Is there such a thing as critical realist research reflexivity? Yes, and no

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Critical realism: Core definitions and ideas

Position: A philosophy of science between positivism and constructivism.

‘Critical realism situates itself as an alternative paradigm both to scientistic forms of positivism concerned with regularities, regression-based variables models, and the quest for law-like forms; and also to the strong interpretivist or postmodern turn which denied explanation in favor of interpretation, with a focus on hermeneutics and description at the cost of causation’ (Archer et al., 2016, p. 4)

‘Critical realism is not an empirical program; it is not a methodology; it is not even truly a theory, because it explains nothing. It is, rather, *a meta-theoretical position*: a reflexive philosophical stance concerned with providing a philosophically informed account of science and social science which can in turn inform our empirical investigations’ (Archer et al., 2016, p. 4, emphasis added).

Four tenets:

1. Ontological realism: Reality is 'mind'-independent, 'non-coterminous with us' (Bhaskar, 2011, p. 141).

'Ontological realism asserts that much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness of knowledge of it' (Archer et al., 2016, p. 4).

'Critical realists maintain that there is a reality that exists largely independently of our experience of it' (Moore & Kelly, 2024, p. 2).

'Society … is an ensemble of positioned practices and networked interrelationships which individuals never create but in their practical activity always presuppose, and in so doing everywhere reproduce and transform. *On this approach, while social structures are dependent upon the consciousness which the agents who reproduce or transform them have, they are not reducible to this consciousness*' (Bhaskar, 2011, p. 3, emphasis added).

Critical realists are concerned with positing and proving that there are causal mechanisms behind both the entities and the relations between entities that constitute the observable world (Sayer, 2000). What we encounter in both the physical and the social worlds, from regularities to facts to events, can be understood by positing and explaining, always fallibly, the 'complex, layered and contingent processes or structures' (Archer et al., 2016, p. 6) that cause them.

2. Epistemological relativism (and methodological eclecticism): That reality is knowable does not imply that there is one, only one, way, or set of ways, to know it. That reality is knowable also does not imply that our knowledge of it is infallible.

‘ … [F]or realists, the world possesses real entities that exists and have causal impact, despite our observations and interpretations of them, and that the pursuit of these objective entities will always result in fallible or partial knowledge’ (Downey et al., 2024, p. 2).

Critical realism accepts that our apprehensions of reality are necessarily and indisputably limited by the fundamental relativity of our experiences of it (Sayer, 2000). Methodologically mediated and socially constructed, our accounts of the social world cannot offer direct or infallible mirrors of ontological reality (Graeber, 2015).

‘There is no way of knowing the world except under particular, more or less historically transient descriptions. Our accounts are fallible, and while realism entails a commitment to truth, there are no truth values or criteria of rationality that exist outside of historical time’ (Archer et al., 2016, p. 6).

3. Judgmental rationality: That reality is variously apprehended, made knowable and known, does not imply that all accounts are equally true, that it is impossible to decide that one or more accounts are better than the others.

'… critical realism's epistemological relativism does not lead to judgmental relativism, or the belief that, because our efforts to grasp reality are inherently fallible, we cannot adjudicate between competing accounts' (Moore & Kelly, 2024, p. 2).

If knowledge operates along two dimensions in the critical realist sense – the transitive (e.g. discourses, subjectivities and other such contestable, changeable and fallibly interpretable objects of thoughts) and the intransitive (i.e. the underlying structures and causal mechanisms posited to explain the relatively stable entities of reality), then the pursuit of the latter in particular demands the exercise of judgment. In the words of Archer et al. (2016), 'we are able to, and required to, adjudicate between rival or competing accounts, and there are often relatively objective reasons for affirming one model over another' (p. 6).

Critical realism's project of judgmental rationality, 'the greater explanatory power criterion' (Isaksen, 2016, p. 253), remains under-realised, if not under-valued. The question of how to judge between competing accounts is fraught with theoretical, methodological and, crucially, ethical complexities.

4. Axiological criticality: We can, and should, change reality, and it is possible for reality to become (more) socially just.

Two aspects of axiological criticality stand out within critical realism. The first is the presupposition that values are fact-laden, rather than merely facts being value-laden. This implies that there is a factual element to values, grounding them in ontological accounts of reality, such as accounts of personhood and social relations. Consequently, values are empirically investigable, making it possible to differentiate between values that are essential for fostering better, more socially just societies and those that are not (see Archer et al., 2016). However, this remains a point of contention amongst critical realists.

The second aspect of axiological criticality, well-connected to the first, is captured by Wright (2011), who notes that critical realism is ‘critical of social structures and practices which produce or perpetuate suffering or other social ills, including those which are caused by the circulation of false or inadequate accounts of reality’ (p. 161).

Critical realism: Methodological operationalisation

Aim: Rather than merely describing or reporting the regularities of events or phenomena under investigation, the goal is to be guided by generative causation to explain why events or phenomena happen by identifying their underlying causal mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2000). ‘Generative’ here means non-linear, non-deterministic, non-successionist. In other words, the inherent complexity of the real world demands the positing of causal mechanisms that, whilst possessing explanatory power, remain open to contestation, and open to change – mechanisms operate in societies, which are, by definition, open systems, and their effects depend on context.

A typical critical realist research process (see Danermark et al., 2002):

1. Identify and describe the event or phenomenon under investigation, breaking it down into its components using the depth ontology model (Think of this model – illustrated in the adjacent figure – as an analytical toolkit), also referred to as the critical realist social ontology of reality (see Bhaskar, 2008). This process of describing the event or phenomenon involves recognising and operationalising critical realism's epistemological relativism, meaning that critical realism in research practice is methodologically eclectic (method-pluralist). Case studies, interviews, ethnography, surveys and mixed methods are all utilised, with the specific method chosen to fit the object of study and the underlying mechanisms sought (Sayer, 2000; Zachariadis et al., 2013).

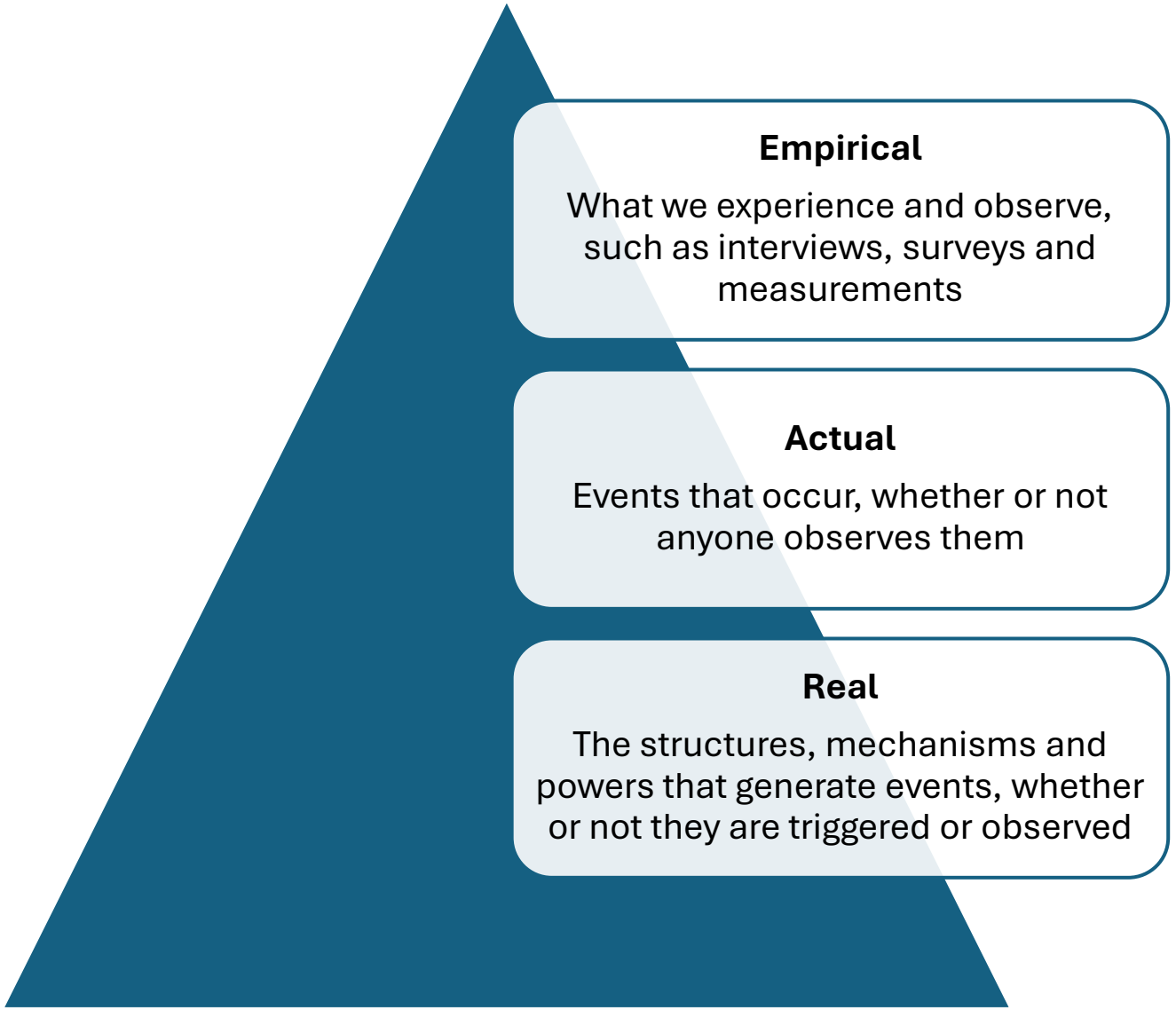


Figure 1. Bhaskar's (2008) social ontology of reality

2. Moving from the empirical to the actual to the real, redescribe the event or phenomenon under investigation theoretically. This is referred to as *abduction* in terms of the logic of inquiry. Next, retroduce it by asking yourself: What must exist for this, the event or phenomenon, to be possible? (Bhaskar, 1998; Danermark et al., 2002). In more theoretical terms, ask what structures and causal mechanisms existing on the real level of reality could be posited to explain the demi-regularities or 'apparent uniformities' (Pawson, 2013, p. 9) of the event or phenomenon – i.e. its relative stability as a thing, or an assortment of things, on the upper actual and empirical levels of reality. In doing so, you are not just looking at the event or phenomenon itself, but also at its context(s), as the identified causal mechanisms are theorised to lead to certain outcomes (empirical possibilities of the event or phenomenon) when situated within particular contexts (or conditions of contextualisation) (Easton, 2010; Fletcher, 2017; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wynn & Williams, 2012). *Retroduction* demands judgmental rationality.

3. Explain the causal mechanisms posited/retroduced, explicitly considering competing rival accounts (and, if possible, alternative candidate mechanisms). While retroductively derived explanations must be empirically grounded and theoretically robust, they remain inherently fallible, not least due to their context-sensitivity in open systems and even when they reflect the legitimate application of the researcher’s judgmental rationality.

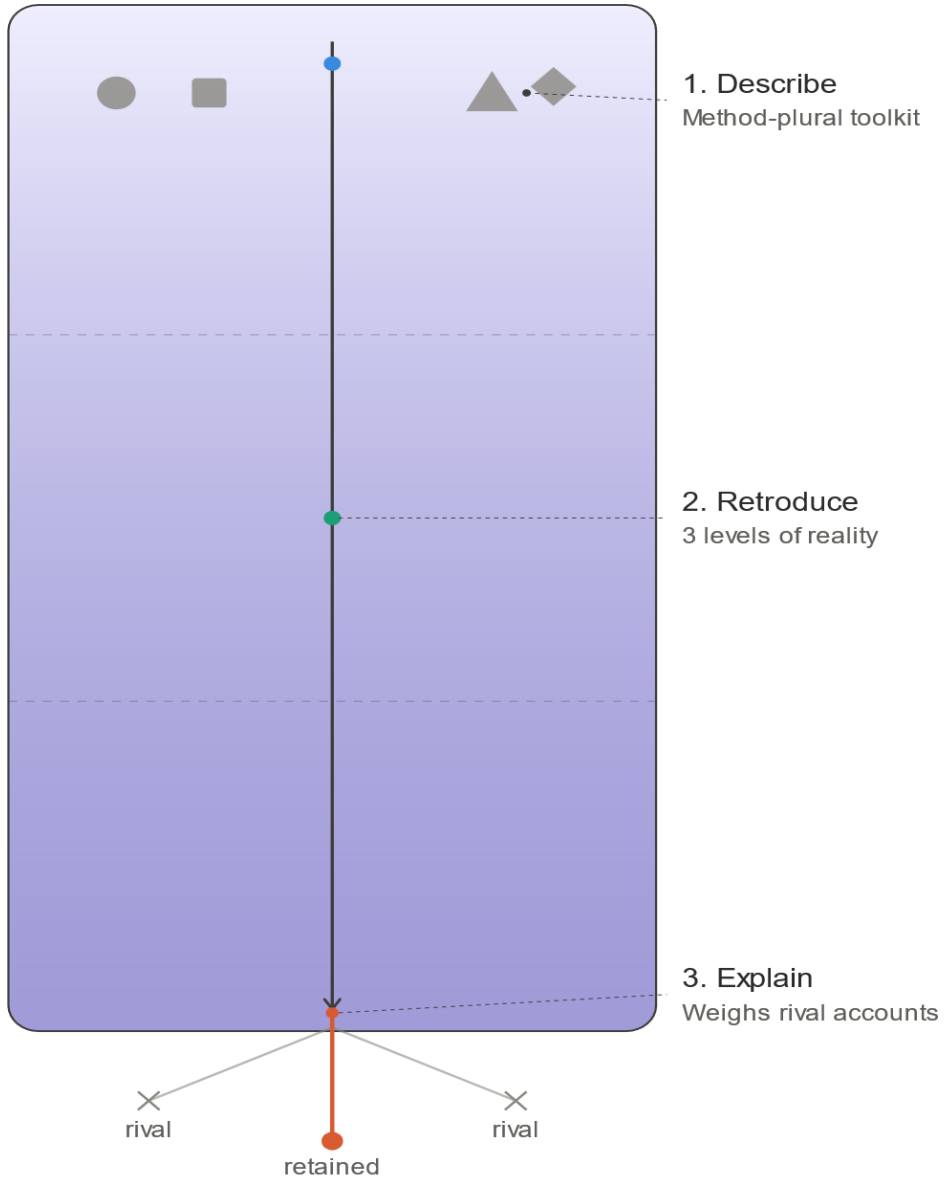


Figure 2. A Claude-generated gradient column that translates Danermark et al.'s (2002) critical realist research process: The light purple surface is the empirical, deepening to the actual and darkest at the real. The scattered grey shapes at the top mark the method-plural toolkit used to describe the phenomenon (step 1); the vertical arrow is the abductive/retroductive move down through the levels (step 2); and the branching point at the bottom shows candidate mechanisms fanning out, with two greyed rivals crossed out and the retained explanation highlighted in coral (step 3).

Reflexivity in research practice

What is reflexivity in research practice, to begin with? Some definitions:

‘Reflexivity, then, can be understood in a multitude of ways according to the aims and functions of the exercise at stake and the theoretical or methodological traditions embraced. In terms of aims, reflexivity can be understood as *a confessional account of methodology* or as examining one’s own person-al, possibly unconscious, reactions. It can mean exploring the dynamics of the researcher–researched relationship … The functions of reflexivity shift from employing it to offer an account of the research to situating the researcher and voicing difference; from using reflexivity to interpret and understand in terms of data analysis to attending to broader political dimensions when presenting material’ (Finlay, 2002, p. 224, emphasis added).

‘Reflexivity, broadly defined, means *a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference*. In the context of social research, reflexivity as its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research’ (Davies, 2008, p. 4, emphasis added).

‘[Reflexivity] means *turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself* to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective’ (Berger, 2015, p. 220, emphasis added).

‘Reflexivity is a skill that we develop as counsellors: an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive, we need to be *aware* of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world’ (Etherington, 2004, pp. 19-20, emphasis in original).

‘The whole idea of reflexivity, as we see it, is the very ability to break away from a frame of reference and to look at what it is *not* capable of saying’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 327, emphasis in original).

‘Self-reflexivity refers to the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers’ interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene … The mind and body of a qualitative researcher literally serve as research instruments – absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world through observation, participation, and interviewing. These are the *analytical resources of our own “subjectivity.”* Of course, our bodies and minds also live in a context’ (Tracy, 2020, pp. 2-3, emphasis added).

‘Questions of reflexivity ask us to consider who we should listen to and why, how to place actors’ ideas in a larger field of power, questions about our own relationship to actors’ theories of the world. Reflexivity asks us to approach our work with *epistemological unease* because we are always at risk of reproducing categories that reify power. For scholars of gender and sexuality, questions of reflexivity loom especially large because our research programs are often rooted in feminist commitments that seek to unseat conventional theories of power and identity’ (Sweet, 2020, p. 924, emphasis added).

‘Engaging in reflexivity can help to reveal the positionality and identity of researchers in relation to the world around them. Reflexive researchers are more able to involve other perspectives in their work - not just as a consultation exercise with a predefined conclusion, but as a genuine collaboration with the potential to transform research practice, values, and institutions. *Collective reflexivity* has the potential for broadening the conversation, helping individual members work together productively, and reducing the risk of dismissing inconvenient findings in the search for parsimonious theory. Greater awareness of our own tendencies enables further interdisciplinary reflexivity to take place’ (Downey et al., 2024, p. 4, emphasis added).

Critical realist reflexivity in research practice

In surveying and synthesising the literature on what it means to be reflexive in research practice from a critical realist perspective, I have found that scholars and researchers commonly take as their starting point Margaret Archer's critical realist theorisation of the self and identity. Within this theorisation, reflexivity is not exclusive to researchers but is understood as a fundamental human capacity for internal dialogue: the 'mental commentary which always precedes, accompanies and reflects upon our actions' (Archer, 2000, p. 319). **Although not explicitly articulated in these terms in the literature, I suggest that critical realist scholars and researchers have largely conceptualised reflexivity as an ongoing, self-aware internal commentary on research as the particular form of action under consideration.** My analysis of this literature has led me to identify and categorise three dimensions of reflexive practice: pre-action, intra-action and post-action reflexivity. I argue that, insofar as retroduction is concerned, intra- and post-action reflexivity exhibit the clearest characteristics of a distinctively critical realist approach. Beyond their relationship to retroduction, however, accounts of reflexivity during and after the research process appear to possess few characteristics that distinguish them from reflexive practices associated with other philosophical and methodological traditions. **Nevertheless, I contend that it is in pre-action reflexivity, before the research undertaking itself, that researchers have the greatest scope to engage in a form of reflexive practice that is distinctively critical realist.**

Intra- and post-action reflexivity:

Example 1: Reflexivity as pertinent to strengthening validity in realist evaluation, defined as the plausibility of research accounts (causal mechanisms + attendant theories) to explain the state of affairs of the phenomenon or event under investigation

Table 1. The Specific Realist Perspectives on Various Aspects of Validity (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019; Zachariadis et al., 2013).

Validity category	Qualitative labels	Quantitative labels	Realist perspective
Design validity	Descriptive validity Credibility Transferability	Internal validity External validity	Empirical events are a manifestation of unobservable mechanisms. The need to separate and scrutinise each aspect of theory is essential. The work must consider the accuracy of the data generated and execution of the research
Measurement validity	Theoretical validity Dependability Consistency Plausibility	Reliability Construct validity	The work should measure intended mechanisms and their link to outcomes. Legitimacy of claims can be enhanced by employing realist consistent theoretical frameworks and testing theory in partially closed scenarios
Inferential validity	Interpretive validity Confirmability	Statistical conclusion validity	Statistics can provide useful patterns of data, but they are merely descriptions of relationships. There is a need to consider how to ensure interpretations reflect the perceptions and experiences of respondents

(Downey et al., 2024, p. 5)

'As the work relies on the investigator's appraisal of relative threats to validity, the process of seeking out rival explanations requires an increased awareness of self, audit trail of decisions, and a process to examine how interpretations of data were made - which makes reflexivity a fundamental practice to enhance the quality of a realist evaluation' (Downey et al., 2024, pp. 4-5).

Example 2: Reflexivity, a structured and frequent reflective activity, aimed at refining the researcher's judgmental rationality

Table 2. A Structured Reflexive Matrix Informed by Rae and Green (2016) to Guide the Phases of a Realist Evaluation.

Position	Overall social space	Within field of specialists	Within academia
Pre-research	How do researchers' broader motivations affect the reason to conduct research in the first place, the choice of topic and research question, and the choice of methodology?	What is the relationship between the researcher and the field? How is the topic relevant to field?	Where do the researchers' interests/ conflicts exist in relation to the act of carrying out the research, literature review, and interpretation of the literature/data?
Data collection	What are the shared and divergent understandings between the researcher and those impacted by the research topic? To what extent are these understandings related to social differences (e.g., gender, education, experience)? Is the researcher prepared to undergo change as a result of interaction with the research?	Do the researcher and participants share the same language? Are there any power differentials between the researcher and the participant, based on positions held (present and past), discipline, or education?	Are data collection strategies inadvertently shaped by popular (perhaps fleeting) scholarly opinion?
Data analysis	How are societal assumptions relevant during the interpretation of findings? How does the social world shape the adjudication and elimination of competing theories?	How does the researcher's experience with the field shape the analysis? Are some data dismissed as being commonplace when they may warrant deeper interrogation? Where does analytical authority reside?	How do the researchers moderate the role of academia on the analytical process? Could any drive for timely outputs or specific conclusions produce omissions or inadvertent fabrications?

(Downey et al., 2024, p. 6)

'Theoretical explanations are fallible, and some dimensions are excluded that may be ripe for further exploration. *Structured and frequent reflexivity* was helpful in recognising unexamined decisions, surfacing such limitations, and enabling more informed choices between substantive theories' (Downey et al., 2024, p. 5, emphasis added).

Example 3: Reflexivity as multiple and interconnected mental commentaries, collectively comprising the researcher's internal dialogue

Five dimensions of critical realist research reflexivity (Moore & Kelly, 2024)

Dimension	Definition	Example questions to apply it
Retroductive reflexivity	Asking ontological questions about causal explanation: what must the world be like for this to occur? Used when reviewing literature, analyzing data, and ideally with participants.	• *What must the world be like for this to occur?* • *What does the existence of this object/practice presuppose? What are its preconditions?* • *What is it about this object which enables it to do certain things?*
Epistemological reflexivity	Scrutinizing our disciplinary and conceptual resources, participants' common-sense categories, and how we are implicated in the study we designed.	• *How does my multifaceted identity influence my evolving understanding, and am I open to surprise and how my initial assumptions might be wrong?* • *How does my emotional investment in the topic shape how I interact with various participants?* • *How might my affective reactions and those of participants serve as an important source of potential insight?*
Evidentiary reflexivity	Generating data that let us develop and test emerging understandings, while remembering we might be wrong or only have partial understanding.	• *Can the evidence presented be interpreted in another way? How?* • *What difference might an alternative interpretation make?*
Ethical reflexivity	Thinking through the consequences of the many choices made while designing, conducting, and evaluating a project.	• *Why am I doing the research? For whose benefit?* • *Do I see participants as a source of data, as experts on their lives, or as research collaborators?* • *How do I negotiate interviewer-interviewee power differentials?* • *In interpreting my data, what tensions arise as I (perhaps implicitly) speak for or about participants?*
Political reflexivity	Attending to the dynamics of power in an inescapably value-laden study: relations with informants, the politics of interpretation and representation, and the consequences of our claims.	• *What are my values as compared to the values of my interviewees, and how are these shaping the interview?* • *What kind of politics is promoted by my study? What kind of action or inaction does it encourage?* • *Does the written account support or marginalize a particular group? With what potential consequences?*

Pre-action reflexivity:

Example: Reflexivity as retroduction turned back on the researcher's own internal conversation

Defining and dovetailing one's	Developing concrete courses of action	Establishing satisfying sustainable
CONCERNS ▶▶▶	**PROJECTS** ▶▶▶	**PRACTICES**
(Internal goods)	(Micro-politics)	(*Modus vivendi*)

Figure 3 Internal conversation and pursuit of the good life

(Archer, 2007, p. 89)

Table 1: Modes of reflexivity

Communicative reflexives:	Those whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action.
Autonomous reflexives:	Those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action.
Meta-reflexives:	Those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society.
Fractured reflexives:	Those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action.

(Archer, 2007, p. 93)

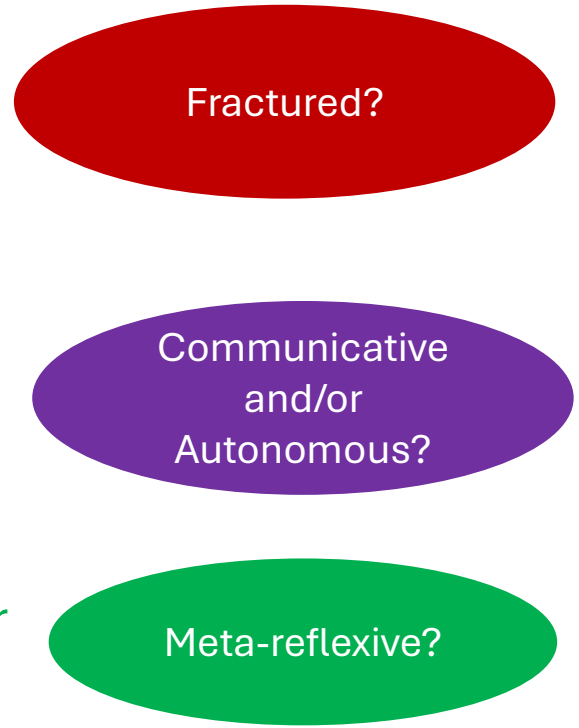
'Using the work and life histories of a group of Sri Lankan women, I use Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach [and four reflexive modalities] to show how investigating reflexivity can provide greater insights into the subtleties associated with [Sri Lankan] women's agency in relation to how they consciously (but fallibly) organize their life journeys and react to oppression, demonstrate resistance and effect emancipation' (Wimalasena, 2017, p. 383).

I utilised these reflexive modalities in my PhD project (see Kaissi, 2020) to investigate the nuanced dynamics of agency and structure (enablements and constraints) experienced by gender and education scholars and researchers working on masculinities – in four nations (UK, USA, Australia and Canada).

Although Archer's four modalities of reflexivity are most commonly used to analyse the reflexivities of others, of research subjects and participants, it is very much possible to turn this typology inward, to use it as a tool to critically evaluate your own researcher reflexivity and practice.

Aside from these external factors, intellectual obstacles have also played a significant role in hindering progress towards determining the proper role of values in social research. Indeed, the issue is a complex one, not least because it is bound up with several other equally difficult philosophical and practical matters (see Proctor 1991; Kincaid et al 2007). These include views about truth, and specifically about what sorts of knowledge of social phenomena are possible; as well as questions about whether academic research should be concerned with building up disciplinary knowledge or providing quantitative facts and/or illuminating 'thick' descriptions of particular cases; and about whether it ought to be designed to serve the needs or wants of 'users' – policymakers, political activists, occupational practitioners of various kinds, or citizens generally. Furthermore, what are involved here are not just matters of principle but also practical questions of feasibility and motivation. For example, to what extent can social scientists focus exclusively on contributing to disciplinary knowledge or providing ethnographic descriptions, given that they need resources, including time, to carry out this work, and that the availability of these resources has become increasingly tied to demands for demonstrable 'impact' on policy or practice? Equally important, many people become social scientists because they want to bring about some sort of practical or socio-political change; for them, making a contribution to academic knowledge, of whatever kind, may seem insufficient.

(Hammersley, 2017, para. 2.2)



In adopting and applying a specific reflexive modality, the researcher remains constantly aware of *the fallibility of their own reflexive practice*. They recognise that, within their work and the context in which they labour, certain causal mechanisms impact their research from multiple directions, both philosophical and practical.

Q&A

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