

# The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

## Critical Realism

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Critical realism offers an ontology that can conceptualize reality, support theorizing, and guide empirical work in the natural and human sciences. It views reality as complex and recognizes the role of both agency and structural factors in influencing human behavior. It can be used with qualitative and/or quantitative research methods. There are strong links between critical realism and other theoretical approaches, such as complexity theory, social emergence, and systems theory, variations of which can be underpinned by a critical realist ontology.

## Background

Critical realism (alternatively termed *transcendental* or *complex realism*) is most closely associated with the early works of the philosopher Roy Bhaskar. It has been developed mostly in the social and health sciences, evaluation, and economics.

Critical realism is one of a range of postpositivist approaches positioned between positivism/objectivism and constructivism/relativism. Critical realism simultaneously recognizes the existence of knowledge independent of humans but also the socially embedded and fallible nature of scientific inquiry. Among other criticisms, positivism is viewed as failing to acknowledge the inherent social nature of knowledge development, the influence of underlying unobservable factors/powers, and the meaning-centered nature of humans. However, constructivist philosophies are also criticized for overprivileging these human perspectives and attendant problematic variations of relativism that cannot adequately resolve competing claims to knowledge or account for knowledge development.

To resolve these epistemological issues, the early work of Bhaskar conceived the existence of three realms of reality: the actual, the real, and the empirical. The *actual* domain refers to events and outcomes that occur in the world. The *real* domain refers to underlying relations, structures, and tendencies that have the power to cause changes in the actual realm. Most often these causal influences remain latent; however, under the right circumstances, factors in the real domain can act together to generate causal changes in the actual domain. These causal changes are neither uniform nor chaotic but are somewhat patterned. The *empirical* dimension refers to human perspectives

on the world (i.e., of the actual and real domains). This could be perspectives of an individual or, in a wider sense, of scientific inquiry. The real and actual domains can be perceived only fallibly. Hence, this ontology advocates the existence of an objective reality formed of both events and underlying causes, and although these dimensions of reality have objective existence, they are not knowable with certainty.

Other tenets of critical realism tend to emerge from this ontological basis. A strong focus in theorizing and research informed by critical realism is placed on understanding causality and explaining events in the actual domain. This movement from events to their causes, known as abduction, is contrasted with other [p. 168 ↓] common goals of research to describe, predict, correlate, and intervene.

Critical realism attempts to respond to and understand reality as it exists in the actual and real domains. Hence, being led by the nature of that reality is of overriding importance and takes precedence over disciplinary, methodological, or ideological predisposition because each of these could distort perceptions of reality. This results in a postdisciplinary vent that seeks to be led by reality in all its complexity and to avoid simplification, narrowness, and distortion.

In the realm of the real, critical realism views behavior as being influenced by both agency and structural factors. Although humans have a degree of agency, this is always constrained by wider structural factors that are viewed as surrounding the individual. Although culture can be conceived as being dependent on and created only through the existence of humans, critical realism argues that culture exists independent of individuals. Likewise, social phenomena are made possible by the presence of humans but are deemed to be external to individuals and have existence and the power to constrain whether this is recognized by individuals or not.

## Suitability of Critical Realism for Qualitative Research

The strengths of critical realism for qualitative research lie in its desire to render complexity intelligible, its explanatory focus, its reconciliation of agency and structural

factors, and its ability to recognize the existence of wider knowledge while respecting the importance of social meaning to humans.

Critical realism is particularly well suited to exploring research questions that relate to understanding complexity. Rather than controlling for or simplifying complexity artificially, the approach advocates that complexity must be embraced and explored. Although other research methods, such as the randomized trial, have control and artificiality as defining characteristics, critical realism advocates that phenomena must be understood in the real world. Understanding phenomena in this natural realm means that findings do not need to endure problematic generalizations from unnatural to natural settings.

Critical realism is also well suited to questions that seek to explain outcomes. A huge volume of research (mostly quantitative) describes outcomes in the natural world. The demographics of death and disease, educational achievement, and health care are monitored systematically in many countries. Moreover, researchers often use trial interventions or programs in an effort to find out what approaches work best so as to improve outcomes in different populations. However, in both instances, little work is carried out to explain the patterns identified or understand the underlying phenomena. As a result, there is often difficulty in accounting for why trends exist or why programs perform as they do. There is nothing inherent in critical realism that directs researchers to theoretical, qualitative, or quantitative methods. The tenets of critical realism place overriding importance on understanding reality. Methodological decisions are secondary to this aim. Some critical realists advocate greater reliance on qualitative work; however, these arguments are based mostly on the assumption that qualitative methods are better suited to understanding complexity in the real domain.

Critical realism is also compatible with critical social science because it views individuals as having the potential for emancipation. Critical realism recognizes that humans can actively shape and change wider social phenomena through channels such as collective action, the arts, and research.

# Applications of Critical Realism in Qualitative Research

Critical realism has been applied in qualitative research in a variety of ways. Its ontology may underpin empirical work irrespective of whether this is overtly recognized or acknowledged. Much qualitative research seeks to understand the causes of social phenomena through recourse to both individual and contextual factors. How closely authors of such research ascribe to or identify with the tenets of critical realism is open to debate. Arguably, a wealth of research that has come to be labeled as interpretive descriptive is underpinned with principles that are not dissimilar to critical realism. However, investigators are often reticent or unable to draw comment on the philosophies underlying their work.

In terms of method, critical realism can be used to guide empirical work as part of recognized approaches. For example, interpretations of critical realism can underpin variations of ethnography and grounded theory. Alternatively, approaches that are presented as [p. 169 ↓ ] critical realist have been developed. Although there is no single critical realist method, these various approaches have some commonalities.

In common with many methodological approaches to qualitative research, critical realism places a strong importance on adequate conceptualization, rigorous description, and convincing explanation.

Given that reality is seen as independent of individuals, attaining an adequate conceptualization of phenomena being explored is very important. If researchers have an impoverished or incomplete conception of phenomena, the quality of the understanding likely to accrue from the research is compromised. Research must seek an accurate understanding of reality in all its complexities but also must avoid the imposition of the researchers' preconceptions or ideology on reality. This rationale informs the argument for postdisciplinary research. From a strong conceptualization, rigorous description and adequate explanation should follow. Again, both of these aims stem from the assumption that reality is complex and external to the individual.

Explanation should be rich and deep, invoking both agency and structural factors in a complex way to account for patterns in data. In this way, results are not descriptive but should provide an explanation of patterns identified in data. Interactions between factors should be described, and a sense of complexity should be to the fore. Different types of data can be relied on to provide a case for explanation, including lay accounts from different key groups or document analysis. These qualitative data can also be linked to quantitative data for corroboration or further explanation. The rationale for this multiplicity is that each method or perspective can provide evidence of what is occurring in the world.

There is a place within this for research exclusively into lay accounts. This follows from the recognition that knowledge of the world exists and that social structures influence human behaviors in the recognition of hermeneutical dimensions. The beliefs, understandings, and meanings of humans do matter—not because they determine what objective reality is but rather because they are likely to influence behavior. Although it is understandable that a patient with a fatal form of cancer might not believe he or she has cancer despite a range of biological indicators and symptoms that point to the contrary, the patient's beliefs do not determine objective reality; that is, they do not cause the cancer to disappear. It remains important to understand the cancer patient's perspective because this will have implications for his or her self-care, but the patient's views should always be framed as an account of reality rather than being taken to determine reality. Hence, critical realism can be used to guide research into lay beliefs, accounts, and discourse with the broad caveat that data produced in these inquiries relate to accounts of reality that may or may not be accurate but do not determine reality. This is compatible with many forms of qualitative research, including phenomenology/lived experience research.

Sampling in qualitative research informed by critical realism retains the same concerns as do other methods, including saturation, typicality of sample, and purposive case selection. However, sampling should also be focused on using key groups to assist in the explanatory project. Careful selection of similar individuals with different outcomes can provide case-based comparisons that can illuminate factors in the real domain of prime importance. Sample sizes should be sufficiently large to allow meaningful comparisons to be made.

# The Future of Critical Realism in Qualitative Research

In the rush to do research as a basis for intervention in policy and practice in health, education, and social services, solutions to well-established problems remain surprisingly and consistently illusive. Inequalities remain, performance is weak, and problematic patterns persist. All too often, the promising results of randomized trials or demonstration initiatives fail to be replicated in the real world or across different settings. Disturbingly consistent adverse patterns in health, education, and social well-being continue to be found internationally. After the initial faith that evidence-based practice could eradicate all such ills, more sophisticated and less reductionist approaches such as critical realism are increasingly seen as being needed by governments and organizations.

Critical realism retains the axioms that knowledge of the underlying complexities of the world can be not only accrued but also applied for human benefit. However, it views having a deep understanding of why patterns exist as a prerequisite to effective action. As such, its future in guiding work to address intransigent real-world problems may be a particularly fruitful area for its continued application.

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*See also*

- [Ontology](#)
- [Postpositivism](#)

## Further Readings

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