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Editorial

The aim of the initial call for papers was to encourage the submission of exemplars of applied work, reflections on the use of critical realism, and metatheoretical developments. We were not disappointed, and we are therefore pleased to present this collection of five articles which advance our understanding of critical realism in practice. The book review in this issue further extends the collection, as it summarises several examples of applied critical realist work. As one would expect of such a collection, there are a variety of disciplines represented, from business studies, to marketing, psychology, law and education. In this editorial, we provide an overview of the (concrete universal) trends of current applications of critical realism of which these articles are (concrete singular, and therefore unique) instantiations. Finally, we provide a brief introduction to each paper. We expect that the audience for this issue may be broader than, though still include, the usual readership of *Journal of Critical Realism*. Specifically, we expect to attract early-career researchers who are new to critical realist ideas, and people whose primary interest is directed at one of the disciplines represented, rather than critical realism per se. For this reason, at the risk of repetition, we have allowed several of the authors to outline the aspects of critical realism that are relevant to their paper.

General trends in critical realist research

Currently, much critical realist work takes the form of underlabouring. In this issue, such underlabouring can be seen in the way that the authors purposively argue to strengthen the theory and practice of their discipline. However, as critical realism becomes more accepted, one anticipates that this characteristic of disciplinary underlabouring will become less necessary, and ultimately unnecessary. However, in the space created by the work of the underlabourers, there are certain characteristics of critical realist social research that are likely to be more permanent. Of these, we have chosen to highlight the following:

- a commitment to ontology;
- the use of retrodution and judgemental rationality;
- the use of the critical realist approach to structure and agency (either in the Bhaskarian form of the Transformational Model of Social Activity or the Archerian form of Morphogenesis/Morphostasis);
- the application of interdisciplinarity, based on a laminated, scalar ontology;
- an engagement with hermeneutically-based methodologies (such as grounded theory or qualitative interviews);
- a commitment to reflexivity; and
- the application of moral realism, leading to normative assertions and suggestions for action.

A commitment to ontology

The authors in this collection are realist about their subject matter. That is, they assume that ‘something’ has happened, or that ‘something’ is there; and that that ‘something’ has an

existentially intransitive reality (Bhaskar et al 2017, 42). These authors therefore do not assume that models, which explain the empirical level, are simply social constructions or ‘in the mind’. Instead, they assume that models refer to the real multimechanismicity that underlies the empirical and actual layers of reality. In this collection, for instance, McAvoy (*) writes, ‘In the social and business world, these mechanisms exist independent of our investigation of them but they are themselves both transformed and reproduced by humans... An examination of these mechanisms is essential in applied business research methodology’.

A welcome consequence of a layered ontology is that critical realist writing noticeably lacks angst about the reality of transcendental, transfactual things, such as Bourdieu’s social capital (see Hu *) and anthropogenic climate change (see Simmonds and Gazley *). It therefore allows us to revisit the ideas of some of the great transcendental thinkers of our time, such as Karl Marx, the power of whose theories has been weakened by the lack of ontology that prevents us from believing that there is a real referent to their work. Bhaskar (2009/1986, 193) explains that positivism, as Marx said of ‘vulgar economy’, is content to ‘stick to appearances in opposition to the law which regulates, and explains, them’; and that although the concept of a fact reflects our spontaneous consciousness in science, nevertheless it is a concept which must be transcended in our reflective consciousness. ‘For the facts are, as Marx said of the process of circulation, merely “the phenomena of a process [production] taking place behind it”’ Critical realists are free to go beyond the facts, to the transfactual processes behind them.

The use of retroduction and judgemental rationality

Most of these authors refer to retroduction and McAvoy and Butler use the term 36 times. Typically, retroduction is referred to in its capacity as ‘a distinctive form of inference...which posits that events are explained through identifying and hypothesising causal powers and mechanisms that can produce them’ (Hu *). However, Patel and Pilgrim also refer to the potential for retroduction to allow cross-disciplinary understanding. They write, ‘retroduction provides a common logic for both the clinical understanding of distress and the judicial understanding of criminality’.

All the authors in this collection also make use of the concept of judgemental rationality. For instance, Hu (*) states that judgemental rationality allows:

researchers to evaluate and compare the explanatory power of different theoretical explanations and, finally, to select theories which most accurately represent the ‘domain of real’ given our existing knowledge.

Retroduction is discussed again below, under the heading of interdisciplinarity; and judgemental rationality is also discussed again under the heading of moral realism.

The use of the critical realist approach to structure and agency

Social structures and their relationship to agency are mentioned by all the authors in this special issue. For example, Hu writes ‘On the basis of this (CR) understanding, the “exogenous shocks” or economic disequilibrium discussed in the entrepreneur literature can

be considered as a social structure produced by human agency, while also providing conditions for human agency to act upon, which are all part of the reality of entrepreneurial opportunities'. Simmonds and Gazley make use of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic/morphostatic approach to structure and agency. They state that, 'Together the CR ontology and the morphogenetic methodology provides the basis for developing marketing systems theory and addressing questions regarding the nature of systems development, function and outcomes.'

The use of interdisciplinarity, based on a laminated ontology

Acknowledging that we need to refer to both structure and agency to understand any social issue automatically commits the researcher to at least two disciplinary matrixes: one to understand structures and one to understand agents. Bhaskar et al (2017, 53) therefore suggest that the interdisciplinary research team 'should construct a laminated system consisting in a conjunctive multiplicity of levels of laminations of reality'. McAvoy and Butler provide an example of such a 'laminated' matrix, which they illustrate in their Figure 1. Their matrix considers both: individual agents' characteristics, such as risk-taking behaviour and 'social loafing' (where an individual works less in a social context); and structurally-related characteristics, such as norms and team goals. However, they also include reference to 'time' and 'efficacy' – suggesting perhaps 'material interactions with nature' – and 'frequent interaction', which suggests 'social interactions between people'. These are reminiscent of Bhaskar's (2016, 83) model of four-planar social being, which is an elaboration of the (TMSA) structure/agency model. In another example, Hu similarly engages with a lamination or matrix (template). He describes how an important issue is to decide how extensive the template should be. He says, 'In template analysis, too many pre-defined codes can prevent researchers from considering data that challenges original assumptions, while too few codes may result in the lack of a clear direction when researchers are overwhelmed by rich data'. Interestingly, Hu decides to pre-define those codes related to social capital, while he leaves open those codes related to generative mechanisms (accessing resources) to allow for themes to emerge. It seems possible that this is an example of the use of *retrodition* (RRREI(C)¹ or applied science) for areas of research that are already well theorised and which can therefore be pre-defined (Hu's social capital) but the use of *retroduction* (DREI(C)² or pure science) for areas of research where there is a lack of theory (Hu's

¹ RRREI(C) stands for: *resolve* it into its component parts using significant components of the problem (based on already existing theory that suggests what is important); *re-describe* it in terms of the available relevant theories; on the basis of these descriptions, *retrodict* back to antecedent states of affairs that are responsible for the issue under investigation; *identify* a detailed picture of the causal genesis of the event; possibly *correct* the overall picture in the light of the fuller explanation.

² DREI(C) stands for: *describe* a level of reality; *retroductively* think of plausible mechanisms that explain why reality is this way; *eliminate* rival theories by using judgemental rationality to decide which theory best explains the largest amount of the empirical evidence; *identify* the level of reality (be sure that it exists, perhaps by developing new technologies to literally see it, or through experiments, but where these are not possible, through other exploratory tests, such as putting the theory to use in some way to test that actions suggested by it result in expected outcomes); *correct* the theory contradictions arise through the process of identification.

generative mechanisms, such as accessing resources, whose codes he therefore leaves 'open'). McAvoy and Butler (*) mention the value of using both retroduction and retrodiction in research, seemingly without having read Bhaskar's (2016, 46) advocacy for the same. Bhaskar formalised the use of both retroduction and retrodiction in his 'theorem of the (contingent) co-occurrence of the retroductive and retrodictive moments in research, which he called the RRRIREI(C)³.

The trend towards using laminations to deal with emergent levels of reality is also evident in the volume of applied research edited by Price and Sisitka (2016) – reviewed by Skinningsrud (*) at the end of this issue – in which several of the contributors make use of the Bhaskar's (2010, *) conception of the seven laminations of scale in applying critical realism (namely Togo, Burt, and Munnik) and Bhaskar's four planar social being (namely Schudel, Munnik and Mukute).

An engagement with hermeneutically-based methodologies

Although critical realism achieves metatheoretical unity by admitting the value of the empirical moment of positivism, the hermeneutical moment of the interpretivist methodologies and the linguistic moment of postmodernism, nevertheless, in the social sciences, hermeneutically-based methodologies are the starting point of critical realist research. This is because, unlike in the natural sciences, language provides an 'inside' or 'interior' to social life (Bhaskar 2016, 57). We can only investigate this interior by engaging with it hermeneutically. The consequence of this starting point is that critical realist social research is characteristically associated with the methodologies that have been typically considered to be qualitative or focussed on meaning. Critical realists are further justified in the use of qualitative methods because, 'in CR the rejection of positivist preoccupations with prediction and quantitative measurement necessitates a preference for qualitative methods in understanding social events' (Ackroyd and Fleetwood in Hu *).

Engaging in hermeneutics may be achieved through a literature review that looks at other researchers' views (see Isaksen), and it may involve questionnaires and interviews that consider what the research participants think. For instance, Hu (*) uses grounded theory to guide his hermeneutical investigation. McAvoy and Butler (*) use interviews to investigate their participants' understandings and experiences. Isaksen provides a particularly engaged example of the necessity to start social research with hermeneutics in his rendition of his literature review as an immanent critique. The psychologists described in the paper by Pilgrim and Patel rely largely on interviews with their clients to decide the likelihood of the presence of torture. However, this initial engagement with hermeneutics does not preclude the use of quantitative, non-hermeneutic measurements and statistics, which allow researchers to explore the exterior of social life. For instance, McAvoy and Butler (*) also use 'observation' to inform their conclusions, which includes measuring the time taken to achieve certain goals and the efficacy of the intervention under investigation; and Patel and Pilgrim

³ RRRIREI(C) stands for: *resolution*, *abductive redescription*, *retroduction*, *inference to best explanation*, *retrodiction*, *elimination*, *identification* of antecedents and correction. It is a mixture of the DREI(C) and the RRREI(C).

(*) consider the political context in which the torture would have happened, and other proven torture cases, which potentially suggest a possible pattern of offending present in the victim's country of origin.

Reflexivity: the unity of theory and practice

Reflexivity – the identification and resolution of theory practice inconsistencies – is another commonality among the papers in this collection. For instance, Isaksen uses Bhaskar's concept of immanent critique to search for and resolve contradictions. McAvoy and Butler (*) identify theory/practice inconsistencies in terms of: what was (theoretically) expected, but not (practically) observed; what was expected but observed in a way that was not exactly what was expected; and what was observed but not expected (see their Figure 2). Patel and Pilgrim (*) describe their use of reflexivity as follows:

The psychological assessor incrementally builds up a biographical vignette that contains the alleged torture and provides a sense of the client and their life. They press for more information, identify gaps and any seeming contradictions, knowing that such contradictions will undermine the account in the eyes of the judge.

Simmonds and Gazley (*) describe reflexivity in this way:

CR provides the basis to reflexively evaluate and critique assumptions and our current trajectories by providing us with an understanding of being and its structure, its processual and multiply determined nature.

The presence of reflexivity in critical realist social science is closely related to the need to use hermeneutic methods. This is because both hermeneutics and reflexivity are possible because humans – which includes the human mind – are part of reality (totality, all-that-is). As Bhaskar (1993, 255) explained, 'It is totality too that closes the hermeneutical and epistemological circles and explains why texts or reality respectively, insofar as they appear as such, are always bound to appear at least potentially intelligible to us'.

Moral realism

Another emerging trend in the critical realist literature is an engagement with moral realism. It is a welcome advance over the lack of normativity, and consequent lack of agency inherent in anti-naturalist (postmodern, hermeneutical, phenomenological) approaches. While not all critical realists agree with moral realism, or even have the same understanding of what moral realism entails, nevertheless, one way or another, questions of moral realism are currently topical in critical realism circles (e.g. Elder-Vass 2010, 2017; Price 2018, unpub.). In this collection of applied critical realist articles, moral realism is not mentioned but is nevertheless present in the way that the authors either offer, or plan to offer, alternative ways of being based on the outcomes of their research. An example of this commitment to deriving an 'ought' from 'what is' can be found in the work of Simmonds and Gazley who write:

(R)esearch may challenge the belief that technical and managerial approaches will simply solve the environmental crisis, a perspective which currently resides in the

‘limited opportunities available, desired or permitted’ by the business community (Seghezzi 2009). As Bhaskar notes, ‘that what is, is only one possible world and that, moreover, always presupposes the possibility of other worlds’ (2010, 23).

Patel and Pilgrim also provide a powerful example of the use of moral realism, in terms of the legal and psychological assessment of torture victims. They argue for a critical realist version of moral realism that avoids the relativist excesses of postmodernism and the reductive instrumentalism of positivism. In their context, the ethical question of whether a person who claims to have been tortured should be given asylum depends to an extent on whether it can be ascertained that they have in fact been tortured. Instead of using the a reductive, positivist ‘tick-box’ approach to the assessment of evidence, they argue that psychologists and lawyers should use retroduction to focus on the discovery of structures and mechanism of the torture, as suggested by the evidence. Their aim is to improve the ability of these professionals to use the evidence to avoid false negative and false positive assessments. The paper by Patel and Pilgrim illustrates against the claim that critical realist moral realism is a kind of instrumentalism, based on positivism, in which the facts speak for themselves. Far from it, they suggest a kind of moral realism that takes into account the values of the state agents (in this case their values of professional integrity, honesty and the desire to achieve justice) and combines these with judgemental rationality and a depth understanding of reality to arrive at non-reductive, realist ethical positions. Their version of judgemental rationality, which requires that those doing the thinking be themselves ethical, is in keeping with the version advocated by Bhaskar (2009, 17) who states that, ‘ judgemental rationality in cognition depends not only upon the recognition of ontological realism and epistemic relativity, but upon meta-epistemic reflexivity and ethical (moral, social and political) responsibility on the part of the cognitive agents concerned’.

Overview of the articles

In terms of where these articles fall in relation to the research cycle, the article by Isaksen (*) provides an example of a literature review, the papers by Hu (*) and Simmonds and Gazley (*) are particularly relevant to the writing of a methodology chapter, and McAvoy and Butler (*) provide an example of how to approach the literature review, the methodology section and the results section. The paper by Patel and Pilgrim is an example of the use of critical realist ontology and epistemology in a professional context, rather than a formal research context. From their example, we see that critical realism reduces the distance between scientists and non-scientists since the approach that they use, based on retroduction and judgemental rationality, is identical to that used by the scientists working within formal academia. In this way, we can say that critical realism de-mystifies, or democratizes, science.

In terms of the content of the articles, Isaksen uses his research – which aims to identify effective ways to teach critical realism – to argue that immanent critique can provide an excellent way to better understand the relevant literature, to formulate justifiable opinions about it, and to guide research questions. Simmonds and Gazley identify tensions and limitations within current marketing systems theory and literature and put forward critical realism as a more comprehensive basis for the development of marketing systems theory. In

so doing, they delineate the features of a critical realist approach to the study of marketing systems; one which they feel is more likely to overcome the problem of the externalities of 'marketization' that result in degraded ecosystems and alienating values in our individual and collective identities. McAvoy and Butler use their research on the structures and mechanisms that are assumed to improve the efficacy of team work to demonstrate how a critical realist 'causal framework' method can be used by business researchers to guide analysis. Hu considers how critical realist methodological principles can be used to develop a qualitative case study research design to guide empirical work in entrepreneurship, exploring specifically how social capital in China, referred to as *guanxi*, provides opportunities for entrepreneurial activity. Patel and Pilgrim look at the challenges of providing psychological assessments of people seeking asylum in the wake of their reported torture, and resolve these challenges using critical realism.

Conclusion

In this editorial, we have outlined the major trends in critical realist applied work and illustrated them with the examples of critical realist work collected in this issue. Whilst the latter are concrete singulars, and are therefore necessarily unique, they nevertheless contain many of the concrete universal characteristics of critical realist work in general. The trends in critical realist applied work – that we discuss here – are reminiscent of Bhaskar's critical realist 'toolkit'. In discussing his toolkit, he urges the social scientist to: be a realist; be a scientist (use retrodiction); be interdisciplinary; employ hermeneutics; make use of the TMSA; and think in terms of scale (Bhaskar in Bhaskar et al 2017, 42-3). To this we added the use of moral realism, which was implied in Bhaskar's toolkit, even though he did not mention it directly. We hope that this special issue on Applied Critical Realism in the Social Sciences will provide at least some of the much called for guidance for researchers who want to put critical realism to work.