이 각자의 연구를 dog food managerialism (positivism에 대하여), weird science (relativism에 대하여)라는 수식어를 사용하며 비난하는 경우까지 있었다. 이 연구의 목적은 positivism과 relativism에 근거한 연구방법론의 차이를 살펴보고 절충주의의 가능성을 모색하는 것이다. 그러나 Kuhn (1970)이 지적했듯이, philosophy of science의 선택은 궁극적으로 개인적이고, 주관적인 것이기 때문에, 절충주의의 가능성을 제시하기보다는 연구주체의 선택이나 방법론에 있어서 positivism과 relativism이 상호 보완할 수 있는 부분을 제안하였다.

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### I. Introduction

Is “philosophy of science” relevant to day-to-day, routinized research practice in consumer behavior? It is unfortunate that these kinds of questions or debates are often carried on (largely in a research methodology class) at such an abstract level that, once the dust settles, research in the natural and social sciences generally goes on the way it did before, as if the debates of such nature had never taken place. This seems to imply that practicing

researchers view philosophy, sociology and history of science issues as secondary to the main job of designing studies, generating data, and analyzing results. For most researchers the connection between abstract philosophical issues and concrete research practice has been quite obscure. For example, majority of methodological articles published in the marketing journals centers on technical rather than philosophical matters. The latter has been viewed as interesting, but largely irrelevant for the day-to-day

practice of research (Anderson 1986).

However, according to Ferber (1988), philosophy of science considerations are particularly important for an area like consumer research that seeks to be interdisciplinary. The fact that the topic is studied by so many disciplines with different research traditions immediately raises the question of how one evaluates the (often conflicting) knowledge claims of its various practitioners. Closely related to this is the issue of whether it is even possible to study the topic in a truly interdisciplinary manner or whether a multidisciplinary approach is worth trying (Ferber 1988).

Given some doubt about the possibility of multidisciplinary approach, Lutz's (1989) presidential address at the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) explicitly raised the issue of philosophy of science by saying, "As the editor of the Journal of Consumer Research, I have been faced with decisions regarding numerous manuscripts reporting on research efforts emanating from a research tradition that has been variously labelled postpositivism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and naturalism. I have accepted some of these papers, and rejected others, based largely on the inputs of trusted reviewers skilled in the methods attendant to this

tradition, At the same time, I have been forced, though quite willingly and with great interest, to learn more about this general form of inquiry" (Lutz 1989). It seems that moving toward a multidisciplinary approach is a fact of life in current consumer research.

According to Lutz, the field of consumer research must be experiencing what Kuhn (1970) identified as a paradigm shift. A significant number of consumer researchers, though majority of them still resorts to the traditional positivist paradigm, has rejected the tenets of positivism and has turned instead to relativism as the emergent paradigm for knowledge generation. Ethnography, literary criticism, historicism and other methods have become increasingly popular in the consumer research field, bringing with them various, novel criteria of their own by which such research endeavors are to be judged.

Before Lutz explicitly mentioned the emergence of an alternative paradigm in consumer research, Belk (1987), in his presidential address, urged researchers to investigate "macro consumer behavior". Roger's (1987) Fellows' Address also exhorted researchers to tackle research problems from broader perspectives by incorporating tenets of the critical school of social science into their regimes.

These series of remarks by the prominent consumer behavior theorists seem to allow for the alternative way of doing science, so-called, interpretive approach which is representative of relativist approach as opposed to experimentation-oriented traditional approach while some hard-line positivists and relativists still criticize each other by using emotion-laden derogative label such as “dog food managerialism” (directed to positivism) and “weird science” (directed to relativism) (Peter 1991).

In the presence of heated debates between the two, seemingly irreconcilable, camps, it is not surprising that there are different, conflicting philosophical views on the nature of science and that a number of them have been advocated as the appropriate foundation for consumer research.

Certainly, much has been learned about the nature of science by perusing the literature concerning the philosophy of science. However, simple answers to the question of how to do science better were not found. Rather, one of the major lessons learned has been that there is much less agreement about the nature of science and how it works. On the other hand, despite the fact that there is much more disagreement than agreement between still predominant positivism and emerging relativism, there should be some room for reconciliation.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to review and evaluate the philosophical underpinnings of traditional positivism and the emerging relativism in guiding consumer research, and to attempt to elaborate on the possibility of eclecticism between the two apparently separate and irreconcilable camps in terms of substantive and methodological domains.

The remaining sections of this paper are organized as follows. Section II compares positivism with relativism in terms of axiology, ontology and epistemology. Sections III and IV review positivistic and relativistic accounts of science, in turn, in terms of their respective philosophical underpinnings. Given much less understanding of relativism, Section V is devoted to introducing relativistic method, so-called, interpretivism and evaluates its potential contribution to consumer research on substantive and methodological level. Section VI closes with concluding remarks on the possibility of eclecticism between positivism and relativism in doing consumer research.

## II. Positivism and Relativism in Consumer Research

This section focuses on making a comparison between positivism and

relativism in terms of axiology, ontology and epistemology. Hereafter, I will use the term “relativism” interchangeably with “interpretivism” since, in consumer research field, those researchers who have relativistic orientation largely resort to methodologies that are labelled as interpretivism (Anderson 1989).

## 1. Axiology

Each approach pursues different goals or axiologies. The positivist’s central goal is explanation via subsumption under universal law. As well, they seek prediction. A phenomenon is explained and understood if one can demonstrate an underlying systematic association of variables. Of course, if one can demonstrate a systematic association then one can also predict the phenomenon.

While some interpretivists (relativists) do try to identify patterns of behavior, their central goal is not prediction but understanding. Understanding involves grasping the individual and shared meanings (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). This goal represents the day-to-day research practice of interpretivists. For example, as opposed to the positivist information-based model of advertising experiences. Mick and Buhl (1992) proposed a meaning-based model of

advertising. According to Mick and Buhl, the traditional information processing model of advertising states that ads are typically construed as relatively fixed stimuli that contain or imply prespecifiable information, while consumers are studied as if they are subjects, without identities, who react to ads through linear stages (hierarchy of effects) or limited persuasion route (central or peripheral route) (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), for the principal purpose of judging brands.

On the contrary, the meaning-based model of advertising states that consumers construct a variety of meanings as they subjectively interpret advertising. This orientation stresses the subjectivity of ad experiences within the boundaries of the ad’s sign structure and denotative content and the consumer’s history and sociocultural background (Mick and Buhl, 1992)

Interpretivist researchers may view understanding as a never-ending hermeneutical circle. Thus, understanding is never finished or complete. Through active participation in the culture, they strive for an insider’s view or wish to understand the shared meanings (Ozanne and Hudson 1989).

## 2. Ontology

Positivists hold a realist stance regarding

the nature of reality. That is, they believe that a single, unchanging reality exists, which is divisible and fragmentable. Thus, a phenomenon can be removed from its natural setting and studied in a controlled environment. This premise leads them to believe in experimentation. Interpretivists, however, believe that reality is mental and perceptual, and many realities exist because of different individual and group perceptions. The context in which a behavior or event arises influences the meaning of the phenomenon, thus, reality must be viewed holistically and parts of this reality can not be separated from their natural setting and studied (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In addition to holding different views on the separability of reality. Both approaches make different assumptions about the nature of social beings. On the one hand, positivism holds that human behavior is determined by outside influences which act as objects that cause behavior. On the other hand, interpretivism generally holds a voluntaristic model of humans. Humans actively create and shape their environment, rather than merely reacting to their environment and internal states (Ozanne and Hudson 1989).

### 3. Epistemology

Based on its different assumptions and

goals, each view pursues different types of knowledge. Despite the problems of induction, positivists seek or generate nomothetic statements. That is, they seek general laws that can be applied to many different people, places, and times. As well, positivists emphasize adherence to what they believe to be a proper scientific protocol. They believe in adherence to this protocol allowing for producing accurate, repeatable results. At all times, care is taken to keep the researcher and the subject separate so the researcher may not influence the results. Central elements of this research protocol involve the a priori identification of a conceptual framework and the use of a controlled environment where extraneous sources of variance are minimized so true relationships among variables may be identified. Through applying this protocol, the positivist seeks to reveal relationships that can be generalized and predicted to other contexts.

Interpretivists believe that phenomena are time-bound and context-bound and thus, they seek idiographic descriptive knowledge. While interpretivists may identify patterns of behavior, they believe that the world is so complex and dynamic that causal relationships can not be established. The interpretivist's belief in mutual, simultaneous shaping between

entities is consistent with their belief that reality should be viewed holistically (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Thus, interpretivists do not specify a priori relationships that are then tested in a fixed design. While researchers may enter the field with some general ideas and questions, they do not know enough to specify a fixed design and must rely on the assistance of informants.<sup>1)</sup> Their research process is illustrated by emergent design. For example, O'Guinn and Faber (1989) used emergent design to investigate compulsive buying without prior assumption or specified data collection and analysis plan since they were interested in phenomenological aspects of the behavior of concern. The research design evolves as researchers immerse themselves in the natural and changing environment (Meyer 1982, Gersick 1988).

In summary, positivists strive for explanation and prediction. A single, immutable reality exists, which is fragmentable. The behavior of social beings is generally viewed as being determined by internal state and/or external

forces. Positivists seek nomothetic knowledge, assume that real causes exist, and adopt a stance of separation between researcher and subject. On the contrary, interpretivists' central goal is understanding. Reality is socially constructed and therefore many realities exist. Behavior can not be removed from the context in which it occurs because meaning is context-dependent. Interpretivists generally seek idiographic knowledge, assume that real causes can not be identified, and view the research-informant relationship as interactive and cooperative.

Aforementioned comparison between the two camps is largely based on face-value. In the following two sections, I review and evaluate more fundamental differences of respective philosophical underpinnings that have engendered each camp's different research practices.

### III. Positivistic Views on Science

Logical positivism was created by the mathematicians and philosophers of the Vienna Circle. According to Auguste Comte, the evolution of knowledge follows three stages of development: (1) the theological, in which reality is comprehended in terms of the conflicts and creations of gods and spirits, (2) the

1) Interpretivists do not believe in experimentation. Therefore, they do not use the term "subject". Instead, they use the term "informant" since they believe in mutual, simultaneous shaping between entities, researcher and informant.

metaphysical, in which there is the use of abstractions and generalities, (3) the positivistic, which relies upon the quantitative description of sensory phenomena. The Vienna Circle was interested in formalizing the last stage by relating Comte's quantification of empirical observations and data to the logical structure of language and its relationship to the physical world. The result was the philosophy of logical positivism, whose core element was the verification principle (Casti 1989). These positivistic accounts of science include logical empiricism, naive falsification and sophisticated methodological falsification.

### 1. Logical Empiricism

Logical empiricism is usually considered as a moderate version of logical positivism that attempts to avoid the "problem of induction". The induction problem refers to the fact that no matter how many empirical observations support a statement, it can not be concluded that the statement is universally true. Thus, unlike logical positivists, logical empiricists reject the idea that scientific theories can be conclusively verified, and they are moderate in the sense that they are not so positive about verifiability of

theory. However, they do argue that theories can be increasingly confirmed through empirical research and logical analysis (Peter 1991).

In marketing and consumer research, Hunt (1983) has written on his interpretations of this perspective, and he has been its major proponent. According to Hunt, logical empiricists believe that the world is real, and that there are real phenomena which have an existence independent of the observer. The purpose of science is, therefore, to increase understanding of these real phenomena. While all scientific activity is not completely objective, objectivity as a goal for science is and ought be a valuable norm. The difference between science and non-science is the open empirical testing of knowledge claims. This testing is called "intersubjective certification" (Hunt 1983). Hunt goes on to state that theories are systematically related sets of statements, including some lawlike generalizations, that are empirically testable. Here, "lawlike" denotes nothing more than the observed regularity in the occurrence of two or more phenomena. He argues that deductive-nomological model with the additional requirement of causal mechanism and the inductive-statistical model remain the most viable

models available for explaining phenomena. He also notes that the discovery/justification dichotomy plays a central role in logical empiricism. The discovery/justification dichotomy means that it is useful to distinguish the procedures that scientists use to create or discover hypotheses and theories from the procedures that are used to justify the truth-content of these same theories (Hunt and Speck 1985).

*Evaluation of Logical Empiricism* : There are many reasons why logical empiricism has long been rejected in the science studies literature. First, it fails to overcome the problem of induction, since it still depends on a finite number of observations to support the assertion that a universal statement is probably true (Anderson 1983). In fact, philosophers have long agreed that there is no defensible method for determining the truth-content of statements. Second, no defensible criterion has ever been found that differentiates science from non-science. Finally, the definition of theory by logical empiricism fails to distinguish scientific theories from other forms of statement. For example, astrology and parapsychology can be shown to meet its requirements, yet few people accept these areas as scientific.

One positivistic attempt to provide an alternative to logical empiricism is naive falsification. Rather than seeking gradual confirmation of theories through induction as advocated by logical empiricism, naive falsification emphasizes the refutation of deductively derived hypotheses.

## 2. Naive Falsification

Among empirical researchers in consumer research, particularly those who advocate lab experimentation, naive falsification is often championed. For example, while there are serious disagreements in a debate on external validity (Calder et al. 1983, Lynch 1983), believers in naive falsification agree that Popper's falsification principle is at the heart of the process by which they advance both their scientific knowledge and confidence in that knowledge. According to Calder et al. (1981), theory applications call for falsification test procedures. These procedures are used to test a theory by creating a context and measuring effects within the context that have the potential to disprove or refute the theory. Thus, the main argument of naive falsification as interpreted in consumer research is that theories are to be proposed and then rigorous empirical tests are to falsify them. Since science

seeks universal propositions, any non-supportive finding leads to immediate rejection of a theory. Supportive findings do not confirm a theory but give it a stature of a theory that has not yet been falsified (Peter, 1991).

*Evaluation of Naive Falsification* : It is easy to demonstrate why this form of falsification is naive. A theory is falsified if predictions are disconfirmed for any subjects, settings or events within the domain of the theory. Clearly, almost all theories would be immediately falsified if this criterion were applied.

### 3. Sophisticated Methodological Falsification

Although many would argue that sophisticated methodological falsification is not a positivistic view, it is commonly interpreted as such in consumer research (Calder and Tybout 1989). This approach to falsification was developed by Lakatos (1970) in part to overcome the problem with naive falsification outlined above.

In this view, the focus is not on a single theory but on a sequence of ever improving theories, which are the research programs that, according to Lakatos, characterize mature sciences. Research program have both a positive

heuristic which directs the paths of inquiry and a negative heuristic which indicates which paths not to follow. Research programs also have an irrefutable "hard core" of fundamental assumptions that are determined by methodological decisions and are insulated from refutation by a "protective belt" of auxiliary hypotheses. Research programs follow the positive heuristic and successively attempt to falsify theories. The theories consist of the negative heuristic and auxiliary hypotheses, and, when falsified, are modified by the addition of new hypotheses, making a new theory. Each such circle is a "problem shift" and is "theoretically progressive" if each successor predicts some novel, unexpected fact. A problem shift is "empirically progressive" if it leads to the discovery of a new fact. A problem shift that is not both theoretically and empirically progressive is degenerating and should be stopped (Suppe 1977).

*Evaluation of Sophisticated Methodological Falsification* : Suppe (1977) provided detailed criticisms of sophisticated methodological falsification. These criticisms generally focus on the idea that Lakatos has failed to explain how scientists could a priori choose a research program that would be

progressive since what is "theoretically progressive" is conditioned by the subject matter of the science.

It seems that the current, main-stream, consumer research based on the positivistic approach to advancing knowledge resorts to falsification principle and that major criticism centers on the principle itself. Thus, it is worth looking at such criticism in its right perspective. There are many reasons why falsification in all of its forms has been criticized as an adequate philosophy of science. One of the most telling problems is that while falsificationists recognize that theories can not be proven to be true, they typically accept the idea that theories can be proven to be false. However, according to Laudan (1977), it is not possible to prove a theory to be false. This is because there is much more involved in any empirical study than the substantive hypothesis of interest. There are a whole set of assumptions about initial conditions, auxiliary hypotheses, and the validity of measuring instruments, of sampling, and of data analysis procedures. No study can completely separate these and test only the substantive hypothesis of interest. Thus, attempt to conclude that a theory has been falsified can easily be deflected by suggesting that something

else in the assumptions and premises caused the falsifying results (Laudan 1977, Anderson 1983).

It should be noted that the evaluation of falsification is rather biased against positivism partly because the purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the positive impact of the emerging relativism on the future consumer research and the referenced scholars are generally anti-positivist. As to associating empiricism based on falsification with positivism, Hunt probably would argue that labelling contemporary empirical scientist in general as positivist can not be justified because although many philosophers of science characterize their philosophy as being empiricist, no one characterizes their works as positivistic. In fact, most philosophers of science and practitioners of contemporary social science would object strongly to being labelled positivist without recognizing that their research practices implicitly have a positivistic touch in the sense that their usual hypothesis testing indeed resorts to the assumption that there is a true, fixed yet unknown parameter value. However, if it is to be argued that theories can not be shown to be true or false, then it is not clear what role empirical "testing" plays in the account of falsification. Theories can not fail or have their weakness revealed since non-

supportive results can not lead to the conclusion that the theory is false. Similarly, supportive results can not lead to the conclusion that the theory is true either. Empirical results also can not be used to conclude that one theory is better than another in this account. This is because (1) it is denied that the greater the number of tests a theory survive the better it is, and (2) no empirical method is offered for determining the degree to which empirical results must differ to determine that one theory is superior to another. Apparently, then, empirical testing has no valuable role to play in this account. Subjective judgements are now seen to play an important role in doing science. For example, subjective judgements are required for such things as determining how complete a theory is, how parsimonious it is, and whether it is superior to another theory (Peter 1991). In fact, this flexible, subjective, view of falsification shares much common ground with relativistic account of science.

#### IV. Relativistic Views on Science

Relativists in consumer research believe that while there may be (or may not be) a reality independent of the observer, there is no way to know such a reality.

In other words, scientists create views of reality and attempt to develop social consensus about these views. What counts as knowledge and the standards by which it is judged are relative to particular times in history, particular research communities, and particular contexts. Thus, relativists reject the positivistic idea that there are universal standards for judging knowledge claims.

To relativists, science is clearly a social process performed by interacting human beings. Thus, much more is involved in the acceptance and rejection of theories than the logic involved or the empirical evidence collected. As Kuhn (1970) noted, the superiority of one theory to another is something that can not be proved in debate. Instead, each party must try, by persuasion, to convert the other. Thus, relativists recognize that both psychological and sociological phenomena have strong influences on the acceptance of scientific knowledge and that science, as a social process, is clearly subjective.

A major difference between relativistic and positivistic views lies in the assumptions about the nature of empirical data. While positivistic researchers recognize that data have measurement error, they typically view data as being objective and independent of the researcher. As such, data are assumed to be reality

against which theories are tested.

However, relativists recognize that there is no purely observational language, i.e., all data are theory-laden. This means that at least implicit theories are involved in the construction of all empirical data. Thus, empirical data do not represent a reality independent of the scientist. The scientist selects the theory, the specific hypothesis to be examined, the research setting, the test stimuli, the subject, the measures, the statistics to be used, and he or she provides the interpretation of the results. According to Hirschman (1989), one of the leading interpretivist scholars, the most surprising and striking element running through all of the prominent consumer behavior theorists' descriptions is the acknowledgment of the role of personal interpretation in constructing their respective theories either they are characterized as positivists or as interpretivists. She further states that without interpreting phenomena and interpreting the works of others, novel scientific concepts could never emerge, novel scientific perspective could never be formulated, and new paths for scientific inquiry could never be embarked upon.

Therefore, interpretivism, as it stands, seems to boil down to the belief that interpretation of reality is essentially subjective and does not exist

independently of researchers.

In this section, relativistic views on science were discussed in terms of their philosophical underpinnings on a rather abstract level. Given much less understanding of relativistic research practice as compared to positivistic counterpart, the following section will provide a detailed introduction of interpretivism as representative of relativism, in a more concrete manner. Its introduction is not meant to be comprehensive but to provide working knowledge on substantive and methodological level to evaluate its potential contribution to consumer research field. Specifically, the next section raises the question of whether interpretivism (relativism) can be viewed as a significant alternative or addition to positivist methods in advancing knowledge in consumer research.

## V. Interpretivism on Substantive and Methodological Domains

### 1. Substantive Domain

The substantive domain of interpretivism was represented in Belk's passionate call for macro consumer behavior research in his 1987 ACR Presidential address. For instance, it was suggested to focus more

on the broader phenomenon of societal materialism (which is of interest to interpretivists) rather than on the micro-level phenomenon of brand choice (typical substantive domain of positivist's information processing model).

So interpretivists prioritize individual and societal quality of life rather than economic performance. If consumer behavior, in a holistic sense, consists of buying and consumption, positivists have focused on buying process to find some managerial implications while interpretivists have investigated consumption phenomena which are socially constructed and generally of interpretive nature.

If we agree that one criterion for evaluating the usefulness of research is its contribution to society and society's welfare. At present, it is unlikely that much positivist consumer research would score high marks according to this criterion.

Another specific instances of the interpretivist research are "culture and consumption" (McCracken 1981), "possession and the extended self" (Belk 1989), "experiential aspects of consumption" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and so on. These researchers are surely focusing on the substantive domain of social significance.

As Belk (1987) and Anderson (1983)

suggested, if a discipline achieves scientific respectability only when it is widely perceived as addressing questions of social significance, consumer researchers should be urged to expand their research agenda to include socially-meaningful, -applied research and to pay attention to many important social problems that involve consumption issues, which, unfortunately, have been generally ignored in much of current consumer research.

## 2. Methodological Domain

In sharp contrast to positivist experimentation where the researcher attempts to distance the self from the object of investigation, the interpretive or humanistic method requires participation on the part of the investigator. The outcome of the interpretive method is an interpretation of the phenomenon about which the researcher is inquiring. There appear to be two processes upon which the effective investigator must rely in constructing a veridical interpretation-intuition and empathy. Empathy is required because the investigator must be able to learn the others' reality to understand how they think, feel and believe. In the next stage, the comprehension attained through investigator empathy must be combined

with personal intuition to arrive at an interpretation. Intuition also enables the investigator to translate comprehension of the phenomenon into knowledge that can be transferred to the audience with which he or she wants to communicate (Geerts 1983).

To implement the interpretive method requires a series of steps that differ in both form and content from those followed in positivistic research. In what follows I outline the specific steps quoted from Hirschman (1986).

*Step 1. A priori Conceptualization :* For both interpretivist and positivist researchers, the first step is the conceptualization of a phenomenon for study. However, each has a different conceptualization of the phenomenon to be investigated. The positivist researcher is likely to have an a priori scheme of the phenomenon as being composed of discrete elements (i.e., variables that are inter-related in a causal network). In contrast, the interpretivist researcher is likely to envisage the phenomenon a large, indistinct, mass whose texture and content the researcher wants to learn. There is no desire to provide a causal explanation but a desire to discern the nature of the phenomenon in its entirety.

*Step 2. Exploratory investigation :* Typically,

the interpretivist researcher makes several preliminary field visits to observe the phenomenon. These visits are used to explore the phenomenon as it is manifested in various settings. More importantly, the researcher also uses these preliminary visits to begin discarding his/her preconception about the phenomenon. This attempt is believed to enable the researcher to become receptive to the structuring of reality used by the persons being studied.

*Step 3. Personal Immersion in the Phenomenon :* Positivism dictates that during the third stage of research - the conduct of a large-scale survey or a conclusive experiment-every effort be made to keep the researcher's subjective beliefs from interfering with the objective examination of inter-variable relationships. Thus, surveys are often conducted by interviewers ignorant of the hypotheses of the study, experimental treatments are administered on a double-blind basis. Faith is placed in random sampling and assignment, and manipulation checks to hopefully reveal the true nature of reality. On the contrary, the interpretive approach denies the possibility of discovering objective truth. Thus, the researcher must place faith instead in his or her own sensitivity and empathic insightfulness

when exposed to the thoughts, beliefs, values, and realities constructed by others.

This process requires the systematic personal immersion of the researcher in the phenomenon being studied. During this immersion process, the investigator participates in and observes the activities under study as unobtrusively as possible. For specific instance, Mick and Buhl (1992) purposively sampled their informants to investigate the meaning-based advertising effect. The second author had been an acquaintance of the informants for 10 years. This familiarity encouraged their participation and candor while providing the researcher with a valuable stock of background knowledge for interpreting the phenomenon of interest. This illustration is in sharp contrast to the positivist's random sampling theory and distanced stance from the subjects.

During the period of immersion, the researcher undergoes a continual observation - hypothesis formation - observation-hypothesis revision. Though this process may seem virtually impossible given the human tendency to fit new data into a preexisting conceptual structure, it can be mastered with continued practice (Hirschman 1986). Like the positivist method, the interpretive approach recognizes that every study will fall short

of the ideal. At best, one can only hope to improve performance over time but never to perfect it. However, the human observer - despite all of his or her intrinsic biases and preconceptions - is believed to have the mental capacity to expand, enlarge, and reconceive a view of reality. Hence, the hermeneutic circle need not turn inward upon itself. Rather, it can spiral outward, expanding the validity of comprehension as more and more personal experience is acquired.

*Step 4. Constructing an interpretation :*

The interpretation usually is presented in a case study format. The researcher presents background information on the purpose of the study, a rationale for selecting specific sites and/or times to investigate the phenomenon, and then his or her interpretation of the phenomenon. The interpretation should reflect the construal of reality manifest within the phenomenon and not the perspective of the researcher.

At the final stage of the research process, the interpretivist researcher has had direct contact with the phenomenon under study, has experienced it, and now attempt to translate that experience into a verbal interpretation. In the researcher's own attempts at conducting interpretive inquiry, the verbal interpretation often has

been preceded by a conceptual breakthrough in which the researcher literally cracks the code of the phenomenon. The disconnected bits of experience absorbed by the researcher abruptly seem to coalesce into a comprehensive whole.

One of the most striking aspects of interpretive method would lie in its discovering process. The process of "cracking the code" of the phenomenon is analogous to that of discovering. In this respect, interpretive method would be viewed primarily as hypothesis-generation device.

## VI. Conclusion

Despite all the criticisms directed toward each other, positivist and relativist approaches each form an interdependent system that is self-justifying (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Ozanne and Hudson evaluate the procedures for producing knowledge-claims in the two research camps and conclude that the knowledge outputs of these two approaches are incommensurable. Their views on incommensurability are illustrated in their examination of Bower's (1981) positivist approach and Denzin's (1984) interpretive approach to studying emotion (The

former defines emotion as a physiological, internal state stored in memory in an associative network while the latter as self-feelings). Thus, the claim of incommensurability is based on the assertion that what was perceived to be phenomenon of emotion changed when investigated by the two researchers. However, according to Hunt (1989), it is clear that Ozanne and Hudson are using the meaning-variance interpretation of incommensurability. That is, although Bower and Denzin were using the same term (emotion), they were not referring to, or measuring the same phenomenon. Therefore, the knowledge-claims of Bower and Denzin, although different, cannot be considered to be incommensurable in any meaningful epistemic sense. In addition to his counter-argument against incommensurability, Hunt's analysis posed a major challenge to interpretivism. He urged interpretivists to make strong and continuing efforts to clarify the meanings of their major concepts, especially when such concepts (e.g., emotion) were shared with the positivist approach and used differently.

In line with his counter-argument against the interpretivist claim of incommensurability, Calder and Tybout (1989) who are strong advocates of

sophisticated methodological falsification posed another challenge by citing Hirschman and LaBarbera's (1989) conclusion in the meaning of Christmas, "Consumers make of Christmas what they can; what they will; what they wish. The true meaning of Christmas lies within each of us; and for each of us, it is a unique truth." Calder and Tybout (1989) criticized her interpretivist touch of the concluding remark by saying, "what this truth is and how its explication can contribute to an understanding of consumer behavior is only further obscured by this sort of poetic statement." It was cautioned that creativity is not synonymous with self-expression.

Despite some challenges and criticisms, the interpretivist way of doing research may possibly draw attention to defective aspects of positivist research practices and suggest a way of complementing, predominantly experimentation-oriented, current consumer research.

First, students do not represent consumers. However, the conventional positivist research has been using student subjects in the experiment for the sake of convenience. Such practices affected research outcomes in several ways.

Student's cognitive skills and peer relationships mediated a wide range of independent variables. These powerful interactions used to jeopardize external validity and might have led to wrong inference. More importantly, overuse of

student subjects inevitably limited research content to such products as CDs, soft drinks, ballpoint pens, etc. (Wells 1993). This restriction has narrowed the substantive domain of positivist research. On the contrary, the interpretivist approach which is less methodologically bound in terms of subjects selection and experimental design should relieve such restriction and enable researchers to get closer to consumers in more diversified categories of products and services.

Second, the laboratory does not represent the environment. Positivist's favorite lab experiment may misrepresent the real world mainly because it permits control that is impossible outside. When that control produces lab-specific circumstances, generalizations to the real world can be wrong. If this is a real concern, interpretivist inquiry in natural settings may be a viable alternative to lab experiment. Though the findings in natural settings are less generalizable, their transferability<sup>2)</sup> would be much more valuable than pseudo-generalizability.

Finally, perhaps because of a positivistic obsession with "testing"

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2) Within interpretive inquiry, one is concerned not with the generalizability of a particular finding across population, time, or conditions, but rather with the transferability of one manifestation of the phenomenon, recognizing implicitly that no two social contexts are ever identical (Hirschman 1986).

theories (justification), consumer researchers have done little in the way of creating useful theories (discovery). A clear implication of interpretivism as reflected in detailed summary of the steps taken by the interpretive method is a critical activity in discovering process. Interpretivist orientation would show same illuminating ways of discovering by enabling us to immerse ourselves in the phenomenon of interest and emphasize hypothesis-generating aspects.

The purpose of this paper was to elaborate on the possibility of eclecticism between positivism and relativism in consumer research. However, self-justifying system of each research camp let any comparison or attempt to reconcile regress to the questioning of philosophical assumption, "Objective reality does exist?", which can not be resolved. As Kuhn (1970) suggested as to incommensurability of theories, philosophy of science must be chosen for reasons that are ultimately personal and subjective. Therefore, the possibility of eclecticism should be reserved. Rather, complementarity of each research practice can be suggested to make consumer research achieve holistic disciplinary status. Both camps can get nowhere by challenging respective philosophical underpinnings. Hopefully, they can advance knowledge on

substantive and methodological domains by complementing each other.

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## Positivism And Relativism In Consumer Research: Any Possibility of Eclecticism?

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### Abstract

According to Ferber (1988), philosophy of science considerations are particularly important for an area like consumer research that seeks to be interdisciplinary. The fact that the topic is studied by so many disciplines with different research traditions immediately raises the question of how one evaluates the (often conflicting) knowledge claims of its various practitioners. Closely related to this is the issue of whether it is even possible to study the topic in a truly interdisciplinary manner or whether a multidisciplinary approach is worth trying. In fact, this issue has triggered heated debates on positivism and relativism in consumer research and a significant number of consumer researchers, though majority of them still resorts to the traditional positivist paradigm, has rejected the tenets of positivism and has turned instead to relativism as the emergent paradigm for knowledge generation.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the possibility of eclecticism between positivism and relativism in consumer research. However, self-justifying system of each research camp let any comparison or attempt to reconcile regress to the questioning of philosophical assumption, "Objective reality does exist?", which can not be resolved. As Kuhn (1970) noted, philosophy of science may be chosen for reasons that are ultimately personal and subjective. Therefore, the possibility of eclecticism may be reserved. Rather, complementarity of each research practice can be suggested to make consumer research achieve holistic disciplinary status. Both camps can get nowhere by challenging respective philosophical underpinnings but can advance knowledge on substantive and methodological domains by complementing each other.

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