

# Introduction to Critical Realism For Doctoral Researchers

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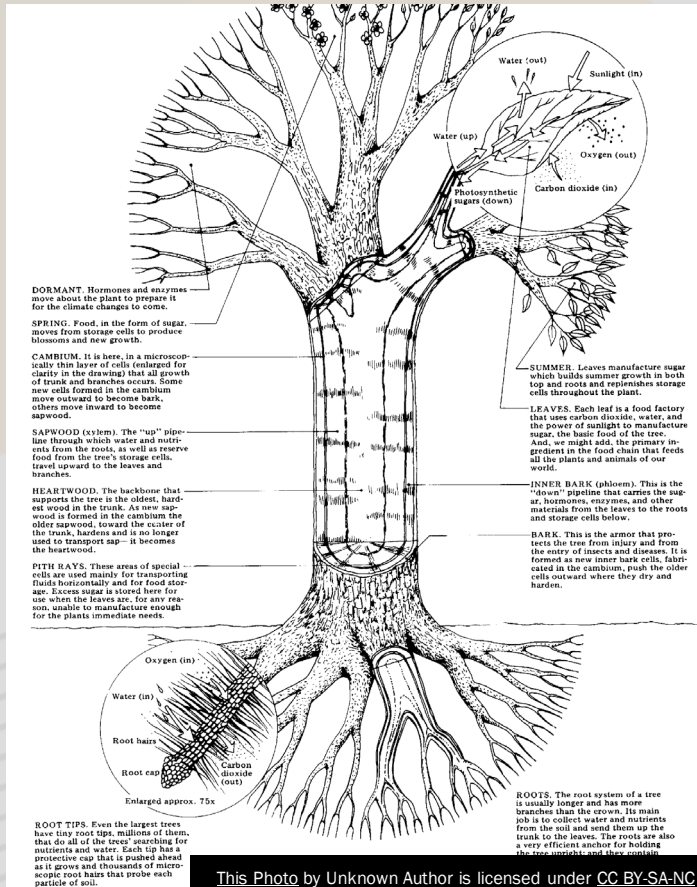
# So you're doing a PhD...

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- A PhD is traditionally a Doctor of Philosophy...but:
  - How much philosophy have you had the chance to explore?
  - How often do you think about your methodological stance as a researcher?
- Whether you are doing a PhD, EdD, DProf, or D by publication, you are probably aware that...
  1. A methodology is a combination of an ontology (a position about the nature of the world) and an epistemology (a position about the nature of knowledge and knowing).
  2. You must adopt a particular methodology to do your PhD
  3. There is a spectrum of methodological approaches ranging from objectivist (e.g. positivism, empiricist realism) to subjectivist (e.g. social constructionism and constructivism)
- What, you might wonder, lives in the middle?



# What is Critical Realism?



- Critical realism (CR) is a philosophy of science offering an alternative methodological approach that sits between subjectivist and objectivist approaches
  - CR combines an objectivist ontology with a soft social constructionist epistemology (Elder-Vass, 2012)
  - It is a family tree of approaches and areas of study, that take as starting points the following:
    1. There is a reality beyond social construction, and some of it exists outside of human perception
    2. Human knowledge is fallible, but we can make sensible judgements to get closer to understanding reality
    3. We can use specific methodological assumptions and tools to help us to better apprehend reality
- (Bhaskar, 2008a and b)

# Use of CR is wide...and growing

<i>Field of Study</i>	<i>Subject and Selected References</i>
<b>Social Ontology</b>	Realism and Constructionism (Elder-Vass, 2012) Social Reality (Lawson, 2019)
<b>Sociology and Cultural Studies</b>	Structure and Agency (Archer, 2007; Porpora, 1998) Culture and Society (De Souza, 2014) Digital Capitalism (Carrigan, 2018)
<b>Economics</b>	Labour markets (Fleetwood, 2011)
<b>Management and Organization Studies</b>	Entrepreneurship (Wilson and Martin, 2014; Martinez Dy et al., 2018) Information Systems (Mingers, 2004) Institutions (Leca and Naccache, 2006) Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2006) Programme Evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997)
<b>Health Care</b>	Nursing (Schiller, 2016)
<b>Legal studies</b>	Philosophy of Justice (Norrie, 2009)
<b>Education</b>	Empirical research methods (Scott, 2005; Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019)
<b>Gender and Feminist Studies</b>	Patriarchy at work (Walby 1986) Gender and Feminisms reader (Van Ingen et al., 2020) Trans inclusion (Martinez Dy, 2020)

# Key Critical Realist Theoretical Tools

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## Ontology

- ❑ Depth ontology: the existence of causal powers is analytically separable from their actualisation and empirical observation (Bhaskar, 2008a)
- ❑ Transfactuality and open systems - empirical regularities are not required to ascertain the tendencies of causal powers (Bhaskar, 2008a and b).
- ❑ Morphogenetic approach to social change; structure, agency, culture (Archer, 2007; Porpora 1998)

## Epistemology

- ❑ Retrodution and retrodiction: focus on explanation rather than prediction, asking 'What must have been the case for this outcome to occur?' (Danermark et al, 2002)
- ❑ Contrastive explanation, in which cases can be comparatively analysed to identify the causes responsible for differences (Lawson, 2003; Martinez Dy et al., 2018; Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019)

# Applied Critical Realism: Use Cases

Subject and Project	Researcher Testimonial
Entrepreneurship – Project Evaluation of Diversity Initiative	<i>“Critical realism offered me a framework to understand what was happening in the organisation beneath the level of the empirical. I was able to theorise some of the deeper structural mechanisms at work.”</i>
Higher Education – Impact of a Prof Doc on organisational change	<i>"Drawing on Archer's morphogenetic approach, I gained new insights on the interplay between human agency and social structures, and how their causal mechanisms, when triggered, can enhance or constrain organisational change in different Higher Education settings according to conditions and circumstances"</i>
Comparative and international education – Teacher educators' agency in the managerial university	<i>"Drawing on Archerian theory and using abduction and retroduction as main analytical tools, I was able to examine the intertwined global forces –such as managerialism and academic capitalism– influencing the national and local contexts within which teacher educators’ agentially develop their careers."</i>

# Limitations

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One of the biggest resistances to the adoption of CR has been its vocabulary (i.e., 'generative mechanisms', 'emergent properties'), which has been criticized as being overly dense or complicated.

However, this is not unique to CR but is endemic to the discipline of philosophy. The issue of having to learn 'jargon' can be a problem for academia in general.

Learning the language of critical realism can be an exciting experience that allows researchers to grow their conceptual understandings of the way the world works. Additionally, work has been done since the original critical realist texts were published to distil the key concepts and to employ them in applied research contexts. This has helped substantially to make the ideas more accessible.

Another limitation for adopting CR is that the philosophy offers little assistance on how to conduct empirical research. That said, practitioners in the social sciences have developed quite a lot of useful resources (e.g. Edwards, Mahoney and Vincent 2014).

# Resources, Connections and More Information

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- ❑ Library, Blog, Videos and Workshops at the Critical Realism Network Website  
<http://criticalrealismnetwork.org/>
- ❑ Centre for and Journal of Critical Realism  
<https://centreforcriticalrealism.com/journal-of-critical-realism/>
- ❑ International Association of Critical Realism:  
<http://criticalrealismnetwork.org/iacr/>
- ❑ Critical Realism Network on Facebook:  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/criticalrealismnetwork/>
- ❑ CR International Mapping Project on Twitter:  
<https://twitter.com/RealistProject>



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