

## CRITICAL REALISM

Priscilla Alderson (2020) in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies*, Cook, D. (ed) London and New York: Sage. ISBN. 9781473942929

Critical realism (CR) is a philosophy of the social and natural sciences. CR can help to resolve contradictions in social science, promote interdisciplinary research, deepen research analysis that connects macro to micro, local to global levels and examine transformative change over time.

The social sciences are split apart by disagreements and contradictions, primarily between positivism (a broad term for mainly quantitative, factual, statistical, experimental and evaluative research) and interpretivism (a broad term for many qualitative, ethnographic, constructionist, and postmodern approaches). Positivists tend to treat even ambiguous complex matters, such as happiness or SATS tests, if they are precise, measurable facts about children's actual happiness or learning. In contrast, many interpretivists treat even solid, universal realities, such as children's bodies, as if they are contingent, local, social constructions or discourses without their own essential existence. Another disagreement is whether social science is or should be value-free, relativist or concerned with values. When social scientists cannot agree together in mutual respect, others are unlikely to trust their reports or apply them to policy and practice, and childhood studies so far have little public influence.

CR examines how both groups collapse independent reality (ontology), which can be discovered but not invented, into their thinking (epistemology) in their reported facts and statistics or their perceptions and interpretations. CR resolves the contradictions by respecting the partly-known independent reality being researched (complex, fluctuating happiness or learning), the positivist facts and statistics when they reflect reality, and also the interpretive perceptions.

CR recognises three levels of reality, illustrated here with the example of the fire in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower, London, in June 2017, where children escaped or died or were thrown out of windows to safety: 1) our empirical experiences, understandings, images and memories; 2) the actual things, the burnt building, and the people, events and relations we observed; 3) the underlying causal mechanisms, usually only seen in their effects. These include the inflammable potential of the Tower's fairly new cladding, housing policies guided by cost over safety, class and inequality in the local housing provision. Research at the empirical and actual levels can discover correlations but not deeper causes, and CR has useful concepts to help to analyse and validate these .

Childhood studies are interdisciplinary, studying children not in isolation but in relation to healthcare, climate change, religion, economics and many other aspects of their lives. CR assists interdisciplinary research by mapping commonalities between the social and natural sciences and humanities (such as the shared levels of empirical, actual and real). In *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Roy Bhaskar analysed the unity, though not uniformity, between the social and natural sciences, and this work informs CR research on a great range of topics.

Four planar social being identifies four interacting aspects of being human, and so helps to structure and coordinate research from micro to macro levels. Even small local ethnographic studies greatly gain from being nested and understood within larger concerns that can be researched through literature reviews. The four interacting social planes, illustrated with reference again to Grenfell Tower are: 1) bodies in relation to nature,

affected by the fire, poison gases, water and height; 2) interpersonal relations within families and communities, and with fire fighters and local officials; 3) social structures, including local and national housing policies, and how surviving and bereaved residents were or were not supported by state services; 4) inner being, alienation or flourishing, suffering and the hope of recovery. Four planar social being can help to coordinate research about different though closely related aspects of children's lives, which need to be understood in relation to one another. Interacting structure and agency are central to the work of critical realism as Margaret Archer and others demonstrate.

Social research tends to be static like one or a series of photos each set in their own time. CR has methods for researching dynamic process and transformative change, through emergence (new generations emerge from older ones) and a four stage dialectic. With Grenfell Tower this dialectic would examine: 1) hidden causes, policies and absences (of justice and responsible planning and construction) that led to the fire; 2) interventions intended to negate absences and problems (including the Tower's cladding added for appearance and insulation) and their effects; 3) larger structures (global urban housing and related subcontracting policies, economies and law); 4) critical introspection, moral responsibility and hope of change.

CR contends that all social research involves power, truth and values. Typically, powerless people, the tenants, want to start at stage 1 the real hidden causes, and work through to stage 4) and real change. Powerful groups (the council and government) want to start and end at stage 2, at fairly superficial interventions, leaving power relations and structures untouched.

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Cross references: Agency; Childhood in Western Philosophy; Philosophy, the Child in;

#### Further Reading

Alderson, P. (2013) *Childhoods Real and Imagined: An Introduction to Childhood Studies and Critical Realism, Volume 1*. London: Routledge.

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