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**Abstract:** Critical realism has been an important advance in social science methodology because it develops a qualitative theory of causality which avoids some of the pitfalls of empiricist theories of causality. But while there has been ample work exploring the relationship between critical realism and qualitative research methods there has been noticeably less work exploring the relationship between dialectical critical realism and qualitative research methods. This seems strange especially since the founder of the philosophy of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, employs and develops a range of dialectical concepts in his later work in order to extend the main tenets of critical realism. The aim of this paper is to draw on Bhaskar's later work, as well as Marxism, to reorient a critical realist methodology towards a dialectical approach for qualitative research. In particular, the paper demonstrates how dialectical critical realism can begin to provide answers to three common criticisms made against original critical realist methodology: that the qualitative theory of causal powers and structures developed by critical realists is problematic; that critical realist methodology contains values which

prove damaging to empirical research; and that critical realists often have difficulties in researching everyday qualitative dilemmas that people face in their daily lives. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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### **Critical Realism, Dialectics, and Qualitative Research Methods.**

Critical realism has been an important advance in social science methodology because it develops a qualitative theory of causality which avoids some of the pitfalls of empiricist theories of causality. But while there has been ample work exploring the relationship between critical realism and qualitative research methods there has been noticeably less work exploring the relationship between dialectical critical realism and qualitative research methods. This seems strange especially since the founder of the philosophy of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, employs and develops a range of dialectical concepts in his later work in order to extend the main tenets of critical realism. The aim of this paper is to draw on Bhaskar's later work, as well as Marxism, to reorient a critical realist methodology towards a dialectical approach for qualitative research. In particular, the paper demonstrates how dialectical critical realism can begin to provide answers to three common criticisms made against original critical realist methodology: that the qualitative theory of causal powers and structures developed by critical realists is problematic; that critical realist methodology contains values which prove damaging to empirical research; and that critical realists often have difficulties in researching everyday qualitative dilemmas that people face in their daily lives.

contradiction; critical realism; dialectics; Marxism; qualitative research

According to Hughes and Sharrock ([ 41 ] : 35) the terms “method” and “methodology” refer to two separate but related elements of research practice. “Method” alludes to those techniques adopted to accumulate and collect data about an object of inquiry. Questionnaires, interviews, observation, ethnography, and so on, all represent different types of “method” in this respect. Methodology, on the other hand, examines the logic and rationale which underpins the use of particular methods. A particularly useful function of methodology is therefore to critically enquire into the claims of specific methods, while methods lend credence to the often more abstract assertions of a methodology (see also Ruane [ 73 ] : 48–49).

Debates about causal statements in research provide an illustration of the relationship between methods and methodology. According to an empiricist methodology, quantitative methods are best suited to making causal observations about the world because they generate objective statements beyond the subjective bias of individuals. Contained in this statement, then, is the idea that qualitative researchers deal with “subjective” issues while “objectivity” is arrived at through quantitative methods. However, many qualitative researchers similarly claim that an “objective” world exists outside of language, texts, and other human constructs (Seale [ 77 ] : 470), although they also add a caveat. Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative scholars reject the idea that external data is simply “given” to us and claim instead that we can gain “qualified objectivity” in research. For Manicas this type of objectivity is a contextual approach based on the assumption that it is possible to make judgements about the research process as long as these are made through “responsible forms of rationality”. Being reflexive about an object of investigation is crucial in this respect and involves asking ongoing probing questions during the research encounter such as whether ones interpretation makes sense and indeed manages to capture some of the unique social relations evident in the context at hand (Manicas [ 50 ] : 35). Reflexivity then leads to questions about causal relationships attached to these social relations. It is at this point that a critical realist methodology becomes especially useful in mapping out a theory of causality which is compatible with qualitative research methods.

Critical realists argue that the world is “layered” into different domains of reality. A directly observable pattern of behaviour (the empirical domain) can be explained in a closed experimental setting by investigating linear causal relationships between different variables (the actual domain). Quantitative researchers frequently operate in this domain. However, we might also wish to know something about how this pattern of behaviour is produced by a causal power, or causal mechanism, not immediately apparent at the level of appearances and which can only be fully explored in open systems (the real domain) (Bhaskar [ 8 ] : 13). This is a more qualitative approach to the issue of causality because causal mechanisms are examined in the social world through real open contexts where they interact with one another in often contingent and unpredictable ways. Critical realists also believe in the fallibility of knowledge insofar that the complexity of the world implies that our knowledge of it might be wrong or misleading and so the job of social investigators is to keep searching for knowledge about causal mechanisms in different research contexts (Benton and Craib [ 6 ] : 120). And it is fallibilism which ensures that “responsible rationality” is practiced in research (Manicas [ 50 ] : 35).

But while critical realism has brought many benefits for research practice the acknowledged founder of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, now suggests that there are limits to its founding principles. [ 9 ] most sustained treatment of this issue can be found in his theoretical and philosophical tome, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993). In *Dialectic* and subsequent writings Bhaskar argues that the initial ideas of critical realism require a dialectical supplement in order to transgress a number of shortcomings. For

example, Bhaskar now insists that “abstract” social structures obtain a historical identity not merely because they enter the flow of “concrete” historical events (the normal critical realist claim) but because their very essence reflects and “diffracts” historical “totalities”, which are in turn structured through a variety of internally related contradictions. Structure and history are thus dialectically related with one another.

Many critical realists reject Bhaskar's later dialectical work (Elder-Vass [ 26] : 11), although it is often unclear why they do so (although see Creaven [ 23] ). Contrary to these critical realists the aim of this paper is indeed to take seriously Bhaskar's later dialectical work in order to begin to think about how it might be put to practical use in respect to qualitative research methods. In particular the paper will argue that Bhaskar's later work is a more useful way of conceptualising the relationship between structure and history because it ensures that a reflexive awareness between qualitative research practice and historical systems is ever present in the research context. If there is thus an original slant to the paper it rests in applying Bhaskar's later dialectical work to certain issues in qualitative methods. As far as I am aware this has not been attempted elsewhere.[ 1] The paper therefore proceeds as follows.

The next section briefly maps out some of the principles of qualitative research and how critical realists appropriate and develop a qualitative theory of causality. Following this the paper shows how in his later work Bhaskar has sought to develop and extend critical realism. In particular Bhaskar's work on totalities and contradictions is found to be especially useful for rethinking some critical realist ideas. Many of the theoretical ideas in this section will be explained and illustrated by drawing on some themes from Marxism (a manoeuvre that Bhaskar also makes). The next three main sections return to qualitative methods in order to demonstrate the usefulness of a dialectical approach to realist methodology. Specifically, these sections explore three complaints made against a critical realist approach to qualitative methods: that critical realists cannot adequately investigate social structures in qualitative research; that critical realism is too value-laden in relation to qualitative research; and that critical realist methodology often has difficulties in accounting for everyday dilemmas that people face. We will see that a critical realism steeped in dialectics manages to shake off some of the key points of these criticisms.

### Critical Realism and Qualitative Research Methods

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods refuse to bury the “voice” of research subjects beneath piles of anonymous standardised data (Ragin [ 68] : 81). Instead, qualitative researchers believe that social scientists need to understand those human actions and meanings that individuals and groups attach to their everyday lives, objects, and social relations so that we come to understand how they evaluate their lives through their beliefs and meanings (see Winch [ 82] ). An “emic” (insider) view of society therefore assists the qualitative researcher to gain in-depth contextual information about a case study along with the symbolic practices, meaningful beliefs, and ordinary emotions that inscribe themselves in everyday interactions (Geertz [ 30] : 20–21; Guba and Lincoln [ 32] : 106). For instance, qualitative interview techniques encourage respondents to talk freely often around emotionally loaded topics in order to gain an insight into how people feel and think about a research topic under investigation. In this respect qualitative interviews can be described as a conversation with a purpose (Berg [ 7] : 13). They are thus able to probe in more depth around particular everyday issues than standardised quantitative interviews (see Oppenheim [ 61] : 67; Silverman [ 79] : 159–160). Overall, then, qualitative methods are arguably more attuned to the “messiness” and “openness” of real social life (e.g., the overlapping social identities we all inhabit on a daily basis) which inevitably affect the outlook of respondents in their everyday lives (Alvesson [ 3] : chapter 3;

Oakley [ 59 ] : 35).

Quantitative methods can certainly make similar pronouncements but they frequently do so by encouraging social scientists to formulate generalisations based on misleading and/or limited theories of causality; for example exploring how variables interact with one another in “closed systems” such as a laboratory. Realists and critical realists are particularly adept in demonstrating some of the errors at play in the underlying rationale of quantitative methods. In particular, they argue that quantitative researchers employ variants of empiricism based in a successionist theory of causality. In this theory, variable A causes an event to occur to variable B in some way or another so that cause is seen to emerge before an event occurs. To establish a causal relationship between A and B all that we need to do is to observe a succession of As causing an event to B; for example, observing that taking paracetamol (variable A) causes a headache to stop (an event to B) (Harré [ 36 ] : 116). For realists, however, this is a limited theory of causality because it explores only epistemological questions about the observable actions of an object and thus fails to ask enough questions about an object's internal ontological properties. Empiricists tend to be satisfied with the question, “how do we know X?” rather than the more important question, “what is X?” (Collier [ 22 ] : 75). Without interrogating the latter question there is the ever present danger that physical objects, together with their constituting laws, will be seen to be altered and caused by our knowledge and observations—by our sensations and experimental activity—which of course is highly problematic (Harré and Madden [ 37 ] : 55).

Critical realists obviously do not totally reject empiricist methods such as the use of statistics, but they also believe it is important to examine deeper causal processes at work in the world. In order to explore these causal processes realists argue it is essential to first abstract the underlying causal powers, or causal mechanisms, of an object under investigation and think conceptually about how they operate. Qualitative methods assist the researcher to undertake this task by helping him or her construct a model of a potential mechanism through analogies to other known objects, which will then be used to explain a set of observable patterns (see Bhaskar [ 11 ] : 68; Harré [ 36 ] : 174–176). Once a theory about a mechanism has been created it is then possible to empirically test its theoretical robustness (see also Blundel [ 14 ] ; Morais [ 55 ] ). Mechanisms thus help to describe what generates non-random patterns between objects and they also explain why these occur (Hedström and Swedberg [ 40 ] : 10; see also Harré [ 36 ] : 170; Mayntz [ 51 ] : 241). Correspondingly, such knowledge gives us an insight into how a causal mechanism operates and under what conditions it is activated (Sayer [ 75 ] : 14). This involves adopting an intensive research methodology, “primarily concerned with what makes things happen in specific cases, or in more ethnographic form, what kind of universe of meaning exists in a particular situation” (Sayer [ 75 ] : 20). According to Maxwell ([ 54 ] : 38–40), a realist approach to qualitative research therefore offers up the opportunity to investigate causal relationships in a single case study without the need to control for variables. Variables can certainly explore patterns of behaviour but they are often not so well equipped at explaining the social structures and their associated powers and capacities (causal mechanisms) which underline such patterns.

For critical realists an object's structure is therefore comprised by internal social relations that possess specific capabilities, powers, and tendencies to act in certain ways under particular conditions (Sayer [ 75 ] : 14; see also Danermark [ 24 ] : 47). A critical realist theory of social structure relates this conceptual point to the social world. In this respect Porpora ([ 67 ] ) usefully suggests that one way to conceptualise social structures is to see them as systems of human relations among social positions. The education social

structure, for example, exists through a system of human relations based around, in part, its causal power to bestow certain types of knowledge to pupils and articulate a set of values. But these causal powers also create particular social positions—teachers and pupils being the most obvious example. What follows are a number of structured constraints, resources, potentials, and powers associated with the education system (Porpora [ 67 ] : 344). The analytical movement in critical realist research method therefore comprises a movement from a concrete context within which causal mechanisms are abstracted and analysed and then back to the concrete context to understand how these causal mechanisms operate. Figure [NaN] captures some of the principles of this methodology.

Critical realist methodology subsequently changes our orientation to the practice of empirical data gathering. In respect to qualitative interviews, for instance, a realist approach avoids the temptation to simply convert research method questions into research interview questions. Research method questions focus attention on what needs to be explored and understood, whereas actual research interview questions equip a researcher with the means to gain answers to research method questions (Maxwell [ 54 ] : 104). Research method questions on the one hand seek to understand the causal mechanisms at play in a unique context which then go on to reproduce particular outcomes (see Pawson [ 65 ] ; Pawson and Tilly [ 66 ] ). Research interview questions on the other hand are attuned to the concrete specificity of a distinctive context. Subsequently there must remain a degree of flexibility in how interview questions are designed to elicit information about the unique interaction of causal mechanisms in a particular context.

But while critical realism provides a crucial remedy to some of the pitfalls of only employing a quantitative theory of causality in social research it has nevertheless faced a number of criticisms from those sympathetic to its aims. Working from Marxist perspective Carchedi ([ 17 ] : 76) claims for example that critical realism employs a dualist perspective in which causal mechanisms are associated with “closed” systems while actual concrete events operate in “open” systems. On this understanding it seems to be the case that closed and open systems are parallel and yet ultimately separate systems and so it is difficult to comprehend how they might relate to one another. One possible reading of Bhaskar's work on critical realism certainly lends credence to this criticism. After all, Bhaskar does claim in parts of his work that abstract structures undergo change through concrete space-time relations. The story of how structures evolve and transform can thus be told through different concrete levels: individual biography, life-cycle of the human being, everyday life of intentional agency, development of institutions, how humans have evolved as part of world history, or the biological history of the human species in its place as part of the universe (Bhaskar [ 11 ] : 216; see also Archer [ 4 ] : 156–157; Manicas [ 49 ] : 115; Outhwaite [ 62 ] : 36–44; Sayer [ 75 ] : 127; Steinmetz [ 80 ] : 174). For Bhaskar, then, while structures relate to concrete social activity they are also different to concrete social activity. Both exist in their own ontological spaces, and it is this claim that gives rise to the criticism that Bhaskar reproduces an unhelpful dualism in his early work between abstract structures and concrete everyday activity.

Maybe as a response to such criticisms Bhaskar now claims that causal mechanisms must be situated in a dialectically connected totality, which also includes within it historical processes and concrete events. In other words, rather than structure and history existing as two entities in their own right that come together through “process”, Bhaskar now claims that structures and history are dialectically entwined. In particular Bhaskar locates three areas where his earlier work on critical realism requires more theoretical development: absence; contradiction; and totality. These three moments are interconnected elements of

Bhaskar's later attempt to explain and understand how structures are “diffractions” of the same historical system, or what he also terms as a totality. In other words, Bhaskar now recognises that earlier versions of critical realism require a dialectical supplement in order to acquire and develop the appropriate theoretical tools to understand and explain some of the properties of historical totalities. The paper therefore now briefly summarises some of main points of Bhaskar's dialectics. And to help explain more clearly what are admittedly some fairly obscure arguments in Bhaskar's later work we will also draw on Marxism to illustrate some key features of “dialectical critical realism”. This is particularly apt because Bhaskar sees his dialectical work in part as an extension of some of Marx's insights, while Marxism can help to draw out and make clearer some of Bhaskar's dialectical insights.

### **Dialectical Critical Realism: Diffraction and Refraction in Totalities**

According to Bhaskar the stratified world classified by critical realism is mediated through “non-identity”. Causal powers emerge from other causal powers but then remain relatively autonomous from one another, i.e. they share a non-identity with the powers they emerge from (Bhaskar [ 10 ] : 249). Bhaskar develops this point by saying that non-identity is in fact a form of “absence”. The theory of causal powers suggests that even though we cannot directly see a mechanism at work—even if that mechanism is “absent” to us—it is still an ontological entity which might affect us in some way or another. Indeed, because the world is complexly layered and stratified it is always the case that some kind of absence will impact on us. Think momentarily about scientific progress. Scientists make new discoveries by gaining deeper knowledge about causal mechanisms they did not previously know or have much knowledge about, i.e. they gain knowledge about what were once “absences”. And they eliminate errors in scientific understanding by “absenting” this absence in their knowledge (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 14–28). From this starting point Bhaskar employs the term “diffraction” to characterise these processes and to place them in a dialectical context.

A diffracted dialectic is one which recognises that the world is differentiated and yet unified (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 96). Diffraction acknowledges that while it is possible to identify some determining moments to a system, or totality, these determinations always develop into fractured and fragmented qualitative forms at more concrete levels that cannot simply be reduced to their original determinations (see Norrie [ 57 ] : 50). To elaborate on these initial insights Bhaskar first presents a more nuanced definition of totalities as “systems of internally related elements or aspects. A may be said to be internally related to B if it is a necessary condition for the existence (weak form) or essence (strong form) of B, whether or not the converse is the case ...” (Bhaskar [ 10 ] : 75). Totalities can be divided between an intensive margin where one will find “more and more of the other elements and/or the whole packed or ‘reflected’ into a particular system”, and an extensive margin where one finds “an element's efficacy reflected in more and more of the other elements of the whole” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 125; [ 10 ] : 77). Totalities are thus structures in their own right (Bhaskar [ 10 ] : 80) and gain their unique properties in part through dialectical connections. These “are connections between entities or aspects of a totality such that they are in principle distinct but inseparable, in the sense that they are synchronically or conjuncturally internally related ...” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 58; original emphasis).

It is at this point, however, that a dilemma in terminology can be noted in Bhaskar's account. As much as the diffraction metaphor is useful it also does not capture the dialecticalisation of critical realism as fully as might be expected. Why is this so? An answer can be found in the work of Donna Haraway. She too employ the “diffraction” metaphor in a similar way to that of Bhaskar. According to Haraway ([ 35 ] : 16) diffraction

can be contrasted to “reflection”. In reflection one searches for the “real”, or at least a copy of “the same”. Diffraction on the other hand highlights the need to explore how an object of analysis might create difference, such as different patterns in the world. Diffraction is therefore a more useful metaphor than reflection, argues Haraway, because it pushes one to look for the always partial locations of situated knowledge and “shifting sedimentations” of how the world is structured and defined (Haraway [ 35 ] : 37). Bhaskar similarly sees diffraction as a way to understand and make sense of the “multiplicity of topological modes” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 92) which ruptures the identity of the same. The potential difficulty with the “diffraction” metaphor, however, is that it tends to direct attention to “difference” underlying the world at the expense of how “difference” is nevertheless represented in forms of its original determination. In other words, elements of a system are both different to and the same as the system from which they internally emerge. Something is therefore “different” only to the extent that it gains its identity by being a form of a wider dialectical system of which it is a moment. Consequently, an object never simply alters its identity completely as the diffraction metaphor implies but instead refracts a wider interacting system of which it is an integral part (Rieder [ 69 ] ; Roberts [ 70 ] ).

On these grounds the alternative although similar metaphor of “refraction” better captures the dialectical processes that Bhaskar wishes to explore in his later work. “Refraction” does not overstate the principle of difference at work in totalities but always ensures that difference is brought back to its dialectical relationship with unity and sameness. Indeed, Bhaskar draws inspiration for his new approach from Marxism and it is therefore interesting to note that some Marxists have indeed employed the “refraction” metaphor to make sense of dialectical connections and contradictions in a manner remarkably similar to Bhaskar (e.g., Bakhtin and Medvedev [ 5 ] ). In fact, the Marxist concept of mode of production can be thought of as a totality in Bhaskar's sense insofar that it is a historical system formed through dialectical connections and refractions. A mode of production is comprised through a dialectical relationship between forces of production and relations of production. Forces of production are those instruments and processes through which concrete, everyday human labour creates useful products, while relations of production refer to the historical form which the labour process assumes for the surplus extraction of products to occur. But the relationship between forces and relations of production is also a “totality” insofar that other more concrete social entities, say, education or religion, are refractions of a mode of production in the sense these concrete entities obtain a unique social identity, or social form, through their refracted dialectical connections to a mode of production (Bologh [ 15 ] : 52; Marx [ 52 ] : 285; [ 53 ] : 100–101).

Bhaskar's argument therefore fundamentally alters how realists might start to think about structures and their relationship to history. Most obviously, it suggests that history does not inhere in a different “system” to that of structures but in fact exists in, or are refractions of, the same historical system (or totality) such as that of a mode of production. But Bhaskar also suggests that elements of a historical totality can be contradictory. A dialectical contradiction occurs when at least one element of a dialectical connection is “opposed, in the sense that (at least) one of their aspects negates (at least) one of the other's, or their common ground or the whole, and perhaps vice versa, so that they are tendentially mutually exclusive, and potentially or actually tendentially transformative” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 58; original emphasis). In the capitalist mode of production for example a capitalist owns any surplus produced because s/he owns the means of production and labour power exactly in his or her capacity as a capitalist. The labourer owns only his or her labour power and can only be connected to the conditions of labour under the dominance of capital. Importantly, as Garfinkel observes, this contradictory “qualitative stratification” in the capitalist system alters



the way that capitalism is viewed. Appearances suggest that capitalism is based on freedom—to be free to work for anyone. Beneath this appearance is however another historical relation. Workers are in fact forced to sell their labour power to capital in order to obtain the means of subsistence. Naturally, capital wants to purchase this labour as cheaply as possible and will aim to do this through various mechanisms at its disposal. Individuals thus enter this ownership-relation through structurally embedded social positions mediated through the capitalist totality (Garfinkel [ 29 ] : 84–96). Thus this ownership-relation is not an interpersonal relationship between an individual worker and an individual capitalist but is instead a contradictory relationship between free wage labour and capital (see Carchedi [ 18 ] : 10–11; Clarke [ 20 ] : 60–61; Larrain [ 43 ] : 153).

Bhaskar suggests that the capital and labour ownership-relation represents the determinant contradiction in the capitalist mode of production, which he terms as “an original generative separatism, split or alienation of the immediate producers from the means and materials of their production” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 70; original emphasis). In this sense the generative separatism between capital and labour also represents the primary contradiction in capitalism because it gives form to three other contradictions. First, there are “geo-historically specific dialectical contradictions ... that bring into being a social form and/or crises in the course of its development ...” (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 70). These might be taken as dialectical contradictions that refer to specific phases of capitalism, such as the current phase of financial neoliberal capitalism in our own time. Contradictions of this type mediate contradictory forces between determinant (or “generative”) contradictions and local social forms. Second, then, Bhaskar also suggests that “synchronic or local-periodized dialectical contradictions intrinsic to a particular social form” can be located (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 70). For instance, since the 1980s new contradictory financial neoliberal forms have been refracted into more concrete levels in different ways. Deregulation of the housing markets in the USA and UK and then their subsequent housing crises are illustrations of these “synchronic” financial neoliberal contradictions.

Third, these various refracted contradictions will appear in empirical contexts as everyday contradictory spatio-temporal “rhythms”. A city, for example, is comprised by a multitude of different spatio-temporal rhythms based on factors like class, religion, tradition, poverty, wealth, and so on (Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 55), and these rhythms coalesce in unique ways in different empirical contexts. Such rhythms therefore tell us something about the direction of more abstract contradictions as well as the historical preconditions for determinant contradictions to be actualized. As Paolucci ([ 63 ] : 115–116) observes, all objects of investigation have a history of becoming and it is these historical presuppositions we also need to explore (see also Murray [ 56 ] ). Spatio-temporal rhythms and their refracted contradictions in empirical contexts are one way of accomplishing this task. These contradictions can of course react upon and change the generative contradiction. Indeed, the reproduction of contradictions from the ownership-relation to other social relations, and then vice versa, creates and develops a historically specific contradictory system, or totality (see Carchedi [ 18 ] : 13–15). Figure [NaN] sets out Bhaskar's dialectical analysis.

Summarising this section, we might say that dialectical causality alludes to the potential inherent in generative contradictions to unfold and develop into various concrete contradictory forms (Albritton [ 1 ] : 237). Of course, all of this perhaps sounds somewhat abstract. Therefore, in order to see how the discussion made so far can be usefully employed in realist empirical studies we return once again to qualitative research. In particular, three common criticisms of critical realism are presented: that critical realists cannot adequately abstract social structures in research; that critical realism is too value-laden in

relation to qualitative research; and that critical realist methodology often finds it difficult to take account of everyday dilemmas that people face.

### Abstracting Social Structures

A common rebuke to critical realism suggests that in order to explain a particular social structure, critical realists must first draw on their existing knowledge about the social structure in question. After all, critical realists argue it is necessary to devise hypotheses about the existence of possible structures that will in turn help to explain the interaction of observable components of a concrete event in an open system and such hypotheses are obtained through knowledge already held about structures. "That is to say", announce Kemp and Holmwood "an event is to be explained using existing knowledge of structures, their causal influence and the conditions of their exercise" (Kemp and Holmwood [ 42 ] : 169). For Kemp and Holmwood this is problematic because it means that critical realists rely on a priori information about how structures operate in an open system. Moreover, the common claim made by critical realists that the social world is "open" implies that a number of researchers can follow a realist methodology but still nevertheless produce competing causal accounts of the same social phenomenon. After all, a world which is essentially open will contain numerous causal mechanisms interacting with one another and it is this which can potentially lead to numerous structural accounts of the same social phenomenon.

Without doubt, dialectical critical realists can agree to a certain degree with Kemp and Holmwood's claim that critical realists work with existing knowledge of structures. But dialectical critical realists argue that this is only pre-existing knowledge concerning the determinants of a historical totality but not knowledge about a specific set of concrete structures and causal mechanisms operating in a particular social context. To gain knowledge about the latter set of concrete causal mechanisms obviously requires detailed empirical investigation, which will be explained in more detail below and in the sections that follow. But what can be suggested for now is that dialectical explanation seeks to combine an analysis of concrete "open systems" with abstract "closed systems" (totalities, in Bhaskar's later language) by arguing that even contingent concrete forms refract a higher level contradictory essence in its own unique manner. If this is the case then we can say that the "regularity" associated with, say, the capitalist mode of production at a high level of abstraction, reproduces patterns of dialectical connection at lower of abstraction, but which nevertheless require detailed investigation.

The advantage of working in this way is that one overcomes the impractical dualism between structure and history evident in much critical realist writing and research. So, by abstracting various contradictory causal powers inside a concrete setting one should focus on how these are also refractions of other contradictory causal powers in a historical totality. Naturally, what is important in this research manoeuvre is to ensure that one's abstractions are sufficiently wide enough to capture the movement of refraction (Ollman [ 60 ] ). Yet, this methodological point is often missing from a non-dialectical critical realist research. As a result the social structures abstracted lack historical ontological depth and subsequently become vulnerable to the sort of critique offered up by Kemp and Holmwood. And without recognising that a concrete object is a refracted moment of a historical totality there is more chance that completely different competing structural explanations of the same phenomenon might be presented by other researchers.

An example of what is at stake can be found in Leca and Naccache's critical realist approach to institutional entrepreneurship. They abstract what they consider to be the main causal powers of institutions. These

causal powers are the underlying logics that supply principles of organisation and legitimacy to concrete institutions and include structures of measurement like accountancy (Leca and Naccache [ 44 ] : 632). Causal powers associated with institutional measurement therefore include: using numbers to bring into existence some activity that did not previously exist; bringing to bear a “scientific” outlook in an organisation based around “facts”; standardizing work activities in an organisation through accountancy; creating new markets; and legitimising new activity (Leca and Naccache [ 44 ] : 637–8). From a dialectical viewpoint, however, a number of critical observations can be made about this particular abstraction.

First, none of the causal powers identified by Leca and Naccache are contradictory. They might each deliver a number of strategic dilemmas but they are not contradictory in the sense that Bhaskar suggest insofar that they do not contain internal and necessary contradictions which are essential to their identity. This relates to the second observation, in that these causal mechanisms do not provide a sense of movement in their powers either from their past—where they emerged from—or from their future—the direction they might be heading. Historical movement operating at different levels of abstraction is therefore difficult to identify. Indeed, the causal powers which Leca and Naccache isolate only gain a sense of real relational movement in open concrete systems as they interact with one another. They thus become vulnerable to Kemp and Holmwood's criticism of realist structural explanations of open systems. Finally, the causal powers abstracted by Leca and Naccache are not necessarily connected through relational processes with one another. Instead, they are self-contained causal powers. This is not to deny that each causal power has relational properties. For instance, the causal power identified which stipulates that “measuring makes things commensurable, and it favours standardization” (Leca and Naccache [ 44 ] : 637) will certainly point towards different relational attributes, but this is a descriptive relational attribute rather than a necessary one pertaining to a historical totality. Leca and Naccache therefore seem to bracket out of the research framework those contradictory and historical relations and processes that are essential for social understanding (Ollman [ 60 ] : 102).

What might be the dialectical critical realist alternative explanation, or at least a supporting explanation, to that provided Leca and Naccache? At a relatively high level of dialectical abstraction it is plausible to suggest that capitalist organisations employ techniques of measurement in each activity they engage with so that they establish financial indicators in relation to external market value measures. But these then react back on organisations as an abstract and anonymous external competitive pressure (Harvie and Milburn [ 39 ] ). This “primary” generative contradiction is reproduced in new ways in particular historical phases of capitalism. In our current (geo-historical) neoliberal phase, public sector organisations are under increasing pressure to contract out their services to the private sector (synchronic contradictions). This in turn creates new spatio-temporal contradictory rhythms in particular empirical settings. Hospitals in the UK are a good example, especially since they represent a public service which has been subject to a remorseless onslaught of privatisation (see Leys and Player [ 46 ] ). In a particular hospital one might expect to find that these contradictory structural processes are reproduced in a number of empirical contexts. One such contradiction might be an increasing pressure for doctors to meet new measurement targets and to see more patients in less time in order to tackle increasing market pressures imposed by politicians on GP surgeries. A doctor in his or her daily working environment thus faces the contradiction of having to allocate less time to patients and more time to overseeing the daily business costs of running a surgery (Foot and Groleau [ 28 ] ).

In this relatively simple example measurement is empirically explored in relation to the reproduction of contradictory social relations at different levels of abstraction. At all time the abstraction being employed is wide enough to include knowledge about the historical specificity and relationships of refraction in the concrete empirical research context. This is to treat the research context as a self-contained (external) totality that nevertheless refracts the wider totality of which it is a part (cf. Bhaskar [ 9 ] : 125; [ 10 ] : 77). Taking this on board Paolucci ([ 63 ] : 116) usefully elaborates on possible qualitative research questions to pose in this sort of research setting:

What are the ongoing empirical regularities within the context in question?

What are the most essential structural relations in this context?

What structural relations account for specific empirical regularities?

What historical events account for the rise of this or that set of relations?

How have these empirical regularities and structural relations changed over time?

What are the primary causal forces of this change?

For some critics, however, critical realism is far too abstract and vague when it comes to trying to make value-judgements about empirical research contexts. Despite this worry, claim some opponents, critical realists nevertheless attempt to impose value-judgements on empirical contexts but in the process reproduce a biased viewpoint on the factual knowledge accumulated about the context in question. The next section explores this issue in more depth. Through dialectical critical realism we will see that a version of value-neutrality can be followed in qualitative research which at the same time suggests that concrete research contexts are mediated by, and refractions of, a wider historical totality.

### **Value-Neutrality in Empirical Research**

One role of the “critical” in critical realism is to suggest that value-laden explanatory models have to be constructed that can then criticise any misleading beliefs people hold about how particular causal mechanisms operate in open systems. For instance, Bhaskar ([ 11 ] : 171) argues that research should be guided by a desire to rid society of “unwanted determinations” (poverty, hunger, homelessness, and so forth). For critics, however, this represents a problematic element in critical realism's theoretical armoury. Real concrete situations are far too complex to be reduced to single values, or a fixed ranking of values. As Hammersley ([ 34 ] ) observes, when a particular research context is investigated there will always be a number of values that one can draw on to make several proscriptive arguments. As such, there will also always be reasonable disagreement amongst social scientists about a number of value principles which best fit the context being investigated. A better way forward is to see social science as simply trying to report about factual knowledge. Where rational agreement amongst relevant social scientists has not yet been achieved about the nature of a particular context then we must remain “neutral” as to our knowledge of the context in question. That is to say, we must not use a pre-existing framework, or pre-existing set of values, and simply impose this on a context in order to make sense of it (Hammersley [ 33 ] : 151). Instead, we must be open to disagreement and debate amongst social scientists about factual matters and value issues. On this understanding social scientists should merely report about the factual knowledge they

discover and then open this up to debate in the academic community as to its legitimacy (Hammersley [ 33 ] : 151). This “liberal model” of research is thus indebted to “the existence of conflicting views, and our inability to resolve many of these conflicts ...” (Hammersley [ 33 ] : 151).

But how might dialectical critical realism view this issue? From a dialectical perspective the liberal model of social research confuses different issues concerning the relationship between facts and values. Doyal and Harris ([ 25 ] : 173–174) suggest that values are usually associated with concrete judgements of moral worth made about certain actions and practices that stop human potential from flourishing. For example, if it is observed that a child is not being fed then it follows that morally speaking the child should be given food. Values are thus related to whether or not the satisfaction of needs is being met in certain historical circumstances based on the facts at hand. We must however be careful how we define “facts” in this instance. Facts tell us something “real” about our surrounding environment, yet they are also derived from conceptual schemes, discursive frameworks and theoretical paradigms that we hold about the world. “Facts then are real, but they are historically specific social realities” (Bhaskar [ 11 ] : 283; see also the relevant entries on these issues in Hartwig [ 38 ] ). [ 2 ] Dialectical critical realism develops and extends these earlier critical realist arguments by embedding them in the need to understand historically specific totalities and their contradictions.

But if it is indeed the case that facts are mediated through historical totalities then it is imperative to discover how specific causal powers and causal relations associated with these totalities help to generate our knowledge of the world (Bhaskar [ 11 ] : 117). At an abstract level, for instance, capitalism is based purely on the profit motive and labour exploitation. Indifferent to human needs, this structural imperative maintains the superiority of profit over and above eradicating negative social practices like oppression, pollution, poverty, and so on (Albritton [ 2 ] : 44–45). These abstract properties of the totality of capitalism will be refracted in concrete settings at lower levels of abstraction and which includes their refraction into academic research practice from where academic knowledge is created.

Let us take a relatively simple example to illustrate this latter point. The UK is still dominated by a post-Thatcherite consensus associated with a move from a welfare state to a neoliberal workfare state. Under this neoliberal regime new modes of governance affect people in different ways, including social researchers working in universities. Most notably, since 1986 UK researchers have had to work within competitive research assessment frameworks and are increasingly being forced to engage with “public-private partnerships” to demonstrate “impact” of their research. Successive research assessment exercises therefore have changed the nature of how research is practiced in various ways. Research competition between universities and academics for limited funds has helped to justify removing some research funding from a number of departments who are then moved to gain resources from private funding bodies. A neoliberal policy agenda thus becomes normalised in everyday academic routines because higher education is seen as being just another market commodity (Elton [ 27 ] ; Lynch [ 48 ] ; Willmott [ 81 ] ). In turn, academic practice is mediated and affected by these changes. Conformity to a particular “research assessment” identity starts to take hold amongst many academics, not least in respect to the journals that academics will submit their research papers to. Higher ranked journals are often the preferred choice even if these might have a more conservative and mainstream outlook, while many lower ranked journals which are often more willing to take risks in what they publish struggle to attract papers (Gendron [ 31 ] ; Northcott and Linacre [ 58 ] ). Under these circumstances academic research becomes embroiled in wider neoliberal

governance mechanisms and exerts different contradictory pressures in the university environment, such as that between devoting time and effort to conducting research and devoting time and effort to teaching students.

What this relatively simple illustration also tells us is that a process of selection concerning the importance of what to study in an empirical project is invariably made before a research project begins. Prior expectations concerning the significance of areas to fund are almost impossible to disregard in these instances. Why for example is a research area attracting large amounts of funds at a particular point in time? To what extent is this because social or political agendas of research or government agencies? How are particular words and utterances like “academic autonomy” being used to support this agenda? How does this affect research practice? (see Doyal and Harris [ 25 ] : 5–7). On this score alone social research “is inherently and necessarily political” (Byrne [ 16 ] : 36; see also) and thus hardly “neutral” even in a “minimal” liberal sense of that term (cf. Hammersley [ 33 ] : 158). We therefore arrive at the relatively simple point: there is no such thing as “neutral” research as such because all research is at a minimum mediated through historically specific totalities at different levels of abstraction (see also Carter and New [ 19 ] ; Clegg [ 21 ] ; Roberts and Sanders [ 72 ] ).

None of the foregoing discussion commits one to any distinctive set of values like the pursuit of a particular set of wants and needs. All it does commit one to is the pursuit of “depth-explanations” that seek to gain knowledge about specific causal processes that affect the way we act and think (cf. Bhaskar [ 11 ] : 179). At the same time it demonstrates Hammersley ([ 33 ] : 39–40) is also wrong to insist that for critical realism and for Marxism every facet of social life can be reduced to one particular set of abstract principles. Instead, both critical realism and Marxism support the claim that we require a certain amount of knowledge about the abstract causal properties of a (contradictory) system (totality) in order to gain some critical awareness about how these basic processes operate and are reproduced at various levels into more concrete settings.

Naturally, it must be explained how truth-claims made about totalities and their refracted forms are obtained, for example as Marx does in his realist and materialist exploration of capitalism in *Capital*, but none of what is being argued for here is particularly controversial. Indeed, Max Weber, a sociological thinker who has greatly influenced Hammersley's own thinking (e.g., Hammersley [ 33 ] : 150), took great pains to work out the abstract principles of what he considered to be the ideal-typical model of modern systems. These abstract principles then guided Weber's more concrete analysis of modernity. In spite of this one might still argue that much which goes under dialectical critical realist umbrella is still far too abstract to make sense of everyday dilemmas that respondents might speak about to qualitative researchers. It is to this final criticism that we now turn.

### **Concrete Dilemmas in Empirical Research**

Sayer ([ 75 ] : 165–168) argues that critical realism has not always been useful in advancing a normative theory to take account of the complexities of everyday life. For example, people's needs are often complex and contested and they face everyday dilemmas in their lives when they have to make choices and decisions about issues they face during actual empirical events. When a person thinks about such dilemmas they will start to reason over commonly held beliefs and sift over the different reasons why they should make certain choices in response to the dilemmas at hand (Billig et al. [ 13 ] : 16). In these circumstances abstract normative statements made by some critical realists often fail to capture the

complex nature of dilemmas at play in people's lives.

Sayer's observations are well made but what he does not do in making them is to take stock of the dialectical version of realism. Two responses can therefore be made from the perspective of a dialectical and materialist methodology. First, Sayer is correct to identify problems with a realist methodology guided by abstract normative principles when conducting empirical research. Arguably, however, most researchers would not want to simply impose such abstract normative principles on their empirical research study. Indeed, a dialectical and materialist approach would see such practices as an anathema to empirical research. Dialectical critical realism, and dialectical social theory at least in its Marxist guise, argues that empirical qualitative research should always endeavour to analyse the specific mechanisms at play in a concrete research setting. But it must also do more than this. Qualitative research should try to discover the contradictory causal powers at play in a concrete setting and how these contradictory powers are being regulated, or not as the case may be, by various structural and strategic relations therein. In other words, refracted concrete research settings are the medium through which a variety of contradictory social relations and regulatory mechanisms organise the daily social experience of people (cf. Bakhtin and Medvedev [ 5 ] : 8–9). For this reason normative theories need to be grounded at both abstract and concrete levels (see Roberts [ 71 ] for an extended discussion on this point).

The second response argues that a dialectical and materialist theory is especially well equipped to explore everyday dilemmas through qualitative methods. Everyday dilemmas arise in part because commonsense beliefs contain conflicting themes and contradictory opinions. Billig ([ 12 ] : 143) thus observes: “Every attitude in favour of a position is also, implicitly but more often explicitly, a stance against a counter-position”. Often, these flower into arguments between individuals and groups if dilemmas intensify. However, this dilemmatic approach is compatible with the dialectical standpoint argued for here. Indeed, the two operate together. For example, the peculiar abstract capitalist contradiction between use-value and exchange-value operates at various concrete levels, including the everyday level in which people discuss dilemmas (see Sawchuk [ 78 ] ). Such contradictions create dilemmas for people, and through dilemmas people often become aware of contradictions. It is fairly easy to appreciate, then, how dilemmas can be seen to refract the real contradictions of a historical system in a manner set out by dialectical critical realism. But once this much is acknowledged we gain a different vantage point to think about qualitative research methods.

Think momentarily one more time about qualitative research interviews. From a critical realist perspective an important aim of the research interview is to ensure that a respondent gains awareness of the causal mechanisms affecting a context under investigation. This level of awareness is based further around the respondent reflecting on how they “reason” about a particular context and what resources they feel will enable or constrain them to act in particular ways in the very same context (Pawson [ 64 ] : 306; see also Maxwell [ 54 ] : 101). Dialectical critical realism builds on this approach to qualitative interviews but then develops it to elicit a reflexive mode of understanding on the part of the respondent towards the contradictory and historical form of the context under investigation. Admittedly, to gain this level of reflexivity takes time and often revolves around different but interrelated interview sessions. One interview session might contain questions that seek to explore a respondent's immediate activity in the context under investigation, whereas another interview session might examine a respondent's life history in order to place their immediate activity in wider ongoing processes over time. These interview sessions could be ongoing

over days or weeks and be combined with ethnographic observation (Livingstone and Sawchuk [ 47 ] : 24–25). Proceeding thus enables a continual critical reflexivity to develop of the ideologies and truth-claims embedded in commonsense beliefs circulating the research context.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show how Bhaskar's use of dialectics with the help of Marxism alters the research strategy of critical realism in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates the need to abstract causal powers through dialectical connections and contradictions that inhere in various interconnected totalities. Second, historical analysis becomes a key moment in this dialectical procedure in a way that overcomes a common although unhelpful dualism in critical realist thinking between structures in closed systems and contingent mechanisms in contingent historical events. Dialectical critical realism rejects a theory of history in which multiple structures and their mechanisms are only influenced by concrete historical processes in open systems. History in this schema operates at a concrete level and therefore remains separate to the “closed” world of causal mechanisms. From a dialectical viewpoint this problematically views society as being essentially divided and fragmented into different causal mechanisms which only make contact with one another at concrete events. Dialectics teaches us that while causal mechanisms obviously can and do operate in this way society is still nevertheless an interconnected historical totality so that concrete events are themselves moments of this totality.

Third, Bhaskar's later dialectical work reorients how causal mechanisms should be conceptualised. It now becomes possible, for example, to think about mechanisms as being moments of dialectical connections in totalities and moments of specific dialectical contradictions. That is to say, mechanisms can be theorised as being dialectical and contradictory, and this changes the methodological focus of how we think about mechanisms in social research in a way which at least provides some plausible rebuttals to critics. Bhaskar's later dialectical work thus leaves us with a way of rethinking critical realism in a manner that dialecticises mechanisms in relation to history.

Finally, the dialectical position argued for in this paper recasts debates about the relationship between parts and wholes. In many social theories parts and wholes are conceptualised as separate entities that nonetheless come together in an assortment of guises. Dialectics, however, teaches us that wholes gain their identity through their parts, and that parts come into being through wholes. This holds true for both the social and natural worlds (Lewontin and Levins [ 45 ] : 132). Bhaskar's later work is indebted to this broad dialectical position and the remit of this paper has been to argue that it holds many benefits for critical realist scholars in relation to qualitative empirical research.

## Footnotes

*1 Norrie (57) has recently provided an excellent discussion of Bhaskar's dialectical work but he does not enquire into how dialectical critical realism might be used in qualitative research.*

*2 Similarly, “needs” are a historical product which alter and change their form through time. The “need” for food and shelter is obviously different today than, say, a hundred years ago (see Sayers 76).*

*3 I would like to thank the referees for their comments. The normal disclaimers apply.*

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Graph: The critical realist method of abstraction. Adapted from Sayer (74: 141).

Graph: Dialectical refractions.

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By John Michael Roberts

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