Critical Realism and Qualitative Research: An introductory Overview.

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Introduction

Many of the methodology textbooks that business and management students are encouraged to use a simple and, in our view, flawed dichotomy between objectivist (positivist, deductive, and empiricist) approaches, which are typically aligned with quantitative empirical methods, and subjectivist (social constructionist, inductive, and interpretive) approaches, which are typically aligned with qualitative empirical methods. Whilst this dichotomy certainly simplifies approaches to research, it is based on the odd assumption that some data should a priori, be ruled out simply on the basis of whether it is appropriate and consonant with the general orientation of the approach. Such as assumption is not only, as we discuss later, theoretically flawed, but is also out of kilter with the day to day experiences of individuals: counting can often give us insights into meaning or values (for example when suicide rates rise), and interpreting sights and sounds can give us greater understanding of an external and objective reality (think about all the signs drivers respond to when obeying "the rules of the road", for example).

Critical realist scholars seek to overcome this odd dualism (objectivism or subjectivism) by distinguishing between ontology (what is real) and epistemology (what we know). CR scholars assume the existence of an objective (‘intransitive’) world that has powers and properties that can be more accurately known as a consequence of scientific endeavour but recognise that knowledge is a subjective, discursively bound (i.e. transitive) and constantly changing social construction. Crucially, for science, social science, and for the purposes of this chapter, careful methodological practices form a bridge between our epistemological knowledge and ontological reality: good research means we can understand the world better. This marriage of epistemological relativism and ontological realism, however, presents novel challenges to qualitative social scientists, not least of which is the question of how researchers make
discoveries about any social formation from qualitative datasets when participants may be unaware of or (consciously or otherwise) misrepresent the social formations of which they are a part.

In our view, dealing with this problem requires qualitative researchers to think about the research act in particular and in theoretically grounded ways (see also, Edwards et al. 2014). In this chapter we attempt to distil the general thrust of an emerging and developing stream of CR informed qualitative research. We begin by offering a brief introduction to CR as a philosophy of science before then sketching out the implications of this position for qualitative researchers. The overall argument suggests CR researchers can and should embrace all qualitative (and many quantitative) techniques. Indeed, they often must do so in order to understand social organisation. However, their approach to data collection and analysis is likely to differ significantly from those who are committed to alternative ontological positions.

**Critical Realist Ontology**

The origin of CR, as a philosophy of science, is attributed to a series of books by Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar 1975, Bhaskar 1979, Bhaskar 2008, Bhaskar 1993). He argues that the universe, including the social world, is a *stratified and open system of emergent entities*. This section breaks this mouthful down into simple parts in the effort to clarify its meaning, so if you are already familiar with this ontological position you might want to skip forwards to the next section.

*Entities, Powers and Systems*

*Entities* are things which ‘make a difference’ in their own right, rather than as mere sums of their parts (Fleetwood 2005: 199). Molecules, individuals and organizations are all entities, even though one may be (partially) comprised of others. Entities may be material (e.g. water), immaterial (e.g. class) or both (e.g. a contract). Bhaskar differentiates between ‘real essences’ which are the ‘structures or constitutions in virtue of which [a] thing or substance tends to behave the way it does’ (Bhaskar, 2008: 209), and ‘nominal essences’ which are ‘those properties the manifestation of which are necessary for the thing to be correctly identified as one of a certain type’ (Bhaskar, 2008: 279). Such a distinction enables a separation of the essential generative or enabling processes of an entity and its epiphenomenal features. We may this identify a book nominally, as paper bound together in a particular way, or in a more
sophisticated way in terms of its language, genre, intended audience or purpose, to realise the real essence of the specific book observed.

Entities may also be real in different ways and at different levels. For example, the bogeyman is not materially, but ideationally real: the discourses about him have real effects not least on the bedtime activities of children and on the writers of children's fiction. The bogeyman thus exists as a conceptual/cultural schema in some societies, which affects social and material events. Entities are thus organized hierarchically, in that they exist and have relations at different levels. For example, the entity ‘organization’ is made up from (among other things) people and resources; people are (partially) constructed of tissue and organs; which are, in turn, made up of cells, and so on.

The relationship between these levels is known as ‘emergence’ (Elder-Vass 2010), where one level is dependent upon, but irreducible to the level below: for example, we cannot understand the wetness of water in reference to its components of hydrogen and oxygen; nor can we explain the functioning of an organisation with sole reference to its roles and resources. Each entity at different levels has causal powers that depend on the relational properties of its parts. These relational properties, which are inherent to entities, can be usefully conceived of as essences. An essence is ‘what makes something that thing and not something else’ (O’Mahoney 2011:726). Water, is H₂O and has the power to soak, organizations have directors and the power to employ; money has legal status and has the power to purchase.\(^1\)

The notions of causal powers of entities are important because change often occurs when the powers of one entity interact with another: water can be heated by fire, teams may elect a leader, and organizations might be bought by other organizations. Such mechanisms often transform entities: water might turn into steam, a new leader might change the organisation, and a purchased organization might be asset-stripped. So, changed and/or emergent entities, created from the interactions of entities and causal powers, will often have new properties and powers. We should note here the different ways in which a power may exist: An entity may possess a power simply due to its properties (a government may have some power to increase employment); this power may be exercised by the power being triggered (the government takes on more public sector workers); yet this power may or may not be actualized (i.e. come to be)

\(^1\)Although we need to be careful when using terms like ‘essence’ and ‘power’, it is important to note that without some idea that an entity has one or more essences or powers it is indistinguishable from anything else.
because there may be countervailing powers, (e.g. private sector employment may have collapsed). The social world is full of powers, the actualization of which is often retarded by other powers within the open systems in which they are located.

Any power necessitates the actualisation (manifestation, existence) of at least one mechanism for the potential exercise of that power: the possessed power of an employer to sack a worker implies a mechanism (legal termination of a contract) by which this occurs. Powers thus depend on mechanisms that relate an entity to another. The exercising of powers often results in tendencies which, in the social world, may manifest in patterns of events. However, unlike the natural sciences, these patterns are not reliable event regularities, and their existence alone can certainly not be taken to ‘prove’ one theory or another, as we know that powers are often unexercised, or unactualised. This framing is important because it allows a conceptualisation of what could happen, what should happen and what isn’t happening, which gives the researcher prompts for further investigation. For example, when women dominate a highly paid employment sector, global temperatures decrease, or low paid workers are happy, it indicates that there are (perhaps) deficiencies in our current theorisations or methods which need attention. Moreover, as Bhaskar (2008) argues, critical realism also allows a conceptualisation of absences which accords causal powers: the absence of legislation on worker rights, for example, has real effects which empiricist and constructionist accounts of the world might miss.

For CR scholars, explanatory power is to be found in understanding how different entities are related as parts of a greater whole: to really understand what a heart or a coin is, for example, it is necessary to place it in the context of the body or the monetary system. This is where the term *open system* becomes useful. In contrast to a closed system, such as a laboratory, social mechanisms cannot be isolated and thus repeated in an identical manner to facilitate experimentation. Whilst such isolation is impossible in the social world, critical realists often use the concept of the ‘laminated system’ (Bhaskar 1993; Elder-Vass 2010) ‘whose internal elements are necessarily ‘bonded’ in a multiplicity of structures’ (Bhaskar 1993: 25). Examples might include financialised capitalism, the Russian legal system, or British worker strikes: whilst these cannot be separated from the rest of society, they comprise systems, mechanisms and entities which are important to consider together.
The empirical, the actual, the real

In the introduction, we saw how critical realism commits to both ontological realism and epistemological relativism, yet the picture is more complicated than this, as critical realism, whilst accepting that actual events do occur, also proposes that these events are caused by real mechanisms that are often invisible to the researcher. This stratified or ‘depth ontology’ makes a distinction between the ‘empirical’, the ‘actual’ and the ‘real’. The empirical is what we perceive to be the case: human sensory experiences and perceptions (we observe a driver approaching a the speed camera and slowing down). The ‘actual’ is the events that occur in space and time, which may be different to what we perceive to be the case (we may assume the driver has slowed down before the speed camera when this is not what happened). The real or deep is constituted of the mechanisms and structures which generate (and explain) events, a point which we shall illustrate below.

This stratified conception of causation facilitates a more adequate understanding of how (material and social) powers which operate in different locations and/or, often, at different hierarchical levels are related. Reality is ‘multiply determined’, with no single mechanism determining events (Bhaskar 1975). Multiple causes must be teased out from detailed explorations of the setting, and so it follows that a key commitment of critical realist research is that there are deeper levels awaiting discovery. Beyond direct observation it is also possible to posit various other potential mechanisms that may be (in part or whole) neither manifest nor readily observable, but that still have an effect.

To put all this CR terminology into a brief example, we might refer to a fixed roadside speed camera, which routinely slows down the traffic regardless of whether the camera within it is actually working. A traditional Humean or positivist approach might measure the incidence of new speed cameras (working or not) and the changes in speed of cars, and undertake a regression analysis to show, for example, that a positive correlation means that cameras cause speed retardation. Whilst the numbers here can be (though are not necessarily) useful, the analysis contains inadequate conceptualisation of cause’ which focuses on description rather than explanation. Crucially, it misses out on the most complex element in the processes: the human. An alternative, post-structural approach might emphasise the self-disciplining Foucauldian effects of disciplinary surveillance, and the role such technology has in producing compliant subjects (for example, Fyfe and Bannister 1996). This perspective can produce useful insights, but when discourse is over-emphasised, and the self is seen as constructed, then resistance, social structure, and the wider historical context can be missed.
A critical realist perspective, however, not only accepts the distinction between the empirical (the appearance of a speed camera) and the actual (a speed camera with no film), but also seeks to discover the (deep) causal mechanisms that relate the appearance of the camera with the person, asking what variety of causal relations must exist in order for the empirical events to occur. This not only opens up a wider variety of interesting phenomena, such as the mind of the driver, the powers of the police, and the braking mechanisms of cars, but also helps us understand why things might change: for example when speeds slowly increase when drivers realise the camera doesn’t flash, or when the camera gets vandalised because people think cameras are simply a mechanism for extorting fees. The critical realist approach, therefore, can place the speed camera in a number of related, stratified ‘laminated systems’ - which might include both the structural relations of the citizen, the state and the police, as well as the psychological institutionalisation of drivers and their responses (and resistance) to disciplinary techniques – which rely upon the identification of deep causal relations which may be invisible to the researcher focused merely on actual events.

**Critical Realist Research**

*An Underpinning Ontology*

The example above highlights an obvious limitation of critical realism: it is a metaphysical ontology and (contrary to some writing) does not imply anything about the existence of the self, society, social structures and so on. To achieve a critical realist account of such things we need to develop and use what Cruickshank (2003) refers to as ‘domain specific’ theories. These emerge when general CR realist theory is drawn upon to develop a framework for studying a specific empirical domain, and the consequence is that the theories that are developed, whilst adhering to the principles and language of CR, are only implicitly ontological. For example, those studying labour process theory might use critical realism as an ‘underlabourer’ to build theories concerning the exploitation or alienation of workers however, there is nothing in a critical realist ontology which demands such propositions. Indeed, the epistemological relativism inherent in CR means that one would expect such theories to be at best approximations of reality, not least because all social theorising involves simplification. Applied critical realism, therefore, provides an underpinning structure and language to guide
good research by asking what the entities, causal powers, dependencies and relations are, but
it does not specify what these should be. The task of the researcher, then, is to work out a better
and causally accurate, correct, or reliable explanation for these patterns of events via the
development of more adequate (and domain specific) accounts of the powers, entities,
mechanisms and relations which created them. However, as we saw with the example of the
speed camera, developing such an explanation can be difficult because the powers of entities
do not have to be present or even exerted in order to have an effect.

One consequence of both the ‘domain agnosticism’ and stratified nature of critical realism is
that it is compatible with a wide array of other theoretical (though not ontological) positions.
For example, critical realists are comfortable with the domain level concepts of discourse,
identity or materiality (Elder-Vass 2014, Mutch 2013), though clearly not with the ontological
positions that discourse is everything or that the material is entirely social (e.g. Barad 2007).
This provides critical realists with great opportunities to re-examine competing ontological
positions or theorists, that make important theoretical insights, but are often limited by
ontological strictures. Such approaches have not only led to many critical realist re-readings of
concepts such as discourse (Fairclough 2005), identity (O'Mahoney 2011) and socio-
materiality (Mutch 2013), but also to claim theorists such as Foucault and Derrida as critical

**Mechanisms, Contexts, Outcomes**

In seeking to understand and explain the mechanisms behind empirical and actual events,
critical realism is primarily interested in causal explanations – moving from the what to the
why. This challenges the researcher, the policy maker or the manager to develop deep
understandings of the worlds in which they inhabit: away from the simplistic certainty of
regression analyses, that might show implementing X ‘causes’ Y, and towards an
understanding of why different contexts, conditions, and aspects of X can cause Y. The key to
this enquiry is the ‘mechanism’ and the events that it produces, but the mechanism in an open
system cannot be isolated from its context, hence Pawson and Tilly’s (1997) equation,
Mechanism + Context = Outcome. In more detail:

- Mechanism: how do the properties of one or more entities affect those of others?
- Context: what conditions are needed for an entity’s causal mechanisms be to triggered?
Outcomes: what are the empirical manifestations produced by causal mechanisms being triggered in a given context?

The role of context means that, unlike the image promoted by positivists, there are no clear, simple or easy answers in the social world (Fleetwood and Heske 2010). For example, we might find that low-waged service workers working in a call centre can be happy when they work on quality services, have high levels of discretion in their jobs, and positively identify with the values of their work (Jenkins and Dellbridge 2014). The mechanisms that manifested here concerned the relational identifications of the workers with the values of their employer and their work. However, the authors make clear that the context of this mechanism was a labour market in which there was limited choice, a family-owned, small and successful business, and the identified mechanisms may produce different outcomes in different contexts, even within the same company at a different time.

CR Research Design

The centrality of identifying mechanisms to explain why things happen means that critical realists put theory first. Thus, the aim of realist research design is to produce explanations (theories) about the essences (properties) and exercise of transfactual, hidden, and often universal mechanisms. This takes any potential generalisations from the empirical to the theoretical, in contrast to the positivist approach where generalizations are only concerned with an empirical population (Danermark 2002: 77). This distinction is important because theoretical generalizations are more enduring and can be applied through time and space: a theoretical generalization that capitalism tends to commodify should not only be applicable in all forms of capitalism (including future ones), but when one finds empirical evidence to the contrary, it prompts the researcher to seek further mechanisms that might be at play to prevent the mechanism being actualized. In contrast, a generalization that notes only the empirical instances of capitalist commodification is a much thinner proposition that has limited explanatory value because it simply identifies the empirical event and says little about why it happens, to what extent, and in which circumstances. Moreover, evidence to the contrary simply modifies the generalization and does not prompt a pursuit of counter-mechanisms.

The importance of CR emphasising ontological questions (what is X? how does it work?) over epistemological questions (how can we know X?) means that CR is methodologically ecumenical. Indeed, many realists would argue that the emergent stratified nature of social
realism means that a wide range of methodological approaches or ‘extended methods’ is necessary for a richer conceptualisation of the mechanisms at work in the social world. For this reason, CR scholars embrace a range of qualitative research techniques. Our own edited collection (Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014), which looked at the implications of CR for a range of methods within the field of organisation studies, included chapters on discourse analysis (Sims-Schouten and Riley 2014), grounded theory (Kempster and Perry 2014), interviewing (Smith and Elger 2014), ethnography (Rees and Gatenby 2014), case studies (Vincent and Wapshott 2013), comparative case methods (Kessler and Bach 2014), action research (Ram et al. 2014), historical and documentary methods (Mutch 2014). Elsewhere CR scholars have used observational (Bøllingtoft 2007), diary-based (Næss and Jensen 2002) and autoethnographical (Botterill 2003) methods.

Table 1 Critical Realist Research Strategies (amended from Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014)

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<th>Intensive ↔ Extensive</th>
<th>Intensive</th>
<th>Extensive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the mechanism?</td>
<td>Case-study</td>
<td>Comparative case-study</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do context &amp; mechanism typically interact?</td>
<td>Institutional / historical analysis</td>
<td>Surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do context &amp; mechanism historically interact?</td>
<td>Intensive realist literature evaluations</td>
<td>Barefoot research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the context?</td>
<td>Extensive realist evaluation</td>
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As (Ackroyd and Karlsson (2015)) have argued, the choice of research design for critical realists very much depends on the position of one’s research purpose on two dimensions. The first, relates to the focus of research, and ranges from intensive research to extensive research. Intensive research prioritises qualitative research designs, such as case-studies or action research, where the context is known and the mechanism is unknown (for example, why are workers happy in this factory?). Extensive research examines the effect of different contexts on a mechanism, for example by using surveys (see also, Sayer 1997). The greater breadth of
data can imply relationships quantitatively, but also generate taxonomies. It is suitable for where mechanisms are known (or at least inferred) but the context varies (for example, *in what contexts does greater worker autonomy lead to greater levels of reported happiness?*). Between these two extremes are examples of where the focus of study is on the interaction of mechanisms and contexts. A second scale, concerns the extent of detachment of the researcher, whether they are simply diagnosing from a distance or whether they are trying to manipulate the mechanism or context under study. In Table 1, we amend Ackroyd and Karsson’s categories to re-present eight CR research strategies. This provides us with eight research designs that are described and illustrated briefly below.

**Table 2** CR Research Strategies, Explanations and Examples.

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<tr>
<th>Research Strategy</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Case-study</td>
<td>The most common, and arguably most useful, form of CR research. In-depth exploration of a case to abduct causal mechanisms from their empirical manifestations. Cases may range from people to companies to whole economies.</td>
<td>Gouldner (1964); Beynon (1979) (1973); Burawoy (1979)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action research</td>
<td>Intervention by researchers to explore the workings of a mechanism by triggering it or changing its context.</td>
<td>Cassell and Johnson (2006); Friedman and Rogers (2009); Morgan and Olsen (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative case-study</td>
<td>Exploring how similar mechanisms operate in different contexts.</td>
<td>Delbridge (1998); Taylor and Bain (2003); Kirkpatrick et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive realist literature evaluations.</td>
<td>Builds theories to explain what mechanisms work in different contexts by reviewing the extant literature.</td>
<td>Marchal et al. (2012);</td>
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### Institutional / Historical Analysis

Examining causal sequences over time to explore how mechanisms and contexts interact over time, and the conditions for such interaction.  


### Barefoot Research

Training / encouraging participants / employees to do their own research.  

- Lindqvist (1979)

### Surveys

Primarily focuses on descriptive statistics (e.g., sampling or population data) to illustrate the empirical consequences or conditions of mechanisms. Occasionally used to prompt explanatory investigations, but in conjunction with other methods.  

- Cully et al. (1999)

### Extensive Realist Evaluation

Mixed methods: stage one uses qualitative work to identify causal mechanisms. Stage 2 uses statistical techniques to examine how different contexts affect a mechanism.  

- (Kazi et al. (2002), Kazi (2003))

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**CR Data Collection Methods**

There is little to say about CR methods, because they do not exist. As detailed earlier, CR has a highly ecumenical approach to data collection and holds that methodological choices should ‘depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it’ (Sayer 2000: 19). Thus, whilst CR work is often based on case-study research using interviews and ethnography, it has also involved observation, focus groups, literature reviews and surveys.

One caveat that is rarely commented with either research designs or methods is the extent to which the phenomenon being studied can be isolated. It is true that in the social world this is probably futile, but many disciplines which are increasingly turning to critical realism, such as psychology (Ponterotto 2005) the focus of study may be mechanisms which are more capable of being isolated, at least at one level, than others. This raises interesting questions about the extent to which experimental design may be appropriate, perhaps as part of a mixed methods study. As critical realism is still a relatively nascent topic, we hope to see developments on this and other questions by other researchers.
Analytical method: Abduction and Retroduction

As far as analysis is concerned, whilst both induction and deduction are used in critical realist research, the need to move from the empirical to the real (causal mechanisms) means that the emphasis tends to be on abduction and retroduction. Abduction involves re-description of findings as a causal mechanism or process which serves to explain them. The step involves re-describing that which is observed (interviews, observation, documents) in terms of theory in order to describe the sequence of causation that gives rise to observed regularities in the pattern of events. It involves combining observations, often in tandem with theory identified in the literature review, to produce the most plausible explanation of the mechanisms that caused the events. For example, a researcher looking at HR practices might interview a group of workers about their appraisal and seek to explain these data in terms of theory about disciplinary power of managerial discourses (what is said in the appraisal situation) in the employment relationship, wherein it is theoretically assumed that the bargaining position of the appraisee (worker) is weaker than their appraiser (manager). Here, and if the explanation of the mechanisms is successful, theory and data will be consistently and effectively ‘fitted together’ in such a way as to render the nature of the mechanism clearer.

Retroduction involves imagining a mechanism, which, if it were real, would account for the phenomena in question. In other words, it seeks to ascertain what the world (i.e. the broader context) must be like in order for the mechanisms we observe to be as they are and not otherwise. This often involves first identifying patterns over periods of time and in different contexts to creatively asking ‘what if?’ to identify often hidden causal mechanisms. For example, extending the example used above, we might observe (1) that some managerial discourses are more persuasive than others, and (2) that in certain organizational contexts (opportunity structures, labour markets, etc.) workers are more inclined to accept the managerial version of ‘the truth’, however this might be constructed. This, in turn, suggests a number of other causal processes are also at play to affect the mechanism observed, suggesting the opportunity to understand more about the relationship between the mechanisms we observed and the contexts in which it operates.

In order to build better explanations of the interconnections between strata which might explain such variance within a known mechanism, we must either bring in or develop other theoretical resources. For example, we might use comparative analysis to demonstrate that it is those
appraisers who are able to transpose the dominant cultural tropes of their appraisees into the appraisal meetings who prove to be the most persuasive. As a result, we might develop a new theory that connects the organizational outcomes with broader cultural contexts. Alternatively, and drawing on existing theory, we might consider the nature of opportunity structures within the broader labour market in order to explain why it is that, say, managerial trainees and those with an interest in opportunities for further technical training have a greater interest in being complicit with managerial discourses than, say, those with little opportunity for career advancement. In either case, new lines can be drawn between the operation of a mechanism, at one level, with the context(s) within which the mechanism resides. As different theories emphasize different aspects of mechanisms that are simultaneously implicated in a pattern of events, retroduction implies a commitment to theoretical pluralism, at least at the outset of an investigation. Multiple theoretical lenses can be considered for what they tell us about the various and stratified influences that are affecting the things we observe.

Abduction and retroduction can also be used as part of an immanent critique of a competing position in order to develop theorising in a field. This provides a critique from within a theoretical position and identifies contradictions, ambiguities or inconsistencies. It seeks the ‘Achilles heel’ (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010) of an existing theoretical position in order to identify theoretical weaknesses that require further investigation. For example, Archer undertakes an immanent critique of conceptions of the social agent within economics and social-constructionists sociology to demonstrate the need for a new theory about the ways in which humans are conditioned by, but irreducible to, social norms and structures. This then spurs Archer’s (2000) investigation and development of a theory of humans which incorporates the notion of morphogenetic cycle and the subjects ‘inner dialogue’. In undertaking an immanent critique a critical realist research may seek to ameliorate the flaws they discover by asking what the theory could be like in order to overcome its inconsistencies and re-describing the theoretical tools of the position within an alternative (in this case, critical realist) theory. For example, O’Mahoney (2011) shows that the anti-essentialist positions of many anti-essentialist scholars are inconsistent with their own practices and theorising. He uses this flaw to redescribe their main theoretical commitments (for example, concerning identity and discourse) within a critical realist ontology.

Thus, when abduction and retroduction succeed, they offer a new and often unanticipated view of things: what was hitherto unobserved becomes the basis of new understanding. By postulating a new view of the object of study in the light of a new or existing theorization. A
successful realist study, therefore, involves a re-conceptualization of the subject and the processes to which it is connected. Finally, it should be noted that many researchers, for simplicity, treat abduction and retroduction as one movement, often from qualitative data to the best theory that explains the data (Mingers 2006, Ketokivi et al. 2010). As we believe that abduction necessitates some form of retroduction, and vice versa, we do not disagree with this combination.

**An exemplar analysis**

One qualitative CR study that uses abduction, retroduction and multiple theoretical lenses is Vincent (2008). This study wanted to understand more about the way in which how public sector organisations procured complex goods from private sector suppliers, and so it came to focus on an exemplar case: a ‘strategic partnership’ between Govco (a large and bureaucratic government department) and Futuretech (a multinational business software development specialist). This Partnership became the focus of a case study and a range of qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, observation and documentary analysis was used to abduct the partnership as an inter-organisational mechanisms.

Initial interviews indicated that the Partnership was created because Govco was interested in accessing Futuretech stock of in-house technology and expertise. Futuretech, on the other hand, wanted to make a profit from the arrangement. A contract was agreed, which stipulated (amongst other things) that the cost of a unity of IT systems development should halve over five years, with Futuretech benefitting (financially) where performance exceeded these expectation. The analysis came to focus on how this contract was managed, with subsequent interviews, observation and documentary analysis focused on this concern.

These data indicated that a group of senior IT experts and managers were employed, by both organisations, to manage the contract. These managers knew a great deal about technological possibilities, capabilities, and susceptibilities of both organisations. They met regularly to defining the work Futuretech would deliver and, subsequently, they were responsible for ensuring that it was delivered to contractual targets. As such, the Partnership had a good deal of latitude to decide what ‘good performance’ looked like (even if most respondents didn't say so). Some more junior managers admitted that, as there was no easy yardstick with which to measure time sent developing IT systems, some technologies were much easier to deliver than others. Others hinted that, where performance dipped below contractual expectations any
underperformance could be reconciled against easier-to-deliver work. In the end, contractual targets were consistently delivered, but it little evidence to confirm whether performance was good or bad.

In some ways the Partnership appeared to be effective: it hit contractual targets and IT user surveys showed improved perceptions of performance. In interviews, senior personnel boasts about the cordiality of relations. All were committed to Futuretech's profitability and had a strong interest in the contract to be being a "success" (future careers depended on it!). However, there was also evidence that performance was less than effective - some respondents complained about the effectiveness of the technologies delivered and suggested that, over time, Futuretech delivered increasingly ‘off-the-peg’ rather than more complex and challenging ‘bespoke’ technologies. Ultimately, it is likely to have been more generally recognised that the Partnership was failing to deliver as effectively as it might (the contract was not renewed after the five-year term ended).

In this case abduction from qualitative data revealed the Partnership, as a set of inter-organisational meetings that negotiated contractual details. However, the many questions remained unanswered. Why did the Partnership have so much latitude to determine its own ‘successes’? Why could Futuretech get away with delivering apparently more shoddy and less customer-focused technology as the relationship developed? Answering these questions involves taking retroductive steps ‘backwards’ why the Partnership manifested itself as it did and not otherwise.

At this point existing theory became an invaluable tool to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms observed. As the data were collected the researchers also trawled the literature to see how others theorised cooperative inter-organisational relationships. Various theories were considered and combined in the effort to provide a more effective insight into particular outcomes observed in the Partnership. Three theories, in particular, appeared to be useful. These were transaction cost economics (TCE) which suggests inter-organisational relations are affected by the type of product developed and exchanged; resource dependency theory (RDT) which suggests inter-organisational relations are affected by each partner’s relative dependency on the other’s resources and abilities; and, institutional theory, which suggests inter-organisational relations can be affected by broader ideological trends and norm-enforcing mechanisms. There is not space here to do justice to the complexities of these theoretical frameworks or why they were selected. Instead, we explain how these theories were incorporated within an explanatory framework for the institutional mechanisms observed.
Each of these theory resonated with different patterns in the data. Specifically, TCE suggests that where contractual mechanisms govern complex, uncertain, changeable, and idiosyncratic tasks or undertakings the actors involved will necessarily have greater autonomy in determining their own ends. Data from the field confirmed that technologies were developing quickly within the market and benchmarks for good performance were ineffective. The form of technology that the Partnership acted with thus helped by making a link between something within the Partnership and the specific form of its emergence. TCE thus contributed to the theoretical model developed because it suggests the relative autonomy that senior managers enjoyed within the Partnership has its roots at another level (technological uncertainties). Data, such meetings about contractual targets and the high level of contractual delivery, suggest this is the case.

In this case, Suffice to say, a similar story can be told for RDT, which appeared to account for the increasingly ‘off the peg’ technologies Futuretech delivered. Specifically, as Futuretech assumed responsibilities for developed technologies, knowledge accrued on Futuretech's side of the contract rather than Govco's. As a result, Futuretech’s agents became increasingly powerful in asserting their own technological imperative and interests, even if these did not meet Govco’s needs exactly. RDT thus contributed to the theoretical model developed, with data suggesting Govco (as one entity) became increasingly dependent on Futuretech (as another) over time, and that this may have altered the balance of power negotiations about technologies developed. Again, this theory fits the data.

Finally institutional theory, which suggests (institutional) mechanisms are conditioned by dominant organising logics that operate across broader social formations, contributed to the explanation of the Partnership’s tendency to extol its own successes. At the time of the Partnership’s inception, private sector provision was prioritized over public sector provision as a matter of policy prescription, owing to a generalized ideological faith in the relative efficiency of private sector providers (even where transactional considerations suggested this may not actually be the case). In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that few were shouting about the Partnership’s failures.

On this analysis existing theory and the qualitative case data were bought together to suggest a theoretical model of the generative mechanism that could account for the specific empirical tendencies observed within the case. Arguably, this theoretical model added richness to the explanation by rendering more explicit the causal dynamics that existed between the
Partnership and its antecedents, including the material (e.g. technology/resource) and ideational (norms, discourses) phenomena to which it related.

Theoretical models such as this one are transferable generalisations that can be reapplied in analyses of similar institutional settings. More specifically, and in relation to the Partnership, the combination of insights about idiosyncratic technical conditions, mutual resource dependencies, and a supporting institutional rule system, which inhered within this case, are likely to be present in cooperative inter-organizational forms more generally. This model can, then, be used as a basis for building alternative explanations of the particular configuration of contextual determinants that patinas other similar structures. Knowledge obtained about a single case study is thus not confined to the boundaries of the case itself but is theoretically transferable across a class of cases. Thus, the theoretical models we develop through our case studies, as we explain the peculiarities of our cases, also help articulate the specific conditions that makes a class of cases classifiable in terms of their common antecedents. It is this form of theoretical generalization that qualitative CR researchers should seek to extend and develop.

Conclusions

Critical realism provides, in our view, a more serious, consistent and credible alternative to positivism, interactionism, sociomaterialism, and constructivism, and allows researchers to move beyond the cultural and moral relativism inherent in many of these accounts. Moreover, through its commitment to stratification and emergence critical realism is entirely capable of incorporating epistemological insights from these competing positions without accepting their ontological flaws. This is because critical realism overcomes the objectivist/subjectivist and qualitative/quantitative dichotomies, because it is methodologically pluralist and inclusive, and because it provides a philosophically informed methodology (abduction and retroduction) for generate new insights.

Yet, critical realism is not without its difficulties. First, as we have shown, it does not (and cannot) generate or validate any specific domain level theorising, other than by ensuring that studies commit to a stratified, emergent account of the social world. Second, it does not prescribe which methods are suitable for investigating which problems. This again, is down to the researcher’s experience and intuition. Third, in its ontological guise, critical realism is not actually particularly critical. It’s commitment to truth does mean that false beliefs and
ideologies can be labelled as such but in order to really emancipate, we must do more than identify the disempowered. As Collier explains:

*When it is just a set of false beliefs that enslaves, their replacement by true beliefs is liberation. But the vast bulk of human bondage, misery and repression is not like that. The extension of emancipatory critique from cognitive error to unsatisfied needs makes it clear that false belief is not the only chain that binds us . . . unemployed workers, homeless families, bullied wives, tortured prisoners, may all know exactly what would make them free, but lack the power to get it . . . Hence cognitive enlightenment is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of their emancipation.* (Collier 1998: 461)

Yet some critical realist are working to develop this limitation. Sayer (2011) and others have sought to detail the properties humans possess which imply ethical practices for how they should be treated (see Smith 2010; Nussbaum 2006). CR researchers should therefore be challenged to consider the means required to act on and change the world (see Ram et al., 2014).

Finally, critical realism is relatively difficult to operationalise: many critical realist pieces in sociology and organisation studies are compatible with critical realism, but do not end up detailing a clear set of entities, properties, causal mechanisms, triggers and so on. Others use theorists such as Archer (2003) to provide an applied critical realist framing concerned with social structure, agency and reflexivity, which is more suited for social research than a pure critical realist ontology. Others, including many Marxists, and Labour Process Theorists, undertake studies which do not mention, but are entirely compatible with critical realism. As one prominent theorist recently retorted to one of the authors ‘I don’t see why you need to mention critical realism, surely it’s just good sociological research!’.

As a relatively new position, critical realism is still developing: making new connections, re-interpreting alternative perspectives, and responding to challenges. The work of Bhaskar (Bhaskar 2008) on dialectical critical realism, for example, certainly offers opportunities for novel research which have not yet been incorporated into mainstream social research. As we have seen, this nascence presents challenges to researchers, but also offers them opportunities to contribute meaningfully to one of the most important developments in social theory in recent times.
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