

# Practising emancipatory methodologies

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Characteristics of an ‘underlabouring muscle’: three applied uses of critical realism in empirical research

**Presenter/s:** Catherine Hastings , Angela Davenport, Karen Sheppard

**Organisation:** Macquarie University, Sydney Australia, AUT University, Auckland New Zealand, The University of Queensland, Brisbane Australia

### **Abstract**

Critical realist social science has been described as a ‘demanding undertaking’, and critical realism as a philosophy of ‘theoretical elegance’ that is difficult to translate into empirical research (Fitzpatrick 2005: 10). In this paper, three recent doctoral graduates will describe how an initial (substantial) investment in the philosophy supported their research practice and new knowledge creation, by developing their critical realist research ‘underlabouring muscle’—that is, their individual capacities to employ critical realist-informed thinking as a foundational platform for their empirical research. They will describe how critical realism impacted their social research by profiling which elements of the philosophy became the frameworks that enabled and enriched their empirical and theoretical analyses.

Each presenter works within a different discipline—education, health and sociology—and their doctoral theses encompassed vastly different research questions and research designs. Although sharing a fundamental commonality of allegiance to critical realist ideas, each chose and then applied different concepts within their research methodology in distinct ways. In this paper, the presenters will provide a short overview of their research question/s and methodology, followed by a more detailed account of which aspects of critical realist thinking were applied as key frameworks to support analysis of their empirical data. They will show how these elements of the philosophy worked to ‘underlabour’—support, enhance and liberate—the thinking behind their study. The paper will demonstrate, through three case studies, how critical realism challenged and transformed the practice of three researchers and their capacity to generate emancipatory knowledge. So doing, the presentation will therefore provide concrete examples of applied critical realism to inspire and encourage other scholars working to develop their own critical realist empirical research.

**Presenter/s:** Jin Xue

**Organisation:** Norwegian University of Life Sciences

### **Abstract**

Although dialectic critical realism (DRC) takes its purpose of human emancipation and is oriented towards good society, it has paid more attention to understanding, explaining and criticizing the present and past, the so-called 'negative critique'. However, when it comes to 'transformative action', very limited exploration has been done, which has a narrow focus on forecasting and concrete utopianism. The paper recognizes a methodological lack in exploring futures in the theory of DRC, and argues that methods in Futures studies provide plausible ways of thinking and methodologies to fill in this gap. In particular, normative and explorative scenarios and backcasting techniques are of relevance to critical realism's project for social transformation. Meanwhile, the paper argues for a critical realist grounded future study that takes into account values in framing future images and explores structure-agency conditions through retroductive thinking. The discussion is situated in the context of urban sustainability planning. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to strengthening the transformation potentiality of DRC.

**Presenter/s:** Li Li

**Organisation:** Bath Spa University

## Abstract

The paper outlines some challenges experienced in the author's research projects on generative mechanisms in ethical tourism development in China. The challenges run through the research process of abduction, data analysis, and retroduction. Derived from a thought operation of abduction (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019), Li (2021) proposes a realist framework for ethical tourism research, in which efforts have been on combining Archer's work (1995, 1996, 2000, 2007) and Bandura's social cognitive moral theory (1986, 1991, 2001) to conceptualize the formation of ethicality in tourism. The primary challenge in this process lies in the exercise of joining up the theories - to what extent can they "talk" to each other?

The question is raised in relation to reflection on two entities and related research findings in Li (under review). The first entity is 'intention' - its role in morality. In social cognitive moral development theory, moral thinking and moral pronouncement are not connected via intention, but self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura 1991, 2001; Rottschaefer 1986). Bandura (1991) argues that many behaviours that violate social moral codes will be "laundered as righteous" (68) if the good intention of a transgressor can define the transgressor's action as moral. In Li's study (under review), intention to do a good act presents in participants' moral reasoning of their future acts; however it is often buried under the sand once they start to consider the consequences of the act leading to a decision of inaction. In social theories, such as Archer's (2000) and Giddens' (1990), intentionality of human agency is a focal point of discussions - intention has been regarded as an important property of human agency possessing power that can lead to actions. However, for Bandura, intention appears to have a less significant role to play in linking moral reasoning and moral conduct. Another example is seen in the entity of "self-monitoring of conduct" (Bandura 1991). For Bandura, self-regulatory mechanisms are exercised through three main sub-functions, one of which is self-monitoring of conduct which is essentially concerned with reflexively monitoring one's conduct vis-à-vis one's concerns and the environment. This sub-function, according to Bandura, has little bearing on self-directed reaction. In contrast to Bandura's position, reflexivity is deemed as an imperative property of agency (Archer 2000, 2007).

The challenges in data analysis have been concerned with coding struggles and identifying causal properties of the elements in question. The struggles are reflected in deciding code that categorizes evidence or one that labels the connection between events. How can the coding process help the researcher to identify causal properties? Once they are identified, how to tell the "story" about the mechanisms (i.e. retroduction)? According to Danermark et al. (2019, 117), by this mode of inference, "what is basically characteristic and constitutive of ... structures" can be arrived at. Resembling deduction, induction, and abduction, "we can move from knowledge of one thing to knowledge of something else". Would such a story be accepted or understood by a reader or a reviewer who does not accept the ontological existence of realist mechanism?

**Presenter/s:** Ryan Armstrong

**Organisation:** University of Barcelona

### **Abstract**

Organizational studies concerned with improving how organizations function have made increasing reference to inherent contradictions, tensions, dilemmas, and paradoxes that drive and sustain dysfunction in the workplace. These studies differ widely in their understanding of the nature of these contradictions, their role in organizational practice, and whether and why they should be addressed. It should come as little surprise, then, that despite a growing interest, there is a corresponding dissonance on how to address contradiction in organizational practice.

While Bhaskar's Dialectical Critical Realism provides an appealing foundation for informing organizational practice, its potential has yet to be realized. Here, it may be that DCR could benefit from operationalization, understood as distinguishing a concept from others and translating it into observable behavior so that it can be incorporated into practice.

This presentation discusses an attempt to operationalize DCR, to make it more clearly distinguishable from other perspectives on organizational practice, to be able to identify dialectical approaches in practice, and incorporate DCR into our understanding of the targets, functions, and strategies of those who seek to promote human flourishing through organizational intervention. The attempt brought about a number of challenges and opportunities for organizational practice, and continues to develop.

While recognizing that operationalization is itself a contradictory and inherently imperfect endeavor, it is also sorely needed to promote emancipatory action within organizations. The implications of this research could be of interest to scholars and practitioners alike who seek to realize positive changes within their organizations, and raises a number of possibilities for future research.

Concrete utopian thinking in the South African Environmental Justice movement: how critical realism can underlabour activist research

**Presenter/s:** Victor Munnik

**Organisation:** University of the Witwatersrand

### **Abstract**

This contribution reports on research that used critical realist ways of thinking to support activist voices from coal affected (and dependent) communities in debates about a Just Transition in South Africa, and to conduct research under COVID-19 conditions in these communities. Research in 2019 used concrete utopian thinking with communities to arrive at Middelburg Coal Exchange Open Agenda which lays out a dynamic vision for the South African Just Transition. In 2020, due to COVID-19 and lockdown, academic and NGO researchers could no longer visit the coalfields. Activists in communities became the primary researchers. To contest the dismissal of their knowledge as “anecdotal evidence from the ground”, we deployed a CR depth ontology arguing that community researchers both had immediate access to the empirical level, as well as the real through shared analysis with “office researchers”. Together they could envision how these mechanisms would function under pressure of increasing climate change impacts (using the knowledge of lockdown conditions) and from there – using concrete utopian thinking – how these mechanisms should be reconfigured for a concrete utopian future. Concrete utopian thinking includes components of emancipatory politics, such as the need for a redistribution of resources, and the concept of a flourishing society. This provided a strong alternative to the dominant politics of austerity. An in-movement research approach facilitated shared analysis through shared concepts, and decentred the role of the academic researcher to that of a resource for the movement, without privileged analytical insights. CR provided a firm but unobtrusive safety net for activist’s research into some of the most important challenges of our time.

**Presenter/s:** Neta-Paulina Wagner

**Organisation:** Radboud University

### **Abstract**

Three decades ago, Agnew (1994) warned that the territorial state's ontological role within certain academic disciplines would result in a Territorial Trap. This trap, featuring (1) state sovereignty based on bounded territories; (2) foreign-domestic opposition; and (3) territorial state as modern society's container, would render impossible moving understanding of territory beyond the territorial state within said disciplines. Today, these warnings have become a reality with far-reaching repercussions. Across the social sciences and in practical politics, the territorial state, and its elaboration as 'nation-state', has become the frame for analysis, action, methods, and what is perceived as possible. Even though both the state as a category of political and geographic space and the nation as a category of social space have generally become understood as socially constructed categories (see Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Jones & Clark, 2019), this has not disrupted the Territorial Trap. Instead, as Agnew cautioned, the trap, in its spread far beyond its initial disciplines, has turned self-reinforcing and circular. In order to disrupt this cycle, it is crucial to uncover the conditions of the impossibility of moving beyond it.

Revisiting the Territorial Trap through a critical realist perspective, this paper treats the territorial state as a symptom of generative mechanisms, causes and power structures that produce it, rather than a construct that needs deconstructing. Engaging through a critical realist lens, we reveal a far deeper trap than Agnew anticipated. We uncover the unconscious territorial biases and assumptions within academia and the processes of which the ubiquitous territorial state is a symptom of the conjunction between modernity, globalization and academic practices. An analysis through this lens offers a real possibility for emancipation from the trap, to truly alter underlying assumptions and imaginaries within social sciences and practical politics.

Illuminated in the shadow of a coup: using critical realism to understand the NGOisation of civil society in Myanmar

**Presenter/s:** Matthew Sheader

**Organisation:** Independent

### **Abstract**

For international development agencies and liberal political theory, a healthy civil society has long been considered a prerequisite of a functioning democracy. One of the elements celebrated in Myanmar's new political order, brought to an end by the military's brutal, illegal February 2020 coup, was a widely regarded efflorescence of civil society. Political reforms after 2010 included constitutional and legislative change favourable for independent organisations, accompanied by an expansion of initiatives by international development agencies to build the capabilities of civic actors and to strengthen their influence in governance and policy making. Civil society was often said to have gained greater space to realise its progressive objectives.

This is an ideologically loaded narrative, one which merged with other forces in the 2000s in Myanmar to contain the emancipatory potential of actually existing civil society. Civil society activity began to converge around the hegemonic form of the non-governmental organisation (NGO), with significant implications for the radical transformative potential of both civil society and human rights.

Critical realism can help critique rather than repeat conceptualisations of civil society as an autonomous zone of freedom, and the state as an apparatus of coercion. Notions of an 'expanding space' or an 'improved enabling environment' conceal structural and cultural forces which affect the collective agency and normative orientation of civic actors by shaping the political terrain on which they act, enabling and constraining actors' form and political objectives.

Recognising and acting against NGOisation can be useful for organisations with radical objectives, calling attention to the political mediation of form and strategy. This offers a good example of critical realism's emancipatory potential of explanation. But while knowledge of how collective agency was shaped and its implications for political objectives might have been useful to civic actors in 'normal times', is there any way such a critique can help illuminate a path forward for Myanmar's human rights defenders and brave anti-coup resistance movement?



Why do some disadvantaged Australian families become homeless and others do not?  
Resources in the context of disadvantage, housing and welfare

**Presenter/s:** Catherine Hastings  
**Organisation:** Macquarie University

### **Abstract**

Homeless families include children: for whom the experience of homelessness and extreme poverty can have long-term negative impacts over the life-course. There is evidence that the characteristics of homeless families, and the homelessness they experience, are different from those of other cohorts—with poverty and domestic violence playing significant roles. However, the economic and social risks of family homelessness are mostly also indicators of disadvantage. The question of why some disadvantaged families become homeless whilst others do not, is not a focus of the literature.

This paper describes a critical realist causal explanation of why families in Australia become homeless—particularly focussing on the relationship between disadvantage and homelessness. The empirical part of the study used data from Journeys Home, a longitudinal survey of Australian social security recipients experiencing housing insecurity, to investigate patterns of events and contexts associated with homelessness and disadvantage. The results of descriptive statistics and panel regression analyses were interpreted within a critical realist approach to develop a transdisciplinary and stratified theoretical causal explanation. The theoretical analysis was further supported by theories conceiving homelessness as an extreme placement on a continuum of disadvantage, and Hobfoll’s conservation of resources model.

Family homelessness is explained as the consequence of insufficient financial, housing, social capital and psychological resources when families meet a challenge to housing security due to adverse events, a housing or financial crisis, or family violence. The explanatory model describes how the mechanisms of disadvantage, welfare and housing are implicated in how resources are built by families over time and in the environmental conditions that they face in the context of housing stress. The role of mechanisms at the psychological level are also discussed.

Approaching this study within a critical realist methodology, has enabled a richer explanation, offering strong emancipatory recommendations for further research and social policy.

Multilevel modeling as immanent critique: an application to planning theory and practice

**Presenter/s:** Danielle Rohret

**Organisation:** University of Louisville

### **Abstract**

Employing Bhaskarian critique (1975/2008; 1989), this paper presents an account of planned shrinkage on theoretical grounds which seeks to demonstrate that planned shrinkage suggests a central problematic insuperable in its own terms. Planned shrinkage involves reducing or 'rightsizing' both infrastructure and public services in targeted areas often through land clearance and subsequent urban greening. Mass housing demolition is one major component of planned shrinkage. But in contrast to development as an intentional project managed by the state (development as progress), a second conceptual strand (immanent development) underscores the historical development of the inner workings of capitalism and the corresponding uneven geographies of development (Cowen and Shenton, 2004). How might critical realism be used to rectify conventional accounts of planned shrinkage? I suggest multilevel modeling be employed to synthesize existing accounts of planned shrinkage with those counterpoised as uneven development and by extension, similar juxtapositions in planning theory. Focusing on housing demolition practices in Chicago, I develop an immanent critique of planned shrinkage within a multilevel framework. Multilevel modeling as a quantitative method can be used to re-describe extant theories of planned shrinkage in order to reconcile those with apparently contradictory explanations of neighborhood change as uneven development. Using the example of planned shrinkage, this paper underlabours for a critical realist approach to the development of planning theory and practice.

A social realist history of doctoral education in South Africa – the emancipatory potential of Archer’s morphogenetic framework

**Presenter/s:** Ronel Steyn

**Organisation:** Rhodes University

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the emancipatory potential of Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic/morphostatic framework (Archer, 1995) to account for changes in doctoral education in South Africa. The M/M framework is the methodological corollary of Archer’s realist social ontology, which considers “depth, stratification and emergence as definitional of social reality” (Archer 1995: 159). The M/M framework focuses on three strata of social reality, namely Structure, Culture and Agency, each with its own distinctive emergent and irreducible properties.

Much of the current literature on doctoral education relates to the need to change doctoral education practice, whether for reasons of efficiency or those of justice and equity. However, any attempt to change or enhance doctoral education, requires causal explanations of the current characteristics of doctoral education. The paper will argue that current literature on doctoral education tends to be guilty of conflationary social theorising, leading to a lack of explanatory theories and theories of change in the field. The paper will share some of the analytic and conceptual work I have been doing as part of my PhD project, which aims to illustrate how current characteristics of doctoral education can be accounted for, by tracing the history of doctoral education in South Africa through morphogenetic cycles. Such cycles involve the analytic separation of Structure and Agency, in order to investigate their interaction over time. Through linking structure and agency diachronically, this methodological approach reveals the properties and powers emergent from material and ideational relations, and their impact and import on social groups interacting to change or maintain these relations. The emancipatory potential of such causal explanations lies in the potential for current agents to organise collectively and strategically in order to bring about changes in service of social justice.

**Presenter/s:** Victor Munnik, Jane Burt, Priya Vallabh, Leigh Price, Anna James, Kholofelo Moeng, Mutizwa Mukute, Vasna Ramasar

**Organisation:** Rhodes University, Rhodes University, Norway University of Applied Science

### **Abstract**

Critical realism is a philosophy of science that overcomes the philosophical contradictions in relativist and positivist approaches to science. Bhaskar (2013) argues that these philosophical contradictions are what prevent us from engaging with knowing in a way that leads to social change. Wilson & McCormack (2006) argue that in order to provide research rigour, a researcher needs to consider not only research methodology but also philosophical intent particularly if the research has emancipatory aims. They argue that critical realism is such a philosophical framework to guide emancipatory action. But how do we navigate the complex terrain of critical realism if we are public scholars, activists, teachers or adult educators who re-search the world as part of our commitment to social change? Many of us have broken down in tears as we have tried to read critical realist texts. It is through friendly conversations with people who know a lot about critical realism, that we have learnt about the emancipatory potential of critical realism. When we have been able to apply some of critical realism's concepts and positions we have found that the people we work with respond as if this was common sense and emancipatory spaces have opened up in our work. In this panel we work with just transitions, environmental justice, environmental learning, agroecology and citizen science. We are all learning which is why we offer this facilitated workshop for those that want to engage with the emancipatory potential of critical realism as part of our broader commitment to social change. We will offer examples of how we have applied critical realist ideas with emancipatory intent to catalyse our conversations. We will explore questions, in an interactive discussion with all workshop participants, such as: (1) How can/are we applying critical realism in our practices? (2) What works and what doesn't? (3) How can/are we making these useful ideas, instruments and concepts available to others? (4) How scared should one be of making mistakes when applying critical realism? (5) How do critical realist ideas help us understand how different things are differently real? (6) In what ways do critical realist ideas help make the invisible, visible? (7) Can we apply critical realist ideas without this being another colonising imperative? These are our questions. Bring your own questions, your own examples and your own ideas and challenges and we will learn together. Our hope is that this will lead to some offering to our communities such as a workbook or a series of practitioner friendly webinars.

Building Labor Union Headquarters and Working-Class Strategic Autonomy at the Chilean Workplace in the Early 21st Century: A Critique of the Power Resources Approach

**Presenter/s:** Sebastian Link Chaparro  
**Organisation:** Johns Hopkins University

**Abstract**

This presentation discusses workers' power by examining workers' ability to produce social fields separated from those under bourgeois rule. Drawing on world-system, Marxist-insurrectional, and Critical Realist traditions, and on a comparative analysis of Chilean labor unions in three companies, Carnitas, Technologin, and Bodeguin, we argue that without distinguishing between the social fields of labor and capital at the workplace level, we are likely to misinterpret the extent and stability of workers' empowerment. The toolkit proposed by the influential Power Resources Approach does not provide the tools for distinguishing between the empowerment of bourgeois apparatuses, activists, unions, and working classes. We propose the concept of working-class strategic autonomy (WSA) for evaluating workers' ability to build workers' social fields actively separated from fields led by factory managers, owners, and state apparatuses. We focus on the practices of small groups of workers at the point of production (the union strategic headquarters [USH]) and the unfolding of union tactics and strategies, with special attention to their ability to keep their fields separated from the bourgeois apparatuses (class autonomy), to engage non-leader workers (socialization of strategy), and to transform themselves so as to accumulate power in their fields (strategic self-change). Based on this analysis, we identify three types of USH: representatives, cadres, and political subjects. At Carnitas, union representatives operated in a bourgeois field. At Technologin, union cadres refused to engage in the bourgeois fields until they built their own. Finally, at Bodeguin, political subjects operated from consolidated, autonomous, socialized, and strategically self-changing workers' fields. Recovering the Marxist insurrectional tradition, we highlight two core political orientations for emancipation. First, merging socialism and the working classes through a relatively longlasting organization strictly autonomous from and antagonistic to the bourgeoisie. Second, building organizations directly strategizing for a revolution protagonized by the exploited and oppressed classes at large.