

Critical Realism

The Theory of Critical Realism

A Brief Description of the Theory

Critical Realism (CR) states that knowledge (epistemology) is different from being or existence (ontology). There is a reality (unobservable structures) which exists independent of human thought. Critical realists believe that these unobservable structures cause observable events. Therefore, the social world can be understood only if people understand the structures that generate events. This is important in a scientific context, because it allows the researcher to distinguish between the event and the structure which causes it.

According to this theory, an individual conducting a research study creates the conditions which are necessary (observable event), but the results are caused by the underlying laws and mechanisms (unobservable structures). The word *critical*, in Critical Realism, relates to the ... *epistemic fallacy* – the idea of analyzing ontological statements (what exists) in terms of epistemological statements (what can be known or understood). The epistemic fallacy is caused by a failure to recognize a difference between ontology (existence) and epistemology (knowledge). The realism side of the theory focuses on the existence of real mechanisms (underlying structures or causes) which shape events.

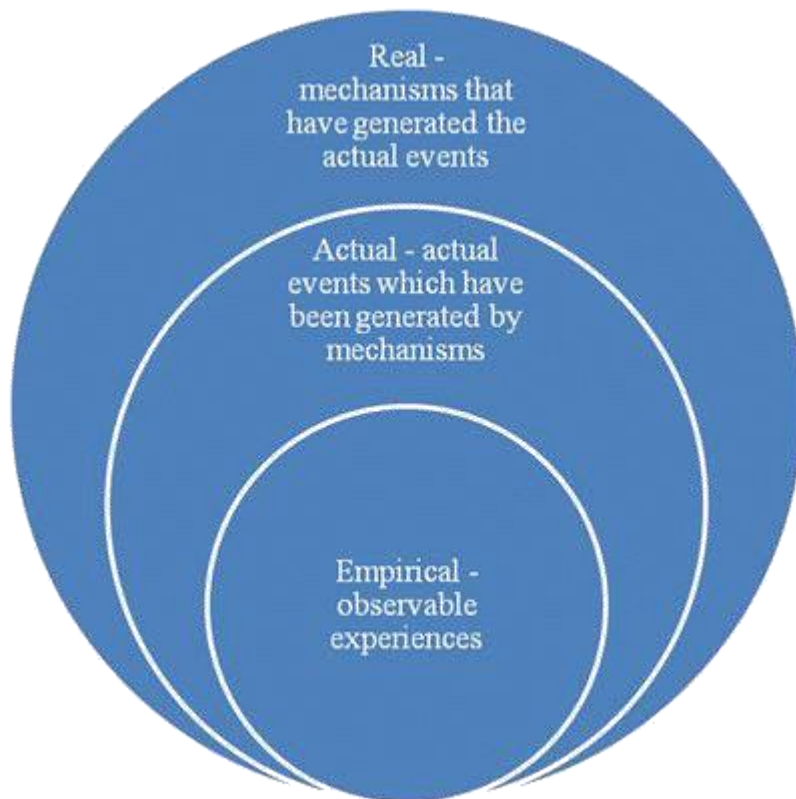
“A central idea of Critical Realism is that natural (physical and

biological) and social (sociological) reality should be understood as an open stratified [layered] system of objects with causal powers [making things happen]” (Morton, 2006). There are three strata (or layers), according to the theory: the Real, the Actual, and the Empirical. The domain of the Empirical include observable experiences. The domain of the Actual includes actual events which have been generated by mechanisms. Finally, the domain of the Real includes the mechanisms (or structures) that have generated (or produced) the actual events.

Critical Realism can be applied to social science as well as natural science. However the applications of this theory in social science are different from the natural. Culture and society are generated (or produced) by human activities (“agency”); so society is continuously changing due to the dynamic (or changing) nature of human actions. As such, there is a mutually influential relationship where humans shape the society, which in its turn affects human activities.

Unlike natural laws, rules of culture and society are not universal but applicable only in a certain location and time. That is to say they change from place to place and from time to time. ... Critical Realism requires a deep understanding of any social situation, going beyond the observable and investigating the mechanisms (structures or causes) behind any event.

Diagram of the Theory



Recreated from Mingers and Willcocks (2004)

Developer of the Theory

Roy Bhaskar

Important Articles

Archer, M. S. (1998). Critical realism: Essential readings. Critical realism – interventions. London: Routledge

Bhaskar, R. (1978) A Realist Theory of Science, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester

Bhaskar, R.(1998) *The possibility of naturalism: a philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences*, Routledge, London (1998).

Areas

Philosophy and Sociology

Levels of Analysis

Individual, group and organizational

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http://www.fsc.yorku.ca/york/istheory/wiki/index.php/Critical_realism_theory [URL no longer works.]

Demi-Reality, Co-Presence, and Relative Reality in Critical Realism

The Real includes demi-reality, co-presence, and relative reality.

The objective of Critical Realism is emancipation from the *demi-reality* (disunity in difference) of oppression through *co-presence* (unity in difference). In other words, to Bhaskar, demi-reality should be eliminated.

However, in co-presence, or nonduality, all of us are wrapped up in one another.

Relative Reality is simply the term used by Bhaskar for difference.

[Demi-reality] generates dualism, alienation, [and] fragmentation

Roy Bhaskar, *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul*. New York: Routledge. 2000. Page 57.

demi-reality ... [is] dominated by hate, split, fear, divisiveness and above all alienation

Roy Bhaskar, *Reality: The Philosophy of meta-Reality, Volume 1, Creativity, Love and Freedom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. 2002. Page xxiii-xxiv.

What we have to do is recognize and empower the realm of non-duality [co-presence] so as to get rid of the demi-real level.

Roy Bhaskar, *Theism, Atheism, and Meta-Reality*. New York: Routledge. 2012. Page 205.

... a unity-in-difference ... [is] co-presence

From: *Unity of Theory and Practice, Interdisciplinarity, and Non-duality* (by Roy Bhaskar)

... co-presence allows us to also see the necessity for a commitment to a eudaimonistic [flourishing, free, emancipated, or happy] society

From: *meta-Reality* (by Roy Bhaskar), page 72

[Critical Realism is] a very important model for peace research and for social campaigns in general. It's also very important for projects of democratization [making things democratic] and indeed all the social projects which involve collective action [people working together]—for these all involve the idea of agents [people] coming together at a level ... which will transcend and/or reconcile their competing and ... conflicting ... human interests.

From:

<http://www.helsinki.fi/oik/globalgovernance/glo/publications/patomaiki/RB-HPglobal%20interconnectedness.pdf> (by Roy Bhaskar) [URL no longer works.]