**Key concepts in critical realism, economics and childhood**

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Critical realism, a philosophy of the natural and social sciences and a tool kit for researchers, was developed in the 1970s by Roy Bhaskar and colleagues. Recently, more social scientists have been applying critical realism to a wide range of topics, such as David Tyfield’s work on the economics of science (Routledge 2012) and my book on childhood (Routledge April 2013).

I aim to explain key critical realist concepts in clear terms, which practical social researchers can apply to their work. Critical realism can help to clarify uncertainties, resolve confusions and disagreements among social researchers, and strengthen the validity of their work.

The concepts I will outline and relate to childhood and economics include: being and knowing; transitive and intransitive; the semiotic triangle; the possibility of naturalism; closed and open systems; natural necessity in natural and in social science; power1 and power2; four planar social being; absence and change.

**Contradictions in social science**

Social researchers veer towards either positivist/empirical or interpretive approaches, or an uneasy mix of the two. However, key features in each approach contradict those of the other, see table 1.

Table 1. Contradictions between empirical and interpretive approaches.

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| In empirical research:  (1) objective self-evident facts separated from values;  (2) understood apart from their social context and as separate variables;  (3) independent and pristine, whoever observes, records, reports or reads about them sees the same fact.  (4) Their essential inherent qualities and  (5) stable lasting reality ‘out there’ in the world can remain unchanged when transferred across time and space.  (6) Positivist social research, modelled on the natural sciences, can therefore discover general laws, replicable findings and reliable predictions.  (7) This confidence encourages assumptions that ‘evidence based’ findings can support self-evident conclusions about causes and effects in social life, and provide effective solutions to public and private problems. | Interpretive researchers  (1) cautiously treat phenomena as if they are constructed by subjective human perceptions and values and negotiated interactions,  (2) within specific social contexts and cultures.  (3) Phenomena are contingent, and depend on our individual social selves and perceptions,  (4) as if phenomena have few or no essential, inherent qualities and  (5) no independent, lasting truth or reality of their own that could transfer intact across time and space. They do not exist ‘out there’ in the world, but only through the social institutions and cultures that give them meaning.  (6) Interpretivism recognises unpredictable human agency, which can be intellectually, morally and pragmatically liberating when it deconstructs ideas of fixed realities, seemingly determined by biology, history, economics or religion.  (7) Connections between research data, conclusions, recommendations and later policy making are questioned as tenuous constructions, instead of being assumed to be self evident conclusions. |

The contradictions and disagreements between social researchers do not help to increase the power, relevance or reputation of social research. Social empiricists can be regarded as naïve about the complexities of social data and how we can know about them. Interpretivists can seem vague and remote from reality and policy making.

**Concepts in critical realism**

Critical realism accepts empiricists’ belief in an independent *intransitive reality:* people and institutions exist before we encounter them and after we leave them; they cannot be reduced into our perceptions. However, our *transitive perceptions* are a vital part of our understanding and of our responses to existing entities, and they can partly reshape these: beauty is partly in the eye of the beholder and people who feel they are perceived and treated as if they are beautiful may gain dignity and confidence. Intransitive realities and transitive perceptions interact, but they cannot be reduced into total dependence of one on the other.

Researchers who recognise this avoid the *epistemic fallacy* when *being (ontology)* is collapsed into *knowing (epistemology),* things into thoughts. This error runs through both columns in Table 1. Critical realism acknowledges independent reality. That restores *the semiotic triangle.* Following Saussure (1916/1983), semiotics refers only to the *signified* (the concept), and the *signifier* (words as sounds or written marks). An example is the concept of dog, and words such as ‘dog’, ‘hound’, ‘chien’, and so on. By concentrating on this pair of concepts and words, semiotics fall into the epistemic fallacy. Bhaskar proposes instead the *semiotic triangle*. At the third, missing angle is the *referent,* the independent, real, intransitive dog or dogs, or child, or banking system being referred to.

Bhaskar (1998) accepts the *possibility of naturalism*. Whereas *scientism* assumes that methods in the natural and social sciences are identical, *reductionism* assumes that the subjects-objects of social and natural science research are identical. However, *naturalism* assumes that there is, or can be, an essential unity of methods in natural and social sciences. Critic al realism analyses how naturalism is possible because the social and natural sciences are more alike than is usually believed. Critic al realism moves between the two columns in Table 1, which both misunderstand natural and social science. It is as if natural science is supposed only to work with direct experience, the *empiricism* proposed by David Hume (1711-1776). And social science, following Max Weber, (1864-1920) should only adopt the *transcendental idealism* of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) - a reliance on theoretical knowledge that transcends experience. In extreme terms, rejection of naturalism is based on the view that natural science deals with things and social science with ideas.

Hume sceptically believed that we should rely on directly sensed evidence. Scientific discoveries therefore should trace ‘constant conjunctions’ or patterns of observed events. If the conjunctions seem to have a repeated, predictable cause, this should be self-evident, our analysis should be unnecessary. However, if Hume’s empiricism were strictly observed, it would be as if we simply observed numerous falling stones and searched for the cause of falling within the stones, or within repeated patterns or conjunctions between the falling objects. This would fit with Aristotle’s belief, held for over 2,000 years, that it was in the nature of stones, their gravitas, to fall. Isaac Newton (1642-1727) transformed science by proposing that gravity was the hidden force and cause behind the falling objects and the circling planets. Newton’s immensely important advance was that science must recognise that real causes, like gravity, may be invisible and unprovable but crucial.

Beyond Hume’s model, empirical researchers work on theoretical interpretations and on making sense of felt experience. The discovery of general laws can only work when it moves beyond observation towards theories and imaginative hypotheses about invisible causes. Although the theory of gravity cannot be directly sensed or proved, and can only be known in its effects, even so over time and space it still gives reliable, consistent explanations. Evolution too can never be observed or proved directly; it can only be known in its hugely diverse and often unpredictable and random effects. But the abstract cause is generally accepted.

When this combined observing-analysing process of the scientific discovery of visible effects and hidden causes is recognised in natural science, it can also be respected in social science. Variable analysis of many separate factors in children’s lives, such as socio-economic background, types of housing or parenting styles, follows Hume’s empiricism. It is like looking for causes within falling objects and patterns between them. Instead, social science needs to look at deeper unseen causes and powerful structures equivalent to gravity, such as social inequality, class, gender and ethnicity.

This involves researching not simply observed objects and events, but also the third level of *natural necessity*: beyond 1) *the empirical* (sensed data) and 2)  *the actual* (objects and events),down to 3) *the deeper causal reality.* In social research these causal powers include class and gender and economic influences. They also include people’s motives and reasons for action.

Natural science is assumed to produce clear simple results but social results are complex, unpredictable and seldom replicable. However, simple, 100% predictable results are also very rare in natural science. Jet engines and bird flight and spiralling leaves defy gravity, though they do not disprove it. This is because *closed systems,* a single overwhelming force, almost never occur. Instead, in natural and social science there are *open systems* of two or more competing causal powers. The powers are determining (influential) but not determinist (wholly controlling).

Critical realism avoids the confusing reference to power as if it has a single meaning instead of two completely contradictory meanings. *Power1* is creative emancipating power. *Power2* is destructive, coercive, oppressive power. Critical realism draws together all aspects of human existence on four planar social being: plane 1 is about bodies and our material relations with nature; plane 2 is about interpersonal relations; plane 3 is about enduring social structures; and plane 4 is about our inner being, called the person, or soul or self.

Finally during the session, I will discuss critical realist approaches to absence and change and the hope of transforming world politics in support of future as well as present generations and species. .

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