Education, conflict, peace-building and critical realism

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Abstract

Critical realism helps to resolve contradictions between positivism and interpretivism, to analyse levels of reality and of being human, and to research transformative change over time. It is important to take children seriously as active contributors to their communities.

Key Words

Children's agency
Dialectics
Research theories
Transformative change

Introduction

Critical realism helps to structure international research, and connect the local to the global, and individuals' lives into their political, economic and geo-historical contexts. Education, conflict and peace-building are processes with interacting causes and effects that occur over time. This paper briefly summarises a few critical realist approaches that are useful to researchers who are analysing these kinds of transformative change. The approaches include: resolving contradictions between neo-positivism and interpretivism; analysing three levels of reality; and working with dialectics beyond dichotomies, on the four planes of social being and through four stages of dynamic change. On a slightly different topic, the paper ends with a note on the importance of taking children seriously as active contributors in many societies.

Critical realism is not a version or method of sociology, but a philosophy of the social and life sciences. Philosophy might seem to be irrelevant to many researchers, while they hurry to complete practical research and reports on time. Yet sorting out research theories, the basic work of philosophy and sociology, can be the most useful way to raise standards of research (Porpora, 2015).

Until the 1970s, much research was sexist and racist. And because many researchers did not question their own negative underlying beliefs but assumed their theories were natural and inevitable, the theories dominated their work. Feminist and post-colonial critics had to point out the problems, and promote new research theories of greater equality and respect. This paper reviews current taken-for-granted theories, and shows how critical realism helps to identify and resolve the problems they raise.

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Positivism versus interpretivism

The problems and limitations of these two main approaches in social research have been widely debated (Alderson, 2013; Moore, 2013; Bhaskar, 1998; Porpora, 2015). Positivist or, as they are often now termed, neo-positivist or post-positivist surveys may be criticised as misleadingly simplistic when they are based on yes/no answers to complex questions. Attempts to measure the effects of a single cause or variable overlook how we live in open systems of countless interacting causal influences. Questions may be poorly worded or irrelevant, and the reported answers may be distorted and misleading. Sampling may not be representative, and individuals become lost within large anonymous groups. Translations between different languages may miss subtle cultural meanings.

These and other problems of positivism lead interpretivists to claim that all meanings are socially constructed through language. Meanings emerge from local contexts and only make sense within them. Data are not independent, with the same intact meaning in any time and place, as suggested in positivist reports, but they are contingent. Interpretivists therefore concentrate on individuals' narratives set within their context.

However, interpretivism also raises problems. If meanings are truly only locally understood, what is the point of conducting and publishing research internationally? What sense would the reports make to readers in other countries? And if each research site can only be understood in its own terms, how can they be compared, or how can lessons learned from one site be applied to any other site? 'Cultural relativism', it is claimed, cannot accept universal rights and values of justice and respect, or universal human experiences of suffering and wellbeing, because local values and experiences are too diverse. Yet this is not cultural but moral relativism, which suspends all universal values (Lukes, 2008). Cultural relativism does respect universal values, although researchers do not assume that their own nation sets the gold standard, and they are as ready to criticise their homeland as any other country. Margaret Mead (1928), for instance, referring to universal concepts of wellbeing, thought that young people in Samoa were happier than those in her native USA. Nevertheless, many neo-positivists and interpretivists still aim to conduct 'value-free' research.

Critical realism: three levels of reality

Social researchers aiming to promote the values of peace and justice need to convince policy makers and the general public that their work is valid and reliable in its analysis of the causes of social problems and how to prevent and remedy them. When social researchers who work with either generally positivist or else interpretive approaches disagree and cannot convince one another, they are unlikely to impress anyone else. The social researchers who combine fact-based approaches with constructionist paradigms tend to ignore the contradictions between them.

Critical realism helps to resolve these contradictions and other difficulties (Bhaskar, 1998, 2008). First, it recognises 1) the empirical (our thinking-talking responses including narratives, social constructions, facts and statistics) as truth claims; and 2) the actual (events, people, things, structures) as two partial complementary levels of reality. Interpretivists work mainly at the empirical level, concerned with people and events only as they are constructed through narratives. Positivists take the second actual level seriously, but they still reduce it into their empirical reports and graphs. Positivist and interpretive approaches both attend to observable effects (evidence) and they overlook what is termed as 3) unseen causal mechanisms. These are at the third more generalisable level, where deeper critical comparisons, potential remedies and alternatives can be considered (see Table 1).

An example from physics illustrates the three levels: we empirically observe falling objects; the objects are actually falling; the unseen cause is gravity, only known in its effects. An example from peace-building involves: we talk about peace-building (the empirical); we actually work on a dispute, such as restoring houses and land to the people who were evicted from them during recent conflict (the actual); we are driven by our unseen values and longings for peace and justice, which are only seen in our activities (the real). Other groups may believe that the restoration is unfair and that it wrongs them, when they are driven by a different version of justice. Peace-building depends on all concerned reaching enough agreement on their values and on what justice as a causal mechanism actually means in this dispute. Critical realism highlights the importance of values, which

Three levels of reality	Social constructionism/ interpretivism	Positivism/ post-positivism	Critical realism
Empirical, talking, recording, stating facts, stats (epistemology, thinking)	✔	✔	✔
Actual, events, things, people, structures (ontology, being, doing)		✔	✔
Real, unseen causal mechanisms (gravity, peace, (in)equality, (in)justice, class, gender, values);			✔

Table 1: Three levels of reality

are central to all social relations (Sayer, 2011), and so is the too-often neglected third level of unseen real causes or causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1998).

Detailed micro studies can be informed by and nested within macro reports of the political economy that pervades daily life. Both can reveal the effects of hidden causal mechanisms, such as how the World Bank's policies result in classes of up to 100 children in Tanzania, with pressure on teachers to control them through violent punishments (Yoshida, 2011).

All the levels make more sense when examined in relation to one another. Similarly, individual agents and social structures are recognised as different but interacting (Alderson and Yoshida, 2016). Social structures are latent powers and positions (including power, dependency and inequality) that only exist and work through human agency, although human activities are often limited, inadvertent and counterproductive. Small-scale studies enrich broader political analysis, which indicates their wider relevance. Critical realism's four planar social being helps to organise their inter-connections. The four planes are: 1) human bodies in nature and, for example, how climate change and pollution affect health and survival and can incite migration and conflict; 2) interpersonal relations through which human agents work for peace or conflict; 3) social structures that can be used to incite violence or restore peace; and 4) psychological inner being, and the values and emotions that drive genuine peace-building. All these interacting levels are powerfully involved.

Dialectical critical realism

Critical realism resolves dichotomies and contradictions into dialectic. For example, positivism and interpretivism, so often seen in contradiction, can work together towards larger pictures of peace-building. For millennia, dialectic has been a dynamic philosophical approach to investigating and discussing truth (Molyneux, 2012). First a thesis or idea is proposed; then antithesis presents disagreements and criticisms; these are resolved into synthesis. Dialectic seeks to combine opposites and resolve contradictions, and so is vital in peace-building, unlike the more usual research method of highlighting dichotomies. Dialectical critical realism involves four stages, but before these are explained, a few of the useful concepts related to dialectic and transformative change over time will be mentioned (Bhaskar, 2008). These include seeing that difference (such as, a new different government) differs from the real alteration of transformative change (the government really does redistribute resources more fairly). Absence allows the empty space and time necessary for movement and change, and powerfully draws us out of the past and into the future. Absence is a driving motivator of human agents in their longing for absent peace and justice. All caring work begins in response to the absences of need, lack and deprivation. Absent events, such as melted glaciers no longer flowing into the Tigris and Euphrates, or the monsoons failing to arrive, have massive effects. These can

be traced through emergence, as when through drought the crops fail and herds die, hunger compels the people to migrate, conflicts begin over scarce resources, politicians attempt to manage migration peacefully, or exploit it to win populist votes. Each stage is more clearly understood as part of the continuing yet also changing emergent chains of events.

Dialectic critical realism works over four stages to research complex dynamic change (Alderson, 2016; Bhaskar 2008; Norrie, 2010). First, as with anthropology, there is the search for underlying meanings, problems and influences, such as the origins of mass displacement. Second, interventions are made or observed, intended to resolve the problem of forced displacement, to help the displaced people and preserve peace. The third stage examines the larger international context to see how famines or wars force migration, which can only be prevented when these origins are addressed. Fourth, there is reflection on how everyone's inner being, their beliefs and values, can promote or block change. The great need for this careful analysis is shown when politicians intervene at stage two, with plans to send migrants home, or build a wall, and ignore the other three vital stages in real peace-building.

Researching childhood in conflict-affected contexts

On the topic of re-examining taken-for-granted theories, this final section looks at how dominant theories of childhood also need to be revised. In Uganda and Niger, the median age is 15 years. These societies depend on many children being active workers alongside the adults. Campaigns against child labour cannot help children who are able to attend school only if they can earn enough to pay for their food and school fees. Researchers and young workers are, therefore, together promoting the children's rights to work with dignity, not to be abused or exploited, and to be able to attend both school and work (https://www.childrenandwork.net/resources/).

This important form of conflict prevention helps children: to be both educated and employed; to gain skills and contacts likely to help them for years to come; to avoid the extreme poverty, hunger and deprivation that fuel violence and conflict; and to avoid needing to join an army as the best way to earn an income. Many children report being pleased to help to support their family, and in Rajasthan, for example, working children organise their own evening schools (John, 2003). If researchers are to understand and support the children's best interests, they have to re-theorise childhood, to take children's own views seriously and respect even young children as competent research participants. Researchers of childhood studies (who criticise traditional child development theory) have been doing so for over 30 years (Alderson, 2013; 2016).

Critical realism is not a method. It helps researchers to analyse the theories and beliefs that underlie their range of research methods, qualitative or quantitative, interpretivist or more positivist/realist. Van Ingen (2017) shows how critical realism helps researchers to resolve the 'crisis of theory and practice' in conflict studies and neo-positivism, to engage with contexts, and to develop more sophisticated and coherent understandings of causality. This brief review highlights the relevance of critical realism in the field of education, conflict and peace-building and I hope, it will encourage readers to consider how it might assist in their research.

Author Bio

Priscilla Alderson has worked in children's services and advocacy since the 1960s and in sociological research since the 1980s. Her research interests include children's rights, wisdom, competence and consent. Her books include those mentioned in the references and also Young children's rights: Exploring beliefs, principles and practice (2008, Jessica Kingsley/ Save the Children, 2nd edition), and with C Goodey Enabling education: experiences in special and ordinary schools (2018, Tufnell Press, 2nd edition). The revised fourth edition of The ethics of research with children and young people: A practical handbook (with Virginia Morrow, Sage) will be published in 2020.

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