

Critical Realism and Case Study Strategy in Entrepreneurship Research

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Abstract

Case study is one of the most popular research strategies among the adherents of entrepreneurship. However, it is questioned in terms of the philosophy being used. This paper proposes Bhaskar's critical realism as a coherent and a novel philosophical position that substantiates case studies to examine richer contextual phenomenon. Therefore, the compatibility of case studies with critical realist philosophy is argued. Further, the paper sets the scene for a discussion; the need of critical realism based entrepreneurship research. Realising entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon, it is argued that critical realism assists to contextualise research. Contextualisation even more facilitated as it favours a wide array of research methods to intervene the social world. However, critical realism cannot prove to be the right answer, its use depends on the researcher's acceptance of its basis assumptions.

Keywords: Case Study, Critical Realism, Entrepreneurship Research

Introduction

Case study research is, perhaps, the most wanted research strategy among the adherents of entrepreneurship. This may be, partially due to the nature of the inquiry of entrepreneurship. There is no argument, entrepreneurship as a discipline is inevitably a social phenomenon (Steyaert, 2007) and therefore, research denying positivist stance may be useful. The main units of analysis of entrepreneurship research; entrepreneurial ventures and relationships, are relatively difficult to access. Therefore, a case study of a single, or a small number of entities may provide a great deal of, largely qualitative, rich insights of a phenomenon.

It is important to note that many case study researchers do not seem to realise that their case study method assumes a positivist stance (Easton, 2010) and it may impede the richness of the outcome. In such a situation, the reliability of a positivist case analysis is questionable. There are reasons to bring upon claiming that positivism is not the answer to

case study research method. One such reason is, positivist's belief of existence of law-like generalisations or regularities (Easton, 2010) that provide a basis for predictions. This tend positivists to make causal statements, assuming occurrence of a regularity precedes to another. In contrast, researchers employ an interpretivist approach to defend these arguments. Interpretivists' deny discerning of causality and the outcome is based on subjective interpretations. However, interpretivist approach lack in "what standards one interpretation is judged to be better than another" (Easton, 2010, p. 118).

In this paper we argue critical realism as a philosophical lens a way forward in entrepreneurship research reinforcing the idea that, case studies within the critical realist philosophy may be a nuanced understanding. Simply, critical realism holds both the premises of ontological and epistemological concerns. It assumes the existence of an independent real world "out there", also, setting out the propositions for social construction (epistemology). This is Bhaskar's

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(1975) philosophy of science which reinforced the idea that universe, as well as the social world, is a stratified and open system of emergent entities. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Setting the scene, the article begins with a discussion of critical realism and its tenets. Then it bridges critical realism with case study research. Finally, the paper concludes with a thought; the importance of a critical realist stance in case study strategy in entrepreneurship research.

Critical realism; what it is?

Critical realism is considered as an extension of positivist and interpretivist paradigm thoughts and therefore, it is important to recognise the basic tenets of them prior to articulate what critical realism is. The basic thought of positivist is that they assume physics as it model for science (Hammersley, 2013). *Physics per se*, reinforces its inferences from causal relationships. Therefore, the positivist idea based on the beliefs of physics believe that all *knowledge must be grounded* in sense experience that is subject to *methodical control* [emphasis added] (Hammersley, 2013, p. 23). This insisted all positivist to believe that all phenomenon require rigorous measurements, thus acknowledged the need of hypothesis testing to test experimental control of variables. According to Hammersley (2013), rigorous ‘methods’ mean ‘explicit procedures’, with the assumption that the conclusions arrived would be the same regardless of the variation of cultural, personal, social characteristics of the inquirer. This notion developed into as ‘procedural objectivity’ (Eisner, 1992). Therefore, positivist believed a principle that, knowledge produced is accurate and reliable, if it has not been influenced by the ‘subjectivity’ of the inquirer.

In contrast, the centrality to the interpretivist argument is the understanding of the social world ‘from the inside’ – through common experience, empathy and culture etc – rather than from the outside perspective in which positivists and empiricist argued (Hammersley, 2013). The key for interpretive argument is, the human behaviour is shaped by

cultures in which they live; and that peculiar orientations of culture will not only influence what people believe but also what people do. Therefore, the concern of the social scientists from the interpretive viewpoint document culturally shaped human behaviour along with sources and consequences (Hammersley, 2013). Furthermore, interpretivists argue the fact that there is a necessity to understand what and why people do, or why certain institutions exists and operate in certain ways. To do so, an idea about peoples’ interpretations about the world and how they act upon it is inevitable. Clearly, this view contradicts with positivists. However, with positivist and interpretivist thoughts, critical realism was emerged.

In its simplest form, critical realism merges a realist ontology with constructivist epistemology (Maxwell, 2012). Similarly, Hu (2018) added that critical realism’s key ontological and epistemological assumptions make it distinct from the traditional philosophical paradigms. In their work, O’Mahoney and Vincent (2014) added that, critical realism differentiates from the traditional positivist (empiricist) and social constructionist (interpretivist) paradigm thoughts.

In his seminal work, Bhaskar (1975) suggested a philosophy of science that reinforced the idea that the universe, as well as the social world, is a *stratified and open system of emergent entities* [emphasis in original] (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018, p. 202). The discussion of Bhaskar’s stratified ontology requires connotations of its principles, and thus Sayer’s (1992) work is identified as a useful inaugural point (See; Hunt, 2003). In his work, Sayer identified eight key assumptions of critical realism and following is the extract from his work.

1. The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
2. Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless knowledge is not immune to empirical check and its effectiveness in informing and explaining

successful material practice is not mere accident.

3. Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.
4. There is necessity in the world; objects—whether natural or social—necessarily have particular powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.
5. The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events.
6. Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept dependent. We not only have to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researchers' interpretation of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore applies to the social world. In view of 4–6, the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.
7. Science or the production of any kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely—though not exclusively—linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.
8. Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to

evaluate them critically (Sayer, 1992, p. 05).

Sayer's assumptions about critical realism imply that it captures both ontological and epistemological stances. For an instant, points 1, 4 and 5 set out the ontological position, assuming the belief of existence of an independent real world "out there". Furthermore, points 2, 3, 6, and 7 set out the propositions for social construction (epistemology). These contradictory views of ontology and epistemology, therefore, sets the principal tenet of critical realism (Easton, 2010; Maxwell, 2012). According to Easton (2010) "critical realists resolve this tension by arguing that the world is socially constructed but not entirely so" (p.120).

Entities, Powers and Systems

Bhaskar's (1975) philosophy of science which reinforced the idea that the universe, as well as the social world, is a *stratified and open system of emergent entities*, can be cleared by segregating its meaning into simple definitions – entities, powers, systems (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). Fleetwood (2005) identifies entities (objects) not merely as collections of parts, rather, as "anything" which makes a difference. Therefore, individuals, organizations, institutions are entities. It should be noted that entities and variables as two contrasting views. Sayer (1992) added that "the concept of variable that is used in quantitative analysis is an indifferent one as regards causal explanation: variables can only register (quantifiable) change, not its cause" (p.180). Therefore, realists explanation about entities/ objects entails primary nature and capacities of the "things" rather than measurable properties (i.e. variables) (Easton, 2010). Further, Blundel (2007) added the term structures to refer how an object is created. As a result of structure, objects constitutes certain causal powers (Blundel, 2007) and liabilities (Easton, 2010). Vincent and O'Mahoney (2018) added that causal powers depend on related properties of its parts. The causal powers possess capacities, potentials or

abilities to act in a particular way to reinforce activities (Lawson, 1997).

The term ‘mechanisms’ is used by critical realists when explaining how object’s causal powers are exercised (Blundel, 2007), in addition, mechanisms transform entities (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018). Bhaskar (1975) called mechanisms as ways of acting of things. Easton (2010) added that in explaining of causality it requires to identify entities and mechanisms that connects and combine events to cause. This is important, as change is often occurred when powers of entities interact with another (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018). For an example, organisations are acquired by other organizations. According to Blundel (2007) mechanisms reinforces phenomenon as well. However, causal powers are not automatically activated, rather, it subject to the availability of other conditions (i.e. the context). Similarly, as Sayer (2000, p. 58) has claimed, ‘a particular mechanism can produce completely different actions at different times, and inversely, the same event can have completely different causes’. Another possible implication is that same events can be the outcome of a completely dissimilar pattern of causes (Blundel, 2007). The central theme of critical realism is therefore, to differentiate these contingent relationships between mechanisms (Blundel, 2007).

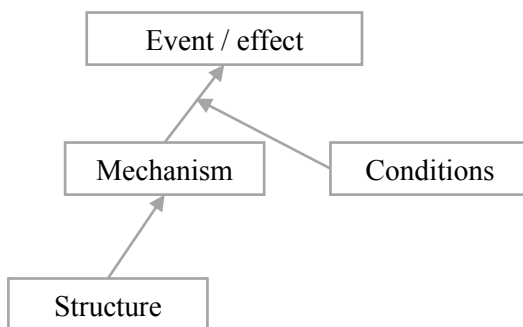


Figure 1: The critical realist view of causation

The Empirical, The Actual and The Real

The above explanation depicts how critical realism commit to ontological and

epistemological concerns. However, critical realism is yet more complicated. Citing Bhaskar’s (1975) work, Vincent and O’Mahoney (2018, p. 203) added that “*stratified* or ‘depth ontology’ makes a distinction between the ‘empirical’, the ‘actual’ and the ‘real’” [emphasis in original]. At first, the *empirical* level, “which is the realm of events as we experience them” (Fletcher, 2017, p. 183). Meanwhile, Vincent and O’Mahoney (2018, p. 204) added, “empirical is what we perceive to be the case”. At this level, objects are measured empirically using common sense. However, human interpretation and experience are often used to mediate these events. This is the level of reality where all the meanings, actions, decisions, occur – but most importantly, these events can be causal (Fletcher, 2017). The middle level, the *actual*, refer to events that happen with time and space. At this level, the events can be “different what we perceive to be the case” (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018, p. 204). Therefore, the actual level does not reinforce human experience. Events at the actual level occur whether we experience or interpret them or not, also these events are often different from what one observed at the empirical level (Danermark, 2002). At the final level, the *real*, discusses causal mechanisms or structures (Fletcher, 2017; Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018). Causal mechanisms or structures are the intrinsic properties of an object, that are causal forces to produce events. Therefore, the critical realists’ emphasis is to explain social events by means of causal mechanisms and the effects they can have throughout the empirical, the actual and the real levels (Fletcher, 2017).

Critical Realism and Case Study Strategy

A relatively new philosophical stance; critical realism, does favour both qualitative and quantitative methods (Easton, 2010; Zachariadis, Scott, & Barrett, 2013). However, Ackroyd (2000) argued that critical realists reject the positivist tradition and its associated quantitative methods; it favours only qualitative methods in understanding the social world. We argue that quantifying things is not practical in realist terms. (Sayer, 1992)

identified that invariant nature of an object as a precondition in measuring an object. Invariant nature refers to the ability of an object which can be broken up and remerged without destroying the meaning of it (Hu, 2018); however, this is impractical in realist terms. Therefore, it implies that critical realism favours qualitative research.

The largely stratified nature of critical realism has made the philosophy itself methodologically comprehensive. In their work, Edwards, O'Mahoney, and Vincent (2014) compiled a series of methodological options in relation to critical realism. That include, grounded theory (Kempster & Parry, 2014; Oliver, 2012), disclosure analysis (Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2014), interviewing (Smith & Elger, 2014), and case studies (Ackroyd, 2004; Easton, 2010; Hu, 2018). Given the extended nature of critical realist methodological options, it is important to select the most convincing method in examining the social reality. In this way of thinking, Sayer (2000) added that methodological choices depend on the nature of the object investigated and what the researcher wants to learn about it.

We argue that case study research fits well with critical realist philosophy. We propose Sayer (2000) categorisation of extensive and intensive research methods to confirm this notion. Sayer claimed that the former; extensive research methods, employ survey designs, questionnaire designs, and statistical analysis. He added that extensive research methods search for similarities, regularities and patterns and these methods restrict its ability of generalisability to other populations. The latter; intensive methods, favour contexts and agents within the context using qualitative analysis; interviews and ethnography. It seeks to answer the question; what produces change? (Easton, 2010). The change occurred by causal powers is a discussed precept in critical realism and therefore, the selection of a method may favour the ability to exhibit causal powers. As an intensive research method, case study supports the examination of causal powers and it is entirely consistent with critical realist philosophy (Easton, 2010).

Case study remains a very popular research strategy among management scholars. Provided its varied views, it is a very difficult question to answer, what a case study is. Creswell (2018) viewed case study as a strategy of inquiry, while Yin (2014) regarded it as a study of a case (or cases) within a real life, setting or a context. Similarly, Eisenhardt (1989) claimed it as a research strategy aiming to understand the dynamics of a single setting. However, in spite of recent critiques (see; Piekkari & Catherine, 2018), Yin and Eisenhardt's works regard as the most popular methodological authorities on management case research. Piekkari and Catherine (2018) argued that Yin and Eisenhardt's thoughts on case study research only favour positivist case studies. Piekkari and Catherine (2018) subsequently suggested Thomas's (2016) work provided it's holistic view of a case study. They argued Thomas's work as a way forward in critical realist philosophy while denying the positivist case approach. Thomas's definition of a case study includes;

“...analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems which are studied *holistically* by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will illuminate and explicate some analytical theme, or object” [emphasis added] (p. 23).

Our review in entrepreneurship literature indicates few case studies that have favoured critical realism. In reviewing the methodological concerns of a realist case study, Easton (2010), Wynn and Williams (2012), Hu (2018) and Zachariadis et al. (2013) provide important insights. Easton's considerations in commencing a realist case study were to recognise a phenomenon, boundaries of a phenomenon and research questions. Yin (2014) suggested that case studies are well suited for “why” and “how” questions. Easton (2010) added the importance of identifying objects/entities of the phenomenon after realising a research question. His thoughts of data collection of a critical realist case study were substantially open. He added that the choice of a data collection strategy will be governed by what is believed to be needed to develop plausible

causal mechanisms. He favoured semi-structured interviews over structured interviews for a critical realist case study. Thomas (2016) also complemented the use of semi-structured interviews in a critical realist study. Completion of data collection of a case study progresses to its interpretation. Easton (2010) claimed the need of an interpretivist appeal in interpreting findings. Also reinforcing interpretations between the empirical, the actual and the real levels, in which critical realist intend to understand may also provide valuable insights. In this way of thinking, Wynn and Williams (2012) and Zachariadis et al. (2013), Hu (2018) recognised the DREI methodology (Description of law-like behaviour, Retroduction using analogies to possible explanations of behavior, Elimination of alternative explanations, and empirically controlled identification of the causal mechanisms at work) as its fundamental basis on critical realist ideas. DREI methodology is a comprehensive explanation as to how findings of a critical realist case study may be interpreted (See; Hu, 2018).

Critical Realism and Entrepreneurship Research.

In this section we mention some important concerns that may be valuable for the adherents in entrepreneurship. Based on some themes, we argue that critical realism a useful platform for entrepreneurship research. Our prime concern is to raise the fact that critical realism assists to contextualise research. Given entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon (Steyaert, 2007), critical realism can be proposed as a paradigm thought to investigate contextual issues (Blundel, 2007).

Contextualising entrepreneurship research have called for much attention among the scholars. For an instant, research recognises the context in examining entrepreneurial action (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011; Ucbasaran, Westhead, & Wright, 2001) and actions are shaped by contextual variables (Zahra, Wright, & Abdelgawad, 2014). Further, contextualising entrepreneurship research reinforces creativity and novelty in

examining a phenomenon in a natural context, and critical realism provides a coherent frame for such investigations (Blundel, 2007).

Research on entrepreneurial action, for an instant, have given an emphasis to discovery or creation of entrepreneurial opportunities (Alvarez, Barney, McBride, & Wuebker, 2017) and thus, action is viewed as an act on the possibility that one has identified an opportunity worth pursuing. Opportunity discovery is an ontological perspective whereas creation is an epistemological view. Arguing that the concept of opportunity does not help to explain adequately the causes, processes and consequences of entrepreneurial action (Davidsson, 2015), interactions between entrepreneurs and their contexts would provide novel viewpoints. The interactions may be viewed as an agential relationship and thus, critical realism would be a frame for such an examination (Kitching & Rouse, 2017).

Critical realism is consistent with a number of quantitative and qualitative research methods (See; Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). In this way of thinking, critical realism provides a platform for entrepreneurship scholars to proceed through process oriented (qualitative methods) and variables oriented approaches (quantitative methods) (Blundel, 2007). The former refers to research methods based on stories and chronologies; the latter refers to methods such as configuration of data and pattern observations. Further, critical realist explanations of the empirical, the actual and the real levels are facilitated through these approaches.

Contextualising entrepreneurship research with these wide array of methods would enhance successful intervention with the social world. Critical realists seek explanations and knowledge about generative mechanisms and structures in social contexts. These intentions may be possible to develop theoretical understandings of real mechanism and structures, from the view of a practitioner or policy maker (Blundel, 2007). Therefore, critical realism may be a nuanced understanding for advocates of entrepreneurship. However, critical realism is empirically challenging.

A way forward

Case study research is prevalent in entrepreneurship research. It is often justified in terms of the exciting results it reveals. However, it lacks in terms of philosophical validation; epistemological and ontological reinforcements. In this paper we proposed a discussion that critical realism as a philosophical lens offers rich reinforcements and idyllically matched with case study research. We claim that critical realism offers a basis for case study research and how it can be done and fashioned. However, critical realism is relatively new for entrepreneurship research (Blundel, 2007), yet it is empirically challenging.

Critical realists accept the social construction but not entirely so. This stratified or the depth ontology distinguishes between the empirical, the actual and the real world. critical realists argue the existence of entities in the real world; such as organisations and entrepreneurs. These entities have powers to act and are liable to be acted upon by others (Easton, 2010). We proposed a number of methodological considerations around critical realism highlighting the fact that it favours both qualitative and quantitative methods. We brought the point; entrepreneurship research need to be contextualised, and critical realism would be a platform for entrepreneurship researchers to understand in situating phenomenon in natural contexts. However, as with all philosophical approaches critical realism cannot be proved to be the “right answer”. Acceptance of a critical realist approach depends on whether you agree with its basic assumptions and that acceptance can be based on any number of things.

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