The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research

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Critical theory is presented as an interdisciplinary approach to seeking knowledge about consumers. Critical theory holds that social problems often result from groups in society being constrained by social structures and processes that they themselves construct and maintain. Critical research involves grasping both the intersubjective understandings of the groups involved and the historical-empirical understanding of the potentially constraining objective social conditions. Contradictions that are discovered provide the stimuli for change. Through the process of critique and dialogue, the critical researcher tries to help people imagine alternative social organizations that facilitate the development of human potential free from constraints.

Socially responsible investing is about self-expression. It's about extending one's values and projecting them into the world, and being able to make choices and see opportunities that are an expression of individual self-choice and awareness. It's about people having control over their lives. [SILBY 1988]

Can people consume in ways that express their social values? Can they imagine a better world and then enact this world through their individual consumption activities? Surely this goal is possible. For instance, a socially conscious investor might divest from firms that have connections with South Africa and reinvest in firms that hire minorities. Or a consumer might buy a company's products, such as Ben and Jerry's ice cream, that uses its profits to support social causes. An environmentally conscious consumer might reject products packaged in polyurethane in favor of products packaged in recyclable materials. Like consumers, consumer researchers have a role to play in making society better by considering whether a program of consumer research can be developed to facilitate social awareness and change (Hirschman 1990).

The purpose of this article is to present a research program called critical theory. This interdisciplinary perspective is a systematic critique of social conditions that aims to help people envision a better society. It explicitly declares an emancipatory interest; that is, its aim is to release constraints on human freedom and potential. Since critical theory does not represent a single or unified approach, it cannot be described with a single definition (Held 1980; Tar 1977). The term usually refers to the group of researchers that coalesced around the Frankfurt Institute (Fuhrman and Snizek 1979/1980). Although critical theory has recently attracted attention in consumer research and marketing (Firat, Dholakia, and Bagozzi 1987; Kilbourne 1987, 1989; Rogers 1987; Uusitalo 1989), no systematic presentation of its ideas exists in the literature.

Critical theory is most easily introduced by comparing it to existing perspectives. Figure 1 presents a perceptual map of alternative approaches to seeking knowledge in consumer research. This map positions alternatives along two continua (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Critical theory's short history in consumer research and marketing began with Everett Rogers's fellows address at the 1986 Association for Consumer Research (ACR) conference in Toronto. This speech was followed by two other expositions of critical theory: a presentation by Mark Poster published in the 1987 AMA Winter Educator's Proceedings (as transcribed by Venkatesh) and our special session on critical theory at the 1989 American Marketing Association Winter Educator's Conference. There is also a smattering of articles on critical theory (e.g., Kilbourne 1987, 1989; Uusitalo 1989) and "calls" to include critical theory in future research (e.g., Belk 1988; Sherry 1991). We should acknowledge that critical theory, although new to consumer research, is applied in literary, historical, philosophic, and linguistic disciplines.

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The subjective-objective axis focuses on the fundamental assumptions made about the nature of reality. Extreme subjectivism holds that social reality is constructed on the basis of the perceptions of individuals. Extreme objectivism assumes that social reality exists as a concrete objective entity, which is independent of our perceptions (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Morgan and Smircich 1980). The order-conflict axis focuses on views regarding social change, which range from a regulation or “order” to a radical change or “conflict” stance (Dahrendorf 1959; Dawe 1970; Lockwood 1956). The “order” approaches ask why society tends to hold together rather than fall apart. The “conflict” approaches ask how human beings may be emancipated from the structures that limit and repress their development.

Consumer research is presently dominated by objective-order paradigms (cluster 1 in Fig. 1). Despite the field’s ongoing commitment to interdisciplinary research (Monroe 1990), most consumer research adopts a psychological orientation that focuses on explaining and predicting existing social behavior (Leong 1989). Recently, however, some research has begun to emphasize a subjective-order orientation (cluster 2 in Fig. 1). Although this new research clearly enriches the field, it generally just describes society. Like other current research, it is not critical or visionary (Sherry 1991). Critical theory (cluster 3) stresses both the subjective and objective aspects of social reality but also seeks social change that will improve human life. Given the important role that consumer research is often expected to play in the areas of public policy, consumerism, and societal welfare, a social change orientation is relevant (Hirschman 1990).

Adopting a conflict orientation (i.e., seeking to free people from constraining structures) encourages us to recognize that knowledge is inescapably tied to interests (Barnes and Mackenzie 1979). The issue becomes not whether one can be apolitical in research, but rather what political stance one takes. According to the critical theorists, the very aim of social science needs to be questioned. For both positivists and interpretivists (clusters 1 and 2 in Fig. 1), the use of scientific knowledge is regarded as external to the knowledge itself (Sewart 1978). This means that, after knowledge is produced, it is treated as neutral information that can be applied in a variety of ways, depending on the interests of the group applying the information. By separating the knowledge (facts) from how it is used (interests), conventional approaches rarely challenge the existing system; they tend to preserve the status quo. For critical theorists, on the other hand, who believe that science is not an activity far removed from practical or moral action, the connections between theory and application are of central importance. Critical theory is a political and moral social science, designed to change society for the better (Fuhrman 1979).

In a consumer-research context, the output of critical theory may be useful to academic, public, and private interests. For the academic constituency, critical theory provides a new approach that investigates those aspects of consumer behavior that constrain some social groups or that generate conflict. Examples include what Hirschman (1990) calls the “dark side” of consumer behavior (e.g., drug addiction, credit card abuse, excessive gambling, and prostitution). For the public constituency, critical theory provides a systematic approach to revealing deception and its consequences. It also has potential to generate social change strategies that may prove useful to legislators and consumer-rights organizations. For the private constituency, critical theory may provide a way to achieve competitive advantage without contradicting the public interest. For example, a New York organization called the Council on Economic Priorities sells a pamphlet called “Shopping for a Better World” (Queenan 1989), a guide that makes it possible for the consumer to find and support companies with responsible policies. As companies’ policies improve on such issues as the protection of the environment, animal testing, and treatment of women and minorities, they receive a better rating and potentially are able to capture a very profitable market segment. From a critical perspective, this action is significant because it resolves the tension between public and private interests.

This article is organized into four sections. First, a brief overview of the history of critical theory is provided. Second, the goals and underlying philosophical assumptions of critical theory are presented. Third, a workbench, critical method is offered. Finally, potential applications of critical theory for academics, public interest groups, and private interest groups are discussed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The dynamic historical context in which critical theory arose has had an impact on the theorists and their ideas. The Russian revolution that held such promise
degenerated into Stalinism, and fascism and nazism gained powerful footholds in Europe. The critical theorists, who were primarily middle-class, German-Jewish intellectuals, were forced to flee their homes. Their forced exile and subsequent isolation in the United States gave them a common sense of purpose and led them to construct an approach that was both scientific and political—a progressive and positive force in changing society.

Critical theory developed out of two general periods. The first began in 1923 with the founding of the Institute of Social Research (i.e., the Frankfurt School) and ended 50 years later with the death of Max Horkheimer. The second period began with Jürgen Habermas’s remolding of critical theory and continues to the present.

The Frankfurt School

The roots of critical theory lie in reinterpretations of Marx the philosopher in the early 1920s by scholars such as Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and Karl Mannheim. Such scholars were interested in recovering the original ideas of Marx before his ideas were corrupted by attempts to adapt their meaning to political circumstances (Feenberg 1981). These researchers were not members of the Institute of Social Research, but their work influenced the development of what would later be called critical theory. The Institute of Social Research was officially created in 1923. Founded as an autonomous research organization, it was formally affiliated with the University of Frankfurt. Under the guidance of its first significant director, Carl Grünberg, the institute remained officially independent of all party affiliations (Held 1980), a circumstance that contributed much to its achievements (Jay 1973).

In 1931, Horkheimer replaced Grünberg as director of the institute (Tar 1977). Horkheimer, along with Theodor Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich Pollack, approached political economy more philosophically. Specifically, they became united in their commitment to explore the relationship between knowledge (theory) and action (practice). At about the same time, four psychoanalysts became members of the institute: Eric Fromm, Karl Landauer, Heinrich Meng, and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (Jay 1973). The psychoanalysts added an emphasis on reflection, dialogue, and emancipation (see the Appendix), concepts that eventually became useful in forming critical theory’s methodology. By exploring the relation between the individual and society, they helped to link the economic base and cultural superstructure. Although each of these individuals had a unique research agenda, under Horkheimer’s direction, general themes and a body of work arose that were eventually referred to as critical theory. The following themes represent a summary of their works.

1. Research should focus on both a critique (see the Appendix) of society (i.e., the structure of authority and the emergence of mass culture; Jay 1973) and the ways in which society is known (i.e., positivism and interpretivism).

2. Criticism of science and society should be interdisciplinary. The boundaries between the social sciences fragment scholars and inevitably blur their understanding of interconnections. A combination of philosophical, structural, and psychological perspectives is required to understand authority, mass culture, and science.

3. Orthodox Marxism should be rejected (Held 1980; Jay 1973; Tar 1977). Changes in social context (i.e., the failure of Marxism in the Soviet Union, the separation of ownership and control of production, the emergence of the professional managerial class, and the ability of capitalism to absorb crises) had rendered this perspective obsolete. The proletariat would not be the agent of change. New mechanisms had to be found for connecting theory to practice (praxis; see the Appendix).

4. Research should emphasize the societal totality (see the Appendix) (Held 1980; Sewart 1978). If science is to participate in the process of social development, facts cannot be separated from values. The totality includes the social ends and technical means.

5. Genuine knowledge (products of science) is the most effective instrument for the emancipation of humans (Comstock 1982). Science should focus on improving the quality of life for repressed social groups. (Critical theorists did not agree on how to defend the normative basis of critical theory.)

As the Frankfurt School established its research program under Horkheimer, the Nazis assumed power and the critical theorists were forced to flee Germany (Held 1980; Jay 1973; Tar 1977). By 1934, the group had found a home at Columbia University. Feeling alienated in the hub of the capitalist world, the members retreated into their work. The next 16 years of cultural isolation were their most productive.

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2A more expanded version of critical theory’s history is available, on request, from J.B.M. For detailed historical analyses of the Frankfurt School see Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory by Andrew Feenberg (1981); The Dialectical Imagination by Martin Jay (1973); Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School by Philip Slater (1977); and The Frankfurt School by Zoltan Tar (1977).

Their work continued until 1950 when the institute was invited to return to Frankfurt. Returning as celebrities, Horkheimer and Adorno disseminated the group’s ideas to Europe. Marcuse and Fromm remained in America and eventually became well known to American social scientists. With the deaths of Adorno in 1969 and Horkheimer in 1973, the Frankfurt School ended its 50-year history. Critical theory had been so dependent on these two men that, were it not for Adorno’s student, Jürgen Habermas, it, too, might have passed from the scene.

Habermas

Although Habermas departed from the Frankfurt School, his agenda can be considered an extension of its work rather than a turn in a completely new direction (Held 1980). Habermas focused on the two central problems that exist in the work of the Frankfurt School. First, how can theory be connected to political practice? Second, how can we create knowledge that is historically bound yet, at the same time, have an ahistorical (universal) basis for critique? The first question arose because the Frankfurt School rejected the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary change. Consequently, they were left with a theory that said what was wrong but did not say who could make it better. Habermas attempted to reinvigorate critical theory politically by giving it a new foundation in communication theory. In providing a new foundation, he also helped address the second problem of the Frankfurt School by providing a normative basis for critical theory (Dickens 1983; Moon 1983; Roderick 1986).

Neither positivism nor interpretivism provided Habermas with a satisfactory conception of the relationship between theory and practice. Habermas held that the relationship between theory and practice is instrumental in a positivist social science; that is, causal relationships are discovered between variables and this information is then used to manipulate and control the social world. Tools (means) are provided, but no direction (end) is given. In an interpretive social science, the relationship between theory and practice is clarification; that is, the forms of life that underlie behavior (e.g., social norms, concepts, values, and beliefs) are discovered through communication with informants, but this understanding is purely descriptive and provides no basis on which to evaluate different forms of life and then advocate one form rather than another.

Critical theory, Habermas claims, has an interest in knowledge that will enable humans to achieve subsistence, self-determination, and autonomy. In other words, humans have an emancipatory interest in knowledge that enhances the possibility of freedom (Habermas 1971; Sewart 1978). Therefore, in a critical social science, the relationship between theory and practice is a “critical” one; theory unmasks social contradictions, revealing how the social structure facilitates and maintains these distortions. Through dialogue with the social actor, the critical theorist seeks awareness of alternative social structures so theory can be a force of change in society. Critique, however, can only arise in communicative action. It is in the domain of communication through the identification of the ideal speech situation (see the Appendix) that Habermas attempts to defend the normative basis of critical theory through the development of a theory of communicative competence. Habermas continues to develop his theory, but since this theory is instrumental to achieve the more general goal of improving the quality of life, the details will be discussed in the section on goals.

THE NORMATIVE STRUCTURE OF CRITICAL THEORY

In this section, critical theory’s guiding assumptions and goals are discussed. Although the version of critical theory that follows borrows heavily from the Frankfurt School and Habermas, it is not intended to capture any single critical theorist and can best be viewed as a generalization across a number of theorists (e.g., Adorno 1973; Habermas 1971; Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964).

First, ontological assumptions are discussed: the nature of reality and of social beings. Second, terminal and instrumental goals are presented. Finally, epistemological assumptions are outlined, including the nature of the knowledge generated, the view of causality, and the relationship the researcher has with the social actor. Table 1 provides a summary of the assumptions and goals of critical theory. The goals and assumptions of positivism and interpretivism are also provided as a point of reference.4

Ontological Assumptions

Nature of Reality. Critical theorists question the extreme positions of interpretivists and positivists. For example, because they believe that all knowledge about the world is subjective, interpretivists overlook the material dimensions of reality; that is, once created, social reality can influence individuals. Conversely, because they believe that a single, objective reality exists, positivists forget that our social world is a historical product, that we are the architects of our social world.

According to Jay (1973, p. 54), critical theory focuses on the “force field” or constant interplay between subject (meanings) and object (social structures). Thus, reality is socially produced through social interaction.

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4The term positivism is commonly used to refer to approaches that strive to apply natural science methods to social phenomena (e.g., behaviorism, cognitive psychology, and systems theory). Positivism does not refer to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Interpretivism refers to any approach that stresses a socially constructed reality that must be interpreted (e.g., semiotics, hermeneutics, and ethnomethodology).
TABLE 1
A SUMMARY OF POSITIVISM, INTERPRETIVISM, AND CRITICAL THEORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Interpretivism</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological assumptions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of reality</td>
<td>Objective, tangible;</td>
<td>Socially constructed;</td>
<td>“Force-field” between subject</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Single, ahistorical;</td>
<td>Multiple;</td>
<td>and object</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fragmentable;</td>
<td>Holistic;</td>
<td>Dynamic;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divisible</td>
<td>Contextual;</td>
<td>Historical totality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of social beings</td>
<td>Deterministic;</td>
<td>Voluntaristic;</td>
<td>Suspend judgment;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Proactive;</td>
<td>Emphasize human potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiological assumptions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overriding goal</td>
<td>“Explanation” via subsumption</td>
<td>“Understanding” via</td>
<td>“Emancipation” via social</td>
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<td></td>
<td>under general laws, prediction</td>
<td>interpretation;</td>
<td>organization that facilitates</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reason, justice, and freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epistemological assumptions:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge generated</td>
<td>Nomothetic;</td>
<td>Idiographic;</td>
<td>Forward-looking;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Time-free;</td>
<td>Time-bound;</td>
<td>Imaginative;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Context-independent;</td>
<td>Context-dependent;</td>
<td>Critical/unmasking;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Value-free</td>
<td>Value-laden;</td>
<td>Practical;</td>
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<tr>
<td>View of causality</td>
<td>Real causes exist</td>
<td>Multiple, simultaneous shaping</td>
<td>Reflection, exposure of</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>constraints through</td>
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<td></td>
<td>dialogue, reconstruction,</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>reflection, . . .</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research relationship</td>
<td>Dualism, separation</td>
<td>Interactive, cooperative</td>
<td>Continuing dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Detached observer</td>
<td>Translator</td>
<td>Liberator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—This table was adapted from Hudson and Ozanne (1988, p. 509).

However, once constructed, it “acts back.” Critical theorists specifically point to and study the tensions or inconsistencies between subject and object. These inconsistencies or contradictions are the source of change. At any moment, contradictions provide the impetus and direction for creating a better society: “The real field of knowledge is not the given fact about things as they are, but the critical evaluation of them as a prelude to passing beyond their given form” (Marcuse 1969, p. 145).

To elaborate, over time objective conditions of action tend to contradict the intersubjective meanings attributed to them (Comstock 1982). In other words, reality is enacted or socially produced, but in time these social structures become stubborn, resist social change, and thus become constraining. Unless reflection occurs, the meanings people attribute to social structures change more slowly than the structures themselves. Thus, reality—the meanings given to social structure and the objective structures—is inherently contradictory. For example, many consumers in the United States believe a democratic ideology exists that allows free speech, individualism, and pluralism. As a consequence, they believe they exercise free will in their consumption choices. However, the people who control mass production benefit by producing homogeneous products, so the production technology constrains choices. The interpretive understanding of the subject (that we freely consume) is contradicted by the concrete social reality (mass consumption). These contradictions or inconsistencies between subject and object are salient for the critical theorist. If people become aware that their ideas about reality are not congruent with reality, this awareness may serve as an impetus for rational social development and change.

Nature of Social Beings. From a critical perspective, humans are neither completely reactive (extreme positivism) nor completely proactive (extreme interpretivism). Social actors are able to affect their social world, but this influence is mediated through the historical totality. To rephrase, because past social creations constrain us, we are not free-wheeling creators of our future. Critical theorists nevertheless assume that humans have the potential to become anything they wish since we can never know the fundamental nature of humans. Thus, when critical theorists reflect on the nature of social beings, human potential becomes the measure of all things (Fuhrman 1979).

Although reality can be considered a human product, it is often created “behind the backs and against the wills” of some individuals (Jay 1973, p. 49). People who own and manage technology, finance capital, and the communication and transportation infrastructure generally have more of an impact on the creation of reality than does the average person. Furthermore, the more powerful sectors may often reproduce society in a way that solidifies their dominance. For example, about 60 percent of children’s television commercials are for food-related products and 70 percent of these ads are
for foods with high sugar content. Experimental studies suggest that exposure to ads for either wholesome foods or sugared foods influenced the children's choices toward those respective foods. But, healthy foods are rarely advertised during children's television hours (Goldberg and Gorn 1983). The manufacturers of sugared foods have created a social production process that serves their interests but not the interests of parents and children. Similarly, while the U.S. government bans some harmful products to protect its citizens, it does not ban manufacturers from dumping these products overseas (e.g., Dalkon Shield, Depo-Provera, Tris-treated children's garments, and chemical pesticides such as leptoephos; Dowie 1979). Although dumping these products on other countries is in the interest of the companies (i.e., profit maximization) and the United States, it is not in the interests of unsuspecting foreign consumers. This focus on interests is important because critical theorists insist on the political nature of science and society.

**Axiological Assumptions**

**Terminal Goals.** Consistent with its ontology, critical theory begins with two value judgments (Marcuse 1964, p. X). First, human life is worth living. Second, human life can be improved. According to Jay (1973), critical theory is one more attempt to bring the Greek political experience (democratic free speech) together with Greek philosophy (reason). Thus, the terminal goal for critical theory is a form of social organization that makes possible freedom, justice, and reason.

**Instrumental Goals.** Habermas's theory of communicative competence suggests those goals that may be instrumental in achieving the terminal goal. His theory addresses discourse (through an analysis of speech acts) as well as the normative structure of speech that allows individuals to communicate. Habermas states that a rational consensus can be reached only if there is a "symmetrical distribution of chances to select and employ speech acts" (McCarthy 1978, p. 306). General symmetry (see the Appendix) refers to a situation in which all people have an equal opportunity to engage in discourse unconstrained by authority, tradition, or dogma. This condition of symmetrical free speech is Habermas's ideal speech situation. In addition to the ideal speech situation, all participants must have the same chance to employ constantive, regulative, and representative speech acts (see the Appendix). This requirement ensures that no assertion will be exempt from critique, no single participant will gain privilege, and the participants will be truthful so that their inner natures will become transparent to others.

Habermas's identification of an ideal speech situation provides the grounds for the critique of distorted communication (see the Appendix). Distorted communication reproduces those belief systems that "could not be validated if subjected to rational discourse" (Schroyer 1973, p. 163). Because of unacknowledged social forces in the self-formation process, humans may not be cognizant of distorted communication. Criticism reconstructs a communicative competence that, in turn, leads to a rational consensus. Thus, the ideal speech situation anticipates an ideal social structure that makes possible freedom, justice, and reason. Like any other axiology, its instrumental utility lies in its ability to serve as a guide or as a critical standard from which actual discourse can be evaluated.

One example is the Calvert Social Investment Fund that provides investment opportunities that are consistent with socially responsible values. Wayne Silby, founder of Calvert, suggests that "you can be proactive and stand up for what you believe, and take care of your family at the same time" (Silby 1988, p. 28). To advise on investment decisions, the Social Investment Fund has created an advisory council composed of 11 people who categorize companies as socially responsible or irresponsible. These people represent a variety of external constituencies and progressive social movements (e.g., environmental groups, education, health, labor, and so on). Thus, Calvert gives voice not only to the people who control capital but also to those who will be affected by the investments. This example approximates an ideal speech situation; if all groups have an equal opportunity to present their interests and if all participants present their cases openly and honestly, a rational consensus regarding the social impact of investment strategies can be reached. Since all participants have equal power, the social organization of communication prevents decisions made on the basis of greed, tradition, dogma, authority, or coercion. Although the practical problems of striving toward the ideal speech situation are immense, Habermas's theory of communicative competence serves as a critical standard.

**Epistemological Assumptions**

**Knowledge Generated.** The kind of knowledge that is legitimized as "scientific" varies a great deal depending on the approach. Positivists, who focus on revealing underlying regularities, generally do not question social reality. Social structures are reified (see the Appendix); they are treated as objects, independent of the social actors who created them. People are alienated from their creations and are unable to see themselves as actors capable of changing those social structures that make up society. Interpretivists also tend to reinforce the status quo. They take a nonjudgmental stance, which assumes that all groups and cultures are equal. Consequently, they offer no way to envision a better society (Fuhrman and Snizek 1979/1980). Over time, both of these approaches to social science generate knowledge that becomes an integral part of the existing society instead of a means of critique and renewal (Landmann 1977).

Critical theorists, on the other hand, first form an understanding of the present historical formation, then
strive to move beyond this understanding to reveal avenues of change that are imminent in the present order. Changes will be possible if contradictions are revealed between the interpretive understanding of the subject and the historical-empirical conditions of the object (Comstock 1982). In this way, the knowledge generated by critical theory is forward-looking (recall Marcuse’s second value judgment, that human life can be improved), imaginative (according to Adorno, one must not only see the old in the new, but also the new in the old), critical and unmasking (Habermas suggests that ways of communicating or social structures that contradict general symmetry need to be revealed), and practical (according to Horkheimer, critical theory mediates theory and practice).

An excellent example of “critical” knowledge is Friere’s (1986) work on teaching illiterate adults in Latin America. According to Friere, a historical-empirical understanding of the educational system reveals a “banking concept” of education: an “all-knowing” teacher deposits knowledge into the students who are empty vessels. Those students who meekly accept the knowledge are the “better” students. Such an educational system is oppressive because it does not teach students to inquire actively about the world. It produces a passive population that serves the interests of the existing social order. Here, the status quo needs individuals to accept and adapt to the existing conditions rather than to change the oppressive conditions. Within this system, students are blind to the educational interest and inaccurately see themselves as acting freely.

Friere (1986) suggests that education should be a “problem-posing” activity that can overcome the teacher-student contradiction by making both individuals simultaneously teacher and student. Only then can the individuals see themselves as conscious beings able to act and change the world. “In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (pp. 70–71). Social actors transform their world first through reflection and then through action. Thus, Friere’s problem-posing approach is critical, forward-looking, imaginative, and practical.

**View of Causality.** Social actors are influenced by constraining social structures; however, this influence is mediated by the actors’ meanings and understandings. Prediction may be possible if these meanings are stable (Comstock 1982). This view of causality is motivated by and illustrates critical theory’s ontology. Humans are confined by social structures, which are real, independent, and measurable (determinism). At the same time, they are the architects of these social structures (voluntarism). Furthermore, these causes and effects can only be understood relative to the historical totality from which they emerged. A critical theorist might identify social pressure as the immediate cause of an individual’s giving up cigarettes, for example. The decision to stop smoking must be understood as a response not only to the individual’s own perceptions and motivations, but also to general trends in society toward health consciousness, the demarketing of cigarettes, the publication of new medical information, and so on.

It is the inconsistencies between subjective understandings and historical-empirical conditions that directly underlie the critical theorists’ view of causality. This view is rooted in their theory of social change. They propose that through reflection, participants are able to identify constraints on general symmetry. These “constraints” are in the forms of distorted communication, contradictions between meanings and social conditions, contradictions between values and motives of different stakeholder groups, authority, dogma, tradition, bounded rationality, myth, rules, and so on. Dialogue or critical discourse exposes constraints to those groups who are constrained. In time, this exposure may lead to social tension and reform. This reconstruction permits a nearer approximation to the ideal speech situation. The new organization will facilitate critique since discourse is freer and more open. Reflection must, nevertheless, remain an ongoing process.

For example, the first point of the marketing code of ethics states, “I acknowledge my accountability to society as a whole as well as to the organization for which I work.” On reflection, it becomes clear that a contradiction may exist between economic and social efficiency. Clearly, under some circumstances this code is not applied (e.g., in the marketing of cigarettes). Through dialogue, the contradictions may be exposed and new forms of social organization may develop. In fact, it is this very tension between the well-being of the consumer and society and that of the manager and organization that has motivated some consumer researchers to distance themselves from the interests of marketers and create consumer research as a separate field (see, e.g., Belk 1986).

**Research Relationship.** From a critical perspective, one cannot separate the social organization of knowledge production from the knowledge itself. Scientists are involved in the creation of social conditions; thus, their research is influenced by political action and vice versa (Comstock 1982; Sewart 1978). The researcher cannot be divided into two beings: a nonpolitical, scientific theorizer and a political, philosophical participant (who votes in political elections, speaks out at city council meetings, works on policy in academic committees, etc.).

Critical theory holds that, because scientific theorizing is inseparable from political action, the researcher should take into account who benefits from the research. Research should be emancipatory, designed not only to reveal empirical and interpretive understanding but also to free social actors who are constrained. Re-
TABLE 2
THREE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research process</th>
<th>Positivism</th>
<th>Interpretivism</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial stage</td>
<td>Review of existing literature to identify a gap</td>
<td>Identification of a general phenomenon of interest</td>
<td>Identification of a concrete practical problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of an a priori conceptual framework</td>
<td>Phenomenon's boundaries are left open and undelineated</td>
<td>Identification of all groups involved with this problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection stage</td>
<td>Empirically testable hypotheses are derived from the conceptual framework</td>
<td>&quot;Bracketing&quot; of prior conceptions</td>
<td>The interpretive step: construction of an intersubjective understanding of each group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hypotheses are tested in a fixed design</td>
<td>Immersion in a natural setting for an extended time period</td>
<td>The historical-empirical step: examination of the historical development of any relevant social structures or processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data are gathered</td>
<td>Design, questions, and sampling strategies evolve as phenomenon is studied</td>
<td>The dialectical step: search for contradictions between the intersubjective understanding and the objective social conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strict adherence to scientific protocol</td>
<td>Reliance on the human instrument for generating &quot;thick description&quot;</td>
<td>The awareness step: discuss alternative ways of seeing their situation with the repressed group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statistical analysis of data to yield an explanation</td>
<td>Content or textual analysis to yield an interpretation</td>
<td>The praxis step: participate in a theoretically grounded program of action to change social conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard data-gathering techniques</td>
<td>Laboratory experiment</td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large-scale survey</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>Historical analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample evaluative criteria</td>
<td>Validity and reliability</td>
<td>Length of immersion and creation of thick description</td>
<td>Improvement of quality of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

searchers should move beyond mere observation of subjects or participation in the informants' social reality and attempt through dialogue to reveal constraints, thereby motivating informants to engage in conscious political action (praxis). Simply put, the purpose of critical research is to make life better for the social actor. Thus, the relationship between the critical theorist and the social actor is one that is based on a continuing dialogue or critical discourse (Comstock 1982; Jay 1973; McCarthy 1978). Metaphorically, the critical theorist is a "liberator" seeking through dialogue to make social actors aware of oppressive structures, a first step on the road to social change.

In the next section, a workbench methodology is presented for critical theory. On the basis of aforementioned goals and assumptions, a research method is proposed that seeks to improve human life.

A METHOD FOR CRITICAL CONSUMER RESEARCH

In this section, one possible approach to critical research is suggested. In Table 2, this approach is presented and contrasted with positivist and interpretivist approaches. (For a more thorough discussion of the conventional approaches in Table 2, see Bruyn 1966; Calder, Phillips, and Tybout 1981; Geertz 1973; Hirschman 1986, 1989; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Hunt 1983; Keat and Urry 1975; Kerlinger 1973; Lincoln and Guba 1985.) Since a critical research method is new in marketing, we will discuss this method in detail and provide a concrete example. The discussion of the critical research process is organized into three stages: the initial stage, the data collection stage, and the evaluation stage.

Initial Stage

Critical research explores concrete, practical problems in everyday life (e.g., recycling of waste, dumping of dangerous products in Third World countries, advertising to children, etc.). It is the ongoing, daily struggles of real men and women that interests the critical researcher, not abstraction. In the initial stage of research, a practical problem is selected, then all groups and individuals who are affected by the circumstances surrounding the problem are identified.
One example of the selection of a practical problem is the safety of minivans. A number of groups are involved in this problem: potential and actual consumers, foreign and domestic automotive manufacturers, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

**Data Collection Stage**

Data collection in critical research is broken down into five steps (see Table 2). This data-gathering approach builds on and extends the work of Comstock (1982).

*The Interpretive Step.* From a critical perspective, social problems result from contradictory interests and differences in power. This situation leads to social structures and processes that are constraining to some groups and beneficial to others. The first step in a critical research process is to develop an interpretive understanding of each stakeholder's worldview since people's behavior can only be understood in light of their specific interests. This understanding of individual and shared meaning is developed through dialogue between the researcher and the social actors. Researchers are successful to the extent that they come to see and talk about the world as the social actors do. Their understanding arises within and is tied to the concrete, social, historical context. Therefore, it is appropriate to have interviews and dialogue with the individuals and groups in the natural setting. By grasping the social actors' view of the world (i.e., their motives, perceptions, interests, and intentions), the researcher hopes to understand social action. In many ways, this understanding is similar to the understanding interpretivists seek; however, the critical researcher regards understanding as just the first step toward identifying opportunities for change and social action.

In studying the safety of minivans, the researcher would develop an intersubjective understanding of each relevant group. Consumers should be interviewed to find out why they want a minivan, what are their perceptions of minivans, what are their safety considerations, and how the vehicle would be used. Representatives of the manufacturers should be interviewed regarding their business objectives, their view of the consumers' needs and wants, their rationale for excluding certain safety features, and their plans for future models. The governmental group (NHTSA) should also be interviewed to find out its safety criteria, its classification of minivans as multipurpose vehicles, and its view of consumers and the automotive industry.

*The Historical-Empirical Step.* Social reality includes not only the intersubjective understandings of the social actors (i.e., the subject) but also the material forces that may constrain social action (i.e., the object). Thus, the second step in the critical research process is to grasp the historical-empirical development of any relevant social structures and processes that have determined or constrained the intersubjective understandings. Past empirical studies are reviewed and new empirical studies may be conducted to grasp the social and historical construction of existing conditions. In other words, an attempt is made to understand the concrete context in which the ideas of social actors have developed. It is only when social actors see that their own social conditions were constructed in the past that they are able to realize that they create their own future structures. This realization is an essential step toward freedom and change.

To grasp the concrete, material, sociohistorical conditions regarding minivan safety, the researcher should review all empirical studies done by the automotive industry, the NHTSA, consultants, academics, and independent organizations such as Common Cause. The researcher should also construct a historical record of automotive safety standards. Care should be taken to note any underlying interests that may have shaped these constructions. For example, studying the genesis and evolution of the NHTSA, the researcher might examine the interests of any external groups who were or are now involved with the agency. The researcher might consult automotive manufacturers' literature or advertising for the minivan and all public statements by the NHTSA and automotive industry representatives. In doing this, the researcher tries to grasp the socially constructed reality that exists separately from and influences the perceptions of the social actors. Once the social actors themselves understand the objective social conditions, they may be able to change them.

*The Dialectical Step.* In step three, the output from the previous two steps is combined into a single analysis. By comparing the social actors' intersubjective understanding to the historical-empirical conditions, the researcher looks for inconsistencies or contradictions that may have arisen because intersubjective understandings evolve slowly and sometimes become inconsistent with objective social conditions. By taking a critical, dialectical (see the Appendix) approach, the researcher attempts to understand the inconsistencies between the objective social conditions and the intersubjective meanings. Here, it is the difference between the subject and object that is of interest. The revealed contradictions are elaborated, and any group that is constrained by the contradiction is identified.

Returning to the minivan example, interviews with consumers might reveal that they buy a minivan such as the popular Chrysler Dodge Caravan because it is a convenient and safe family car. The perception of safety might be reinforced by Chrysler's advertising that stresses safety (i.e., air bags and antilock brakes), even though minivans lack the standard safety features required by law for all passenger vehicles. The historical-empirical research would reveal that the NHTSA has allowed manufacturers to classify minivans as multi-
purpose vehicles. Automotive manufacturers have stated publicly that this classification allows the manufacturer to produce vans with lower emissions standards, but lower emissions standards need not entail lower safety standards. Clearly, the government is looking out for the interests of the manufacturer rather than those of the consumer, its principal constituency (Consumer Reports 1990). Consequently, consumers buy vehicles that they incorrectly believe to be safe.

The Awareness Step. In step four, the critical researcher hopes to engage the social actors in dialogue to help them see their current situation differently, open up alternative ways of acting, and initiate programs of action. Although the researcher can reveal alternative paths, the social actors must freely chart their own course. While researchers can foster awareness in a variety of ways, an obvious approach is through some type of educational program (using dialogue). However, other strategies could prove equally, if not more, effective in making people aware and willing to get involved: essays, plays, novels, movies, and satires (e.g., Doonesbury), to name a few. In the minivan example, researchers might achieve awareness through news releases to various media. By presenting the contradiction publicly, the researcher strives to generate dialogue. Or, the researcher could contact and encourage consumer activists to help educate consumers about the poor safety level of minivans.

The Praxis Step. As a final step in the research process, the researcher participates in a theoretically grounded program of action that is designed to change social conditions and create a better society. For a critical theorist, application is the ultimate test of a proposition. Having identified a contradiction, the theorist must envision new unconstraining social conditions and try to bring them into existence through political action. In this case, the theorist might rally public support for changing the NHTSA classification of minivans.

Evaluation

All research is evaluated on the basis of criteria that are determined by the approach used (see Table 2), so critical consumer research must be evaluated by its own criteria. In the initial stage of research, the problems must be evaluated as to whether they are concrete and practical and of interest to real people. For each of the five steps in the data collection process, evaluative criteria also exist (see Exhibit 1). In the interpretive step, the researcher must form an understanding based on the perceptions of all the people involved. During this stage, the researcher may use evaluative criteria appropriate for interpretive research, such as those proposed by Hudson and Ozanne (1988, p. 515) and McCracken (1988, p. 50). In the historical-empirical step, the theorist must understand how social conditions are historically grounded. Here, if methods such as surveys are used, then traditional evaluative criteria such as validity and reliability could be considered. In the dialectical step, the researcher must identify all contradictions as well as all injured parties. In the awareness step, the researcher must engage the social actor in dialogue to achieve an understanding of existing social conditions. Finally, in the praxis step, the researcher considers whether life has improved for constrained social groups. Quality empirical work is a penultimate goal that is necessary but not sufficient to reach the ultimate goal of making society better.

APPLICATIONS TO CONSUMER RESEARCH

Because critical theory focuses primarily on bringing about social change, it is an applied, practical science. It is not, however, applied in the same way as positivism and interpretivism; application is much more integral to critical theory. Since praxis is the ultimate test of a proposition, application is an essential part of the research method. In the case of critical theory, it is the scientist, not the practitioner, who first decides how his/her research will be used. All applications focus on underlying interests, specifically the conflict resulting from contradictory interests. Since researchers cannot produce neutral knowledge, all applications should explicitly reveal who benefits from the social construction of contradictory interests. Finally, the scientist assumes the perspective of those groups who do not benefit from contradictory interests because critical theory is an emancipatory science aimed at improving life for those who are constrained.

Although all applications in critical theory share these similarities, critical theory has different uses depending on the constituency. Following the AMA Task Force (1988), we propose that three general constituencies can benefit from critical theory and its methodology: academic constituents, public interest constituents, and private interest constituents.

Academic Constituents

The academic constituency takes a leadership role in defining what is known in consumer research (AMA Task Force 1988). Its primary function is to produce and disseminate new knowledge. Since critical knowledge entails praxis, it is best disseminated through a critical problem-solving approach to teaching, such as the one used by Friere (1986). Such an approach would empower students while training them in an applied field such as consumer research. In producing new knowledge, critical methodology systematically focuses on some form of conflict between groups (e.g., alcohol and drug consumption, advertising to children, consumer education, deceptive advertising, materialism, older and low-income consumers, and public/not-for-profit marketing, to name a few). This conflict orien-
EXHIBIT 1
EVALUATIVE CRITERIA FOR EACH DATA COLLECTION STEP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection step</th>
<th>Evaluative criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interpretive step</td>
<td>Were all relevant social groups identified? Did the researcher's understanding evolve as more was learned? Did the researcher see the situation in the same way as the social actors (using their language and concepts)? Is the understanding based on the meanings and values of the people who are involved? Are the intersubjective understandings grounded historically? Did the researcher employ a dialogical, hermeneutical method? Is the account coherent and complete?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Historical-empirical step</td>
<td>Are all relevant social processes and structures identified? Have all relevant empirical studies been examined? Were new studies initiated to fill in any gaps? Is the understanding of the social conditions historically grounded? Has the analysis focused on the historical totality? Is the social constructedness of reality transparent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Dialectical step</td>
<td>Do we understand the dynamic relationship between the social conditions and the intersubjective understandings? Are the interests of the various groups known? Are all contradictions and internal inconsistencies identified? Are the intersubjective understandings linked to the social conditions that maintain them? Are the injured groups identified?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Awareness step</td>
<td>Do the social actors see their current situation accurately? Are social actors aware of unrecognized social constraints and do they see how the conditions came to exist? Is awareness achieved through dialogue? Are the social actors involved? Are new alternative courses of action presented? Do social actors see themselves as capable of positive action? Do the social actors choose their course of action?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Praxis step</td>
<td>Has the contradiction been resolved? Are the participants' subjective images formed into objective structures? Are social conditions changed to be less constraining? Is the political action effective? Is life made better? Is some ongoing program initiated to continue the critical process?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

tation is a new way to look at phenomena. It can reveal, for instance, that certain types of consumption (e.g., fanatic, obsessive-compulsive, commodity fetish, and deep involvement) may result from alienation or anomie. These types of consumption may be a means of coping with or withdrawing from a conflictual society.

Finally, given the varied interests in consumer research, the academic community could benefit from critique by a free-floating critical intelligentsia (Mannheim 1936). That is, as a field, we could benefit from a group unattached to external constituencies who would offer critiques of those groups that control or influence consumption behavior. At present, this role is generally filled by people outside of consumer research, such as by people like Stuart Ewen, the author of Captains of Consciousness (1976). Widely read in sociology programs, this book presents a critical analysis of advertising and the social roots of the consumer culture. The fact that this book is unknown to most students of consumer behavior is evidence that consumer research lacks a critical component. As Ewen points out, marketing strategies often lead to distorted communication and the frustration of human potential. If critical theory were more widely used by consumer researchers, outsiders would not have to critique our field.

Public Interest Constituents

The public interest constituency includes those public policy makers, special interest groups, and consumers who are concerned about the general well-being of society. An important interest of these constituents is to expose the social dysfunctions of marketing strategies in order to motivate regulation and change. Critical research methodology can obviously facilitate the achievement of these goals.

A public interest group might implement the five-step research process as follows. They would first develop an interpretive understanding since many issues of social dysfunction depend on the perceptions of consumers. For instance, the Federal Trade Commission considers practices deceptive if consumers are misled (Cohen 1989). To show that there is a problem with deceptive labeling or unfair competition, the public interest group must show that the consumer was deceived by distorted information disseminated by the company.
The public constituents must systematically develop a subjective understanding of the consumer to demonstrate that the consumer believes in a nonexistent reality.

In step two, the public interest group needs to support objective product claims with historical-empirical substantiation. For the public constituents to be successful, it is essential that they systematically explore, discover, and present information on the objective reality. Product claims of health benefits might be supported by controlled laboratory studies, for instance.

In step three, the dialectical step, public constituents could determine the degree of distortion by examining the distance between the subject (the intersubjective understanding) and the object (the historical-empirical conditions). They should also study the group that is benefiting from this divergence so as to elucidate their motives. If the contradiction between subjective and objective realities was socially constructed by the company (e.g., the marketing strategy is based on distorted communication) and if this contradiction has had a coercive influence (e.g., consumers were induced to purchase goods and services that they would not normally purchase), then the company could be held liable. Of course the company could also use critical methodology in preparing their defense. Perhaps they can demonstrate that no contradiction exists, that the contradiction was not produced by their actions, or that the contradiction is not coercive. If the contradiction existed before the company began its marketing strategy, for instance, this specific corporation should probably not be held accountable.

In taking the awareness step, these constituents could disseminate to legislators information on the coercive influence of the contradiction and on the company’s role in producing it. Praxis, in this context, would take the form of legislation or some other action that would resolve the contradiction.

Private Interest Constituents

The private interest constituency includes practitioners, executives, and marketers. Traditionally, the role of these people is to bring goods and services to the market in such a way that customers are satisfied and organizations achieve their objectives (AMA Task Force 1988). Unfortunately, many companies injure the larger public while satisfying their customers and reaching their economic objectives (e.g., profit maximization or maximization of shareholder wealth; e.g., Coase 1960; Katz 1960). In these cases, a contradiction arises between the private interest (economic efficiency) and the public interest (social efficiency).

Critical theory can be useful to practitioners. Private interest groups could examine their practices to see if they harm or help the public. Harmful practices should be examined and replaced by practices that resolve contradictions between private and public interests. Information can be disseminated to consumers showing that the company does not contribute to the production of contradictions between social and economic efficiency. In other words, disseminated information could focus on the positive social impact of the company’s product and marketing strategy. If a company is able to demonstrate that the social impact of its product, use, and disposition is socially responsible, the product gains value. This information could differentiate the firm’s product from the competition’s. For example, when Starkist places the phrase “Dolphin Safe” on its label, it is in effect relabeling its competition as “Dolphin Unsafe.” By disseminating information on its harvesting process, the firm both gains a competitive advantage and acts in the public interest. In such cases, praxis resolves contradictions between social and economic efficiency.

Marketing from this perspective is education (the awareness step). The marketing concept is expanded to consider not only what consumers want from a product, but also what they want from the company marketing the product. Of course, companies may still maximize their interests at the expense of the public good, but this strategy will open the gate for entrepreneurs. The Body Shop, TenderCare diapers, and Patagonia are examples of companies that have obtained relative competitive advantage by emphasizing social responsibility.

The Body Shop is a cosmetics company based in Britain that currently operates in 37 countries (Burlington 1990, p. 34). Its marketing strategy is based on educating its customers regarding (1) the contradictions between social and economic efficiency that are produced by the cosmetics industry (i.e., animal testing, pollution, negative social psychological influences, such as an unrealistic norm of beauty, and deceptions, such as instant rejuvenation) and (2) how its product and marketing strategy do not contribute to the social construction of these contradictions. This strategy has captured a market segment that perceives clear-conscience products as having added value. Consumers receive utility not only from the product but from investing in a social vision. If other companies want to remain competitive, they may have to follow suit. In this context, critical marketing creates a new playing field in which companies compete to be the most socially responsible. As the competition intensifies, society wins; public and private interests become one.

Another clear-conscience product is RMED International’s degradable diaper, TenderCare. These diapers are made of a plastic that uses cornstarch to bond conventional plastic polymers. In theory the product degrades as the cornstarch is attacked by microorganisms in the soil. Although these diapers are more expensive than the competitors’, sales increased sevenfold in 1989. The company appeals to and reinforces its clientele’s social values with the slogan “change the world one diaper at a time” (Wills 1990, p. 32).
A third example is Yvon Chouinard’s Patagonia. Chouinard states that the business goals of Patagonia are (1) to make money, (2) to give money away, (3) to be creative, (4) to have pride, (5) to avoid hassles, and (6) to have fun (Hawken 1987). Patagonia distributes part of its profit to nonprofit organizations and charities, empowers its employees, uses honest and direct marketing strategies, uses recyclable and biodegradable materials whenever possible, and supports progressive social movements.

Critical theory also has applications in the retail domain. For example, in response to customers’ concerns about the products it was selling, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., organized a “signing project” designed to disseminate information about socially responsible companies. Wal-Mart keeps track of product improvements and passes this information on to the consumer. A sign under Mr. Coffee coffee filters reads, for example, “Wal-Mart commends Mr. Coffee, Inc., for sharing in our environmental commitment; coffee filters: dioxin has been eliminated from the manufacturing process, due to a process called oxygen delignification.” Mr. Coffee’s competitors do not have these signs (at this time), implying that dioxin exists in the manufacture of their filters. These signs add social value to the retail environment—when one shops at Wal-Mart one has the information needed to make socially responsible choices.

One of the most important applications of critical theory for the private sector may be coalitions of private companies and progressive social groups, whose purpose is to unite the public and private interests. For example, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economics (CERES) has constructed their own set of environmental guidelines called the Valdez Principles. The coalition consists of 14 environmental groups and 325 members of the Social Investment Forum, a national trade association of money managers, brokers, bankers, analysts, and other socially concerned investors. The Valdez Principles cover a broad range of environmental topics: wildlife habitat protection, wilderness and biodiversity preservation, safe disposal of wastes, use of safe and sustainable energy sources, and improvements in energy efficiency (Ohnuma 1990). To date, the coalition has invited more than 3,000 major corporations to subscribe to and follow these principles. Backing up the invitation are endorsements from investment groups that control $150 billion: the Social Investment Forum, the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, and government offices that control the pension funds of New York City and the state of California. According to Joan Bavara (cochair of CERES), the Valdez Principles are “structured to reward responsible corporate actions with significant investment dollars, and potentially to withdraw dollars from irresponsible corporations” (Ohnuma 1990, p. 24). In summary, by applying critical theory, private companies may be able to acquire a competitive advantage and improve society at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article is to introduce critical theory to consumer research. A research method based on critical theory’s history, assumptions, and goals was presented and potential applications were suggested. Before summarizing critical theory’s contributions, three limitations should be discussed.

The first limitation is the problem of implementation: critical consumer research is deeply involving. The five-step research process requires that one not only form a subjective and objective understanding, but also a program of action. Such an enterprise probably cannot be accomplished in a single study and might require involvement with groups outside of academia. Such research requires a longer research horizon and a deeper commitment to the substantive problem. Although the problem of implementation does not reveal a flaw with critical theory, given existing tenure and promotion policies, the number of researchers who can afford to engage in critical consumer research may be limited.

The second and third limitations are more fundamental to critical theory, so fundamental that they have become key research questions for contemporary critical theorists. The second problem is rooted in the critical theorists’ claim that all knowledge is historical. If this is so, how can a researcher step out of this historicity and offer a critique of society by a transcendent rational standard? It is difficult to defend the existence of historical knowledge while at the same time suggesting that an ahistorical basis for critique exists. Each member of the Frankfurt School, including Habermas, has wrestled with this issue. Although we recognize the problem, we choose to align with Habermas and his notion of an ideal speech situation. Here a rational consensus is anticipated providing access to a rational anchor for critique (e.g., human rights, freedom, liberty, and justice).

The third problem involves how one moves from abstract theory to concrete social change. In the applications section, we suggest that perhaps a free-floating critical intelligentsia could help resolve this problem of agency. Of course, such a group could only be successful to the extent that they were autonomous yet also able to communicate with progressive forces in society and those who were constrained. Given the complex nature of higher education, achieving this autonomy would be difficult to say the least. Ties to funding institutions are inevitable, publication outlets are institutionally controlled, and the dominant associations exert a powerful influence. Nevertheless, this issue of agency cuts to the heart of critical theory. It can be summarized by the following question: How can consumer researchers deepen public consciousness about acquisition, consumption, and disposition in a way that transforms society for the better? Although our five-step research
process is designed to connect theory and action, the pragmatic problems involved in actually connecting with and changing society are indeed great.

Despite these problems, a critical theory of consumer research has much to offer. Although all social theories are ideological, critical theory differs from other approaches by explicitly acknowledging its emancipatory interest. Critical theory seeks to free people from all forms of domination. It attempts to envision new forms of rational social organization. By providing a concrete method for doing critical consumer research, researchers will be better equipped to investigate broader issues of societal welfare.

Although social criticism is inescapably negative, one way to make researchers more fully aware of their potential for changing the world is through critique. “In a world so full of wondrous things, both natural and humanly created, there is much to engage us—both as consumers and as consumer researchers. In a world so sharply delineated between the consumption of haves and have-nots, there is much to concern us. And in a world so full of high level consumption, but so empty of human fulfillment, there is much to challenge us” (Belk 1987, p. 1). Critical theory challenges researchers to move beyond critique, to envision a life free from constraints, and to build a society that embodies this image.

**APPENDIX**

**Glossary of Terms**

*Constantive speech acts* (e.g., asserting, reporting, explaining, contesting) mark the distinction between being and illusion. Here there is an inherent obligation to return to the source of experience in which the speaker grounds the claim. If this grounding does not dispel doubt, then the problematic truth claim becomes the subject of theoretical and methodological discourse (McCarthy 1978, p. 285).

*Critique* has both a negative and positive interpretation (Connerton 1976); reflection on a system of constraints that are humanly produced (negative) and the rational reconstruction of the conditions that make language, cognition, and action possible (positive).

*Dialogue* is a sharing of experience that results in a more and more refined and clarified interpretation. According to Leifer (1986), dialogue can be understood in terms of three phases: (1) preliminary dialogue—a sharing of individual opinions about the phenomena; (2) transitional dialogue—further discussion and examination of the experience that leads to newer, more immediate understanding of the issue in question and may be tied to group or individual interests; (3) fundamental dialogue—further discussion that leads to a building on previous themes and an interweaving of these themes as they are further illuminated by the data; it is out of this dialogue that a collective understanding emerges.

*Dialectics* is the systematic analysis of the tension or interconnections between opposites (Bhasker 1983). In this article, this means systematically understanding the inconsistencies, tensions, or contradictions between subject and object.

*Distorted communication* is communication that reproduces those belief systems that “could not be validated if subjected to rational discourse” (Schroyer 1973, p. 163). Examples of distorted communication are lies, myth, dogma, and coerced consensus.

*Emancipation* is the elimination of impediments to human freedom. Marx ties emancipation directly to the idea of self-determination (Lukes 1983).

*General symmetry* refers to a situation in which all stakeholders have an equal and unrestrained opportunity to engage in discourse (McCarthy 1978).

*Ideal speech situation* is a situation of symmetrical free speech in which all participants have an equal chance to employ constantive, regulative, and representative speech acts (McCarthy 1978).

*Praxis* is the free, universal, and creative activity through which humans create and shape their historical human world and themselves (Petrovic 1983a). The term is often used to describe practical knowledge (bringing theory and action together) that is constructive and life enhancing.

*Reification* is the objectification of abstractions. For example, reification occurs when researchers develop the concept “attitudes,” then treat this concept as though it behaves according to the laws of the physical world (Petrovic 1983b).

*Reflection* is the thoughtful and deliberate examination of underlying assumptions, motives, values, or intentions of groups and individuals (Fuhrman 1984). Or it can be an examination of the underlying assumptions and the social context that ground a theory or method.

*Regulative speech acts* (e.g., requests, warnings, recommendations, advice) mark the distinction between what is and what ought to be. Here there is an inherent obligation to return to the normative context from which the speaker justifies the claim. If this justification does not dispel doubt then the validity of the underlying norm is called into question (McCarthy 1978, p. 285).

*Representative speech acts* (e.g., reveal, expose, admit, express) in conjunction with intentional verbs (e.g., acts of belief, hope, fear, desire) mark the distinction between the real self and appearances. Here there is an inherent obligation to be truthful when revealing inner nature (McCarthy 1978, p. 285–286).

*Totality* encompasses everything that has come before; thus, the totality is the complete set of dynamic interrelationships that make up a concrete historical period, including imagined ends. According to Meszaros (1983, p. 480), the totality is the “structured and historically determined overall complex.” From a critical perspective, individual and group actions (e.g.,
consumption) need to be understood in the context of the totality.

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