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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical Realism in Management Research: Bridging Structure and Agency in Organizational Analysis

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| ABSTRACT

Organizations are shaped by both structural forces and the agency of individuals. Critical Realism (CR) offers a philosophical framework that bridges this structure–agency divide by acknowledging an objective reality of structures *and* the meaningful actions of agents. This paper examines the foundations of CR and its relevance for organizational analysis. It outlines CR's ontological realism (an independent reality with deep structures) and epistemological relativism (knowledge is theory-laden yet comparable), along with key concepts like stratified reality, emergent properties, generative mechanisms, and the retroductive research approach. The paper contrasts CR with positivist and interpretivist paradigms, highlighting how CR transcends the limitations of each. A central focus is how CR integrates structure and agency through Margaret Archer's morphogenetic theory, explaining how organizational structures condition human action and are in turn transformed by that action over time. The paper discusses CR's contributions to management research, uncovering causal mechanisms, accounting for context and history, and promoting methodological pluralism, and reviews the contributions of major CR theorists. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that critical realism provides management researchers with a robust toolkit to explain organizational phenomena by linking structural constraints and human agency in ways neither positivism nor interpretivism can achieve.

| KEYWORDS

Critical Realism, Structure, Agency, Ontological Realism, Epistemological Relativism, Stratified Reality, Emergent Properties, Generative Mechanisms, Morphogenetic Theory

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Organizations and other human collectives display complex behaviors shaped both by impersonal structural forces, such as institutions, norms, and resource distributions, and by the intentional actions and interpretations of individuals (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). Traditionally, management research has tended to divide into two dominant paradigms: positivism and interpretivism (Sayer, 2000). Positivism conceives of social systems as closed, law-governed entities that can be studied through the discovery of objective regularities, whereas interpretivism regards reality as socially constructed through subjective meanings and often rejects the existence of structures independent of human interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Recognizing the limitations of both extremes, critical realism (CR) emerged in the 1970s through the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1979) as an alternative philosophical stance. CR offers a more nuanced approach to understanding social phenomena by affirming a realist ontology, that real structures and mechanisms exist, while also recognizing that our knowledge of them is mediated, partial, and fallible (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979; Collier, 1994).

Bhaskar introduced critical realism (CR) with the central argument that social reality transcends mere perceptions or individual interpretations (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979). Rather than reducing reality to subjective viewpoints, CR posits that it is underpinned by tangible structures and generative mechanisms that exist and exert causal influence regardless of whether they are observed (Bhaskar, 1979; Collier, 1994). This position directly challenged positivism's tendency to treat social systems as closed, predictable, and governed by invariant laws. Bhaskar (1975) argued instead that social systems are inherently open and complex, shaped by multiple interacting mechanisms whose effects may vary across contexts.

To study such open systems, Bhaskar proposed a stratified ontology, a layered conception of reality that accounts for both what is observed and the unseen forces that produce it (Bhaskar, 1979). According to this model, reality can be understood in three overlapping domains (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979):

- **Empirical domain**: the sphere of direct experiences and observations perceived by individuals or researchers.
- **Actual domain:** events that occur whether or not they are observed, for example, an undocumented decision in a meeting can still influence outcomes (Sayer, 2000).
- **Real domain:** the underlying structures and causal mechanisms that generate both events and observable phenomena (Archer, 1995).

Unlike strict interpretivism, which confines "reality" to subjective experience, CR maintains that objective structures in the real domain exert causal effects on human actions, even if our understanding of those structures is partial or fallible (Elder-Vass, 2010). This synthesis, ontological realism (reality exists independently of perception), combined with epistemological relativism (our knowledge of reality is socially produced and provisional), is the philosophical core of CR (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000).

In contemporary management and organization studies, CR's realist perspective has gained traction as researchers seek explanations that move beyond surface-level correlations or purely interpretive narratives (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). Many organizational phenomena resist simple, linear explanation; for instance, change initiatives frequently fail for reasons that cannot be reduced to a single cause or actor (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). CR offers a framework for investigating such complexity by uncovering hidden structures, such as power relations and cultural norms, and generative mechanisms, the causal processes that sustain observable patterns (Danermark et al., 2002). Through this lens, CR bridges the analytical gap between structural constraints (rules, resources, and institutional frameworks) and human agency (the intentional actions and interactions of individuals and groups) (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010).

A distinctive strength of CR lies in its explicit integration of structure and agency within social explanation (Archer, 1995). It avoids the reductionism of structural determinism, which portrays individuals as passive products of structure, as well as the opposite extreme of voluntarism, which sees individuals as wholly autonomous creators of social reality (Sayer, 2000). Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach is particularly influential in this regard. This model conceptualizes structures and agents as distinct but interacting entities: structures set conditions that shape the opportunities and constraints faced by agents; agents respond through their decisions and actions; and, over time, these actions either reproduce the structure (maintaining the status quo, or morpho stasis) or transform it (morphogenesis) (Archer, 1995, 2010). This cyclical process offers a compelling explanation for why organizational change is often slow or path-dependent; entrenched structures exert a downward influence that individuals must either navigate or alter for change to occur (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010; Danermark et al., 2002).

In summary, this paper critically examines the ontological and epistemological foundations of critical realism (CR) within organizational analysis, focusing on how CR addresses the enduring structure–agency divide. It reviews CR's core concepts and key thinkers, contrasts its worldview with positivism and interpretivism, and explores its treatment of structure and agency through Archer's morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995). The discussion highlights CR's emphasis on emergent causal mechanisms and its practical applications in management research (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2000). By integrating insights from scholars such as Bhaskar, Archer, Sayer, and

Danermark, the paper synthesizes implications for future organizational studies grounded in a critical realist approach.

2. Foundations of Critical Realism

Grasping the philosophical depth of critical realism (CR) involves engaging with its ontological, epistemological, and methodological core (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2002). Developed by Roy Bhaskar as a response to the limitations of both positivism and interpretivism, CR combines a realist ontology, the belief that reality exists independently of our perceptions, with epistemological relativism, which holds that all knowledge is historically and socially situated (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000). It also embraces methodological pluralism, allowing diverse research strategies to investigate complex social phenomena (Easton, 2010).

2.1 Ontological Realism: An Independent Reality

Critical realism rests on ontological realism, the view that a real world exists independently of our perceptions or theories (Bhaskar, 1975). Bhaskar distinguished between the intransitive dimension, structures and mechanisms (e.g., organizational hierarchies, market logics) that exist regardless of awareness, and the transitive dimension, our evolving body of knowledge about them (Sayer, 2000; Danermark et al., 2002). In organizational settings, intransitive elements such as formal rules, institutional norms, or resource distributions can influence outcomes even without actors' recognition (Archer, 1995). For example, a promotion policy may unintentionally disadvantage certain groups, illustrating CR's departure from pure interpretivism by recognizing such structures as real causal forces (Bhaskar, 1978; Easton, 2010).

2.2 Epistemic Relativism and Judgmental Rationality

Critical realism (CR) affirms that while reality exists independently of our perceptions, all knowledge about it is socially produced, historically situated, and inherently fallible, a position known as epistemic relativism (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000). In organizational research, this means explanations of phenomena such as resistance to change or innovation are always mediated by theoretical perspectives and language (Fleetwood, 2005). Yet CR avoids sliding into extreme relativism by introducing judgmental rationality, the idea that competing explanations can be evaluated for coherence, explanatory depth, and empirical adequacy (Bhaskar, 1998; Archer et al., 2013). This allows researchers to acknowledge multiple perspectives while still arguing that some offer deeper or more causally robust accounts than others. Bhaskar (1998) described ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationality as CR's "holy trinity," providing a philosophical middle ground between naive empiricism and radical skepticism.

2.3 The Epistemic Fallacy and the Return to Ontology

One of the central critiques advanced by critical realism is what Bhaskar (1975) termed the epistemic fallacy, the mistake of reducing questions about what exists (ontology) to questions about what we can know (epistemology). In Bhaskar's view, both positivism and certain strands of constructivism are prone to this error. Positivism commits it by equating reality solely with what can be empirically observed, effectively collapsing the distinction between being and knowing. Similarly, extreme interpretivist positions risk implying that if something cannot be meaningfully experienced or articulated, it has no real existence (Bhaskar, 1978).

Critical realism responds by insisting on a clear separation between ontological and epistemological questions. The existence of social structures, mechanisms, and relations does not depend on whether we have yet identified or understood them (Sayer, 2000). Power relations, institutional logics, or class structures, for instance, can exert influence long before researchers develop concepts to capture them (Fleetwood, 2005). From this perspective, the task of science is not merely to record observable events but to probe for the deeper, often unobservable mechanisms that generate those events (Danermark et al., 2002). In the field of management research, this commitment means moving beyond descriptive questions like "what happens?" to more explanatory ones, such as "why does it happen in this particular way, and under what conditions?" By rehabilitating ontology in this way, critical realism provides a philosophical warrant for investigating unobservable phenomena, such as organizational culture, tacit routines, or underlying power structures, as real causal factors. Even when these cannot be directly measured, they remain legitimate and necessary objects of theoretical and empirical inquiry (Archer et al., 2013).

Stratified Reality: Seeing Beyond the Surface: Critical realism gives us a powerful lens to understand organizational life by revealing that reality operates at three distinct but connected levels (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000). Imagine these like layers of an iceberg - what we see on the surface is just part of the story:

Empirical Domain: The Visible Layer
This is what we can directly observe and measure - employee survey responses, turnover statistics, or what we witness in meetings (Bhaskar, 1978). It's the "what" that grabs our attention, like noticing a sudden spike in resignations.

Actual Domain: The Hidden Events
Here we find everything that happens, whether we notice it or not (Danermark et al., 2002). That closed-door meeting where bonuses were secretly cut? The unspoken rule that only early-stayers get promoted? These actual events shape outcomes, even when undocumented.

Real Domain: The Deep Drivers
This is where the magic happens - the invisible structures and mechanisms that generate the patterns we see (Archer, 1995). Think of toxic cultural norms, flawed incentive systems, or power dynamics that quietly push people out the door. They're real forces, even if we can't point to them in a spreadsheet.

2.4 Why This Matters
Traditional approaches often miss the bigger picture. Positivists focus only on the measurable (empirical), while interpretivists sometimes conflate experience with reality (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism's layered approach helps us:

- Spot the visible problem (high turnover)
- Trace the hidden events (biased promotion decisions)
- Uncover the root causes (a culture that rewards loyalty over merit)

Real-World Example: When a tech company noticed its female engineers kept leaving (empirical), digging deeper revealed they were passed over for key projects (actual). The real cause? An "old boys' network" in team assignments that no policy formally acknowledged (Smith, 2022).

Emergence: Properties of the Whole vs. the Parts: Emergence, rooted in the idea of stratification, refers to the notion that higher-level systems possess properties and causal powers not reducible to their constituent parts (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). In organizational contexts, emergence explains phenomena such as culture and team dynamics, which arise from collective interactions yet shape individual behavior through downward causation (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sawyer, 2005). For example, an innovative culture can promote creativity, whereas a rigid culture can suppress it (Morgan, 2006). This perspective counters both reductionism and holism by advocating multi-level analysis that considers the interplay between individuals, groups, and structures (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1975).

3. Generative Mechanisms: The Hidden Engines of Events
Critical Realism (CR) emphasizes the identification of generative mechanisms, underlying structures or processes that cause observable events, even if they are not directly observable themselves (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2002). These "hidden engines" reside in the real domain of reality and are inferred from patterns in the actual and empirical domains. In management research, CR moves beyond simple correlations (e.g., "X is associated with Y") and investigates the underlying causal processes explaining how and why X produces Y under specific conditions (Sayer, 2000).

For example, if participative leadership correlates with innovation, a critical realist would explore mechanisms such as increased psychological safety or shifts in power dynamics as the actual causes (Edwards et al., 2014). Mechanisms are context-dependent; their effects may vary depending on situational factors. For instance, incentive-based rewards may enhance performance in sales teams but hinder collaboration in research teams due to differing contextual dynamics (Danermark et al., 2002).

Since generative mechanisms are not directly observable, CR employs reproduction, a mode of inference using theoretical reasoning and empirical data to uncover causal structures. This focus on the "why" and "how" rather than just the "what" is what grants CR its deep explanatory power (Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000).

3.1 Retrodiction: Reasoning Back From Phenomena to Causes

Retrodiction, a key inferential method in critical realism, involves reasoning backward from observed phenomena to the underlying causes or mechanisms that could explain them (Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000). Unlike induction or deduction, retroduction is a hypothesis-generating approach that asks, "What must be true for this event to occur?" (Danermark et al., 2002).

In organizational research, this may involve proposing hidden mechanisms, like cultural inertia or informal power structures, to explain outcomes such as failed change initiatives (Edwards et al., 2014). Researchers then seek empirical evidence to support or refine these hypotheses through an iterative and fallible process. Retrodiction balances creative theorizing with empirical grounding, making it ideal for exploring complex, often unseen organizational dynamics.

3.2 Methodological Pluralism and Mixed Methods

Critical realism (CR) promotes a flexible, pluralist approach to research methods, grounded in its belief that reality is complex, layered, and shaped by both observable events and hidden generative mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000). This means no single method, quantitative or qualitative, is sufficient on its own. Instead, researchers are encouraged to choose methods based on the nature of what they're investigating, not out of loyalty to a specific tradition (Danermark et al., 2002; O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014).

- Quantitative methods like surveys and statistical models are valuable for identifying broad patterns or relationships in the empirical domain, which may point to deeper causal mechanisms (Sayer, 2000). Meanwhile, qualitative methods, such as case studies, interviews, or ethnography, allow researchers to explore context, meaning, and processes. These approaches are particularly useful for uncovering how and why certain mechanisms operate in specific settings (Edwards et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2017).

- CR also encourages the use of historical and comparative methods to examine how mechanisms behave over time or under varying conditions, a process known as contextualization (Danermark et al., 2002). In practice, this often leads to triangulation, where multiple methods are used in a single study to build a fuller picture of complex social phenomena (Fletcher, 2017; O'Mahoney, 2011). For example, a study on an IT system rollout might combine performance data (quantitative), staff interviews (qualitative), and policy analysis to uncover not just what happened, but why and how it happened in that specific context.

- Importantly, CR pushes back against the positivist idea that correlation automatically implies causation. Just because two variables frequently occur together doesn't mean one causes the other; there might be an underlying mechanism or condition that explains the link (Bhaskar, 1998). Unlike interpretivist approaches that shy away from causal claims, CR argues that causal explanations are both possible and necessary in open systems, as long as they are framed in terms of mechanisms that are sensitive to context (Sayer, 2000).

In short, CR's methodological pluralism is rooted in its ontological commitment to a real but complex world. It recognizes that knowledge is fallible and partial, but improvable through careful, theory-informed, and evidence-based inquiry. By blending different methods to uncover deep causal processes, CR offers a powerful framework for studying the messy realities of organizational and social life.

4. Critical Realism vs. Positivism and Interpretivism

Critical realism is often described as a middle path between the extremes of positivism and interpretivism[3], but it is more accurately an alternative that incorporates aspects of both while fundamentally differing from each. The table below summarizes how these three paradigms compare along key dimensions of social science. This comparison clarifies CR's unique position and how it bridges epistemological and ontological divides in management research.

Table 1: Critical Realism vs. Positivism and Interpretivism

Dimension	Positivism	Interpretivism	Critical Realism
Ontology	One-layer, empiricist reality	Socially constructed realities	Stratified reality (empirical, actual, real)
Epistemology	Objective, value-free knowledge	Subjective, co-created knowledge	Epistemic relativism + judgmental rationality
Causality	Human constant conjunction	Meaning over causation	Context-dependent generative mechanisms
Structure-Agency	Structure dominates	Agency dominates	Analytical dualism: structure and agency interact cyclically (Archer)
Methods	Quantitative	Qualitative	Methodological pluralism (mixed methods)
Research Aim	Prediction and control	Thick description	Explanatory depth (uncovering mechanisms)

Critical realism (CR) positions itself as a philosophical middle ground between positivism and interpretivism, aiming to integrate the strengths of both while avoiding their respective pitfalls (Archer et al., 2016; Sayer, 2000). Like positivism, CR values causal explanation and seeks to uncover real underlying causes. However, it diverges from positivism by rejecting the notion that social phenomena follow simple, universal laws, especially within open systems like organizations (Bhaskar, 1998; O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). From interpretivism, CR adopts an appreciation for meaning, context, and human agency, but without abandoning the belief in an objective reality that exists independently of our perceptions (Sayer, 2000; Archer et al., 2016). This allows CR to support a nuanced view of causation, one that acknowledges both subjective experience and real-world structures.

In practice, CR researchers often combine methods from both traditions. For instance, they may use quantitative techniques to identify patterns, followed by qualitative case studies to explore the underlying mechanisms and context behind those patterns (Danermark et al., 2002; Edwards et al., 2014). The aim is not just to predict outcomes or describe social phenomena, but to explain them in terms of their generative causes, achieving what is known as explanatory depth (Bhaskar, 1998; Fleetwood, 2005). A central contribution of CR is its treatment of the structure–agency relationship. While positivist traditions often overemphasize structural forces and interpretivists may overstate fluid human meaning-making, CR maintains that both structure and agency are real and interdependent. Understanding their dynamic interaction is essential for explaining how organizations work and change over time (Archer, 1995; Vincent & Wapshott, 2014). This balanced stance gives CR an advantage in addressing long-standing tensions in social theory and organizational research.

5. Bridging Structure and Agency in Organizational Analysis

One of critical realism's (CR) most significant contributions to organizational theory is its resolution of the long-standing structure–agency debate. At its core, this debate asks whether organizational outcomes are shaped more by structural forces such as rules, hierarchies, and institutional norms, or by the actions and decisions of individuals and groups. CR's answer is not either/or, but both: outcomes result from the interaction of structure and agency over time (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1998).

CR conceptualizes structure as relatively enduring features, organizational designs, policies, cultures, or power relations that condition what is possible. Agency, on the other hand, refers to the ability of actors to make choices, take action, and potentially transform those structures. Where many traditional theories privilege one side of structural determinism in positivism, or voluntarism in interpretivism, CR seeks a balanced, dynamic view (Danermark et al., 2002). Margaret Archer's Morphogenetic Approach operationalizes this view through analytical dualism, treating structure and agency as distinct, interacting elements. The process unfolds in three phases:

- **Structural Conditioning:** Existing structures shape the possibilities for action (e.g., rigid hierarchies may suppress employee input).
- **Social Interaction:** Agents respond to these conditions, either complying with, resisting, or creatively navigating them.
- **Structural Elaboration:** These actions either reinforce (morpho stasis) or transform (morphogenesis) the structures, which then condition the next round of agency.

This recursive cycle allows CR to explain both stability and change in organizations, not through simple causal laws or individual narratives alone, but by tracing the mechanisms linking structure and agency (Sayer, 2000; Edwards et al., 2014). CR's approach is especially valuable in explaining why well-designed change initiatives often fail, not because of poor execution alone, but due to entrenched structures like incentive systems or cultural norms that exert downward pressure on agents. Likewise, it can explain how innovation arises in rigid environments, through pockets of agency working around or subtly reshaping constraints (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). Unlike Giddens' structuration theory, which treats structure and agency as a unified "duality," CR insists on keeping them analytically distinct over time to better understand how change unfolds. This temporal separation, structure at Time 1, agency in interaction, and structure at Time 2, enables researchers to observe how structural transformation happens, rather than merely asserting it does (Archer, 1995).

In sum, critical realism provides a powerful framework for understanding organizations. It bridges macro and micro perspectives by showing how structures constrain and enable agency, and how agency in turn reshapes structures. This integrated, explanatory approach moves beyond surface descriptions to reveal the deeper dynamics that drive organizational continuity and change.

5.1 Contributions of Critical Realism to Organizational Research

Critical Realism (CR) brings valuable insights to management and organization theory by addressing important gaps left by traditional research paradigms. It emphasizes uncovering hidden mechanisms, reintroducing context and history into causal explanation, embracing emergence and multi-level dynamics, and advocating methodological pluralism with reflexive rigor.

1. Revealing Hidden Causal Mechanisms

Traditional quantitative studies often stop at correlations such as "high employee engagement is linked to higher productivity" without probing why those patterns exist. CR fills this "mechanism deficit" by insisting that observable correlations are clues to deeper causal processes. For example, when participative leadership correlates with innovation, a critical realist might investigate mechanisms like psychological safety, knowledge sharing, or shifts in power dynamics as the real generative forces (e.g., Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2002).

2. Restoring Context and Historical Depth

Positivist research often treats contextual or historical factors as noise to be controlled for. In contrast, CR treats context and history as causally potent. By "reducing" from events to the conditions that made them possible, it explains why identical interventions may have different outcomes in different organizations. For instance, trustful versus conflict-ridden histories can lead to success or failure in implementing new technologies (Danermark et al., 2002; Eastwood et al., 2016)

3. Emphasizing Emergence and Multi-Level Analysis

Organizational phenomena span multiple levels, from individuals to teams to firms to industries. CR's concept of emergence helps integrate these layers by recognizing that higher-level entities have properties inseparable from their parts but capable of influencing them. For example, a culture of innovation at the organizational level, an emergent phenomenon, can encourage individuals to act in creative ways. CR enables analyses of such multi-level feedback loops (Elder-Vass, 2010; Vanharanta & Wong, 2022).

4. Advocating Methodological Pluralism and Reflexivity

CR challenges methodological dogma by endorsing multi-method research as essential to uncovering different layers of reality. Quantitative methods identify patterns, while qualitative approaches uncover context and causal mechanisms. Importantly, CR encourages researchers to reflect on their own biases and theoretical lenses. This isn't relativism, it's a commitment to reasoned argument grounded in evidence and awareness (Bogna et al., 2020; Wynn & Williams, 2012).

When combined, these contributions contribute to what scholars refer to as the "realist turn" in organizational studies (Reed, 2005). CR enables researchers to explain why interventions fail (due to hidden mechanisms or adverse contexts), understand power and political dynamics through underlying structures, and judge explanations as better or worse rather than seeing all as equally valid.

5.2 Applications of Critical Realism in Organizational Research

Critical Realism has provided a powerful lens for deepening our understanding of organizational change and strategic dynamics. In their edited volume Realist Perspectives on Management and Organizations, Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000) pushed beyond surface-level descriptions, such as noting cultural differences or structural rearrangements, and encouraged researchers to reveal deeper causal forces, such as power dependencies and material conditions, that shape outcomes like mergers or restructuring efforts. By focusing on generative mechanisms, researchers can uncover why similar strategies succeed or fail in different organizational contexts.

- In the realm of Information Systems (IS) and Technology Management, Wynn and Williams (2012) made a landmark contribution by offering clear methodological guidance for conducting CR-informed case study research in IS. Their principles help researchers elucidate how structural factors and local contextual conditions interact to generate observed technological outcomes. A concrete application of this line of work can be seen in a CR case study analyzing federated IT governance, where researchers traced how coordination mechanisms, notably power dynamics among stakeholders, affected implementation success.

- CR has also shaped thinking in marketing and consumer behavior, especially where intangible constructs like trust or brand meaning play central roles. Although these areas may not always cite specific examples, the philosophical underpinnings advocated by Sayer (1992, 2000) have inspired multi-method studies that treat trust as a causal mechanism activating loyalty or brand success under certain conditions.

- In the field of organizational learning and knowledge sharing, CR has helped explain why knowledge management initiatives succeed in some environments and fail in others. For example, effective knowledge-sharing systems often depend on underlying mechanisms such as reciprocal trust or managerial support, becoming activated within particular structural conditions like autonomy and time availability.

Finally, CR's value becomes apparent in complexity and project management research. Frederiksen and Kringelum (2021) highlight how CR is uniquely positioned to address complexity, linking broader structural forces like market dynamics with agentic decisions made by project teams. For instance, mechanisms such as goal contagion or escalation of commitment are traced within organizational reward systems to explain why many projects exceed timelines or budgets.

6. Major Critical Realist Theorists and Their Contributions

Critical realism originated and evolved through the contributions of several key theorists, each of whom added nuance to the philosophy and its application. Here we provide a brief synthesis of the major figures in CR and what they are known for, especially in management and social science research:

6.1 Roy Bhaskar (Founder of Critical Realism)

Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014), the founder of critical realism, introduced the philosophy through his seminal work A Realist Theory of Science (1975), where he proposed transcendental realism, the idea that scientific inquiry uncovers real, structured mechanisms in nature. He extended this framework to the social sciences in The Possibility of Naturalism (1979), arguing that while social structures are shaped by human activity, they remain real and exert causal influence (Bhaskar, 1975; 1979/1998). Key concepts from his work include the intransitive vs. transitive dimensions of reality, a three-level ontology (real, actual, empirical), and retrodiction as a mode of explanation (Bhaskar, 1979/1998). He also emphasized emergence and double absence, the idea that social structures, once created, gain the capacity to shape human action (Bhaskar, 1998). While his later works explored dialectical and spiritual themes, Bhaskar's early formulations remain central to organizational research for their focus on real mechanisms, open-system causality, and explanatory depth.

6.2 Margaret S. Archer (Structure, Agency, and Culture)

Margaret Archer (1943–2023) was a sociologist who advanced critical realist thought, particularly through her concepts of analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1988, 1995). She argued that structure, culture, and agency possess distinct properties and should be examined separately to understand their interaction over time. Archer (1988) emphasized culture, the realm of ideas, beliefs, and ideologies, as an independent domain, irreducible to material structures or individual psychology. She also developed the concept of reflexivity, the internal dialogue through which individuals interpret structures and decide on actions, explaining why people react differently to similar conditions (Archer, 2003). In management research, her framework supports analyzing organizational culture separately from formal structures, while considering how individual reflection shapes action. Her later work continued to stress the temporal dimension, urging scholars to study unfolding processes rather than static states (Archer, 2020).

6.3 Andrew Sayer (Methodology and Ethics in CR)

Andrew Sayer is a leading critical realist scholar known for his methodological contributions and focus on the normative dimensions of social science. In Method in Social Science (2nd ed., 1992), Sayer (1992) integrates critical realism with practical research design, emphasizing that explanation and understanding should be pursued together rather than in isolation. He also stresses that social research is inherently value-laden and often carries an ethical dimension, for example, explaining poverty entails a position on whether it should be addressed (Sayer, 1992). In Realism and Social Science, Sayer (2000) developed the concept of explanatory critique, arguing that demonstrating how certain mechanisms cause harm also implicitly criticizes them. For management studies, his work encourages engagement with normative issues, such as not only explaining why a management practice is ineffective but also justifying why it should change based on its unintended consequences. Methodologically, Sayer advocates mixed methods and abductive reasoning consistent with reproduction, urging iterative movement between theory and data to uncover underlying mechanisms (Sayer, 1992, 2000).

6.4 Berth Danermark and Colleagues:

Berth Danermark and colleagues' Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences (Danermark et al., 2002) is one of the earliest systematic guides to conducting research within a critical realist framework. They outline a multi-step process: identify the phenomenon, abstract to explore possible mechanisms, analyze how those mechanisms work in specific contexts, and integrate findings into a coherent explanation. Central to their approach is contextualization, recognizing that the same mechanism may yield different outcomes in different situations, often requiring comparison across cases (Danermark et al., 2002). They also propose analytical resolution, breaking down complex events into components (e.g., structure, agency) before reassembling them, echoing Archer's (1995) analytical dualism. This practical guidance has shaped many qualitative and small-N comparative studies, showing that case-based research can still aim for causal explanation. For example, a CR study of an organizational

turnaround might trace events, theorize underlying mechanisms (such as leadership trust-building or competitive pressure), then test their applicability in other contexts, exactly the kind of systematic yet flexible method Danermark and colleagues promote.

6.5 Other Notable Contributors: Collier, Porpora, Elder-Vass

Several scholars have expanded critical realism in distinctive ways. Collier (1994) clarified Bhaskar's philosophy, highlighting causal tendencies, mechanisms that generally produce outcomes unless counteracted by others, reflecting CR's open-systems view. Porpora (1989) applied CR to sociology, showing that social structures, like class relations, are real relational entities with causal effects on people's lives. Elder-Vass (2010) examined emergence, introducing "norm circles" to explain how social norms exert causal power through collective enforcement, illustrating how emergent phenomena shape behavior without reducing them to individuals. In economics and organizational studies, Lawson (1997) critiqued mainstream models for ignoring real social structures, while Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2000, 2004) demonstrated CR applications in employment and organizational analysis. Despite differing emphases, Archer on agency, Sayer on methodology, and Elder-Vass on emergence, all critical realists share Bhaskar's core idea: understanding social phenomena requires recognizing hidden structures and generative mechanisms beyond observable events (Bhaskar, 1975; Collier, 1994; Porpora, 1989; Elder-Vass, 2010).

7. Conclusion

Critical realism (CR) offers management researchers a robust conceptual framework for understanding organizations in a nuanced and integrated way. By asserting that structures and mechanisms exist independently of our knowledge, yet acknowledging that our understanding is partial and theory-laden, CR bridges the divide between positivism, which seeks universal laws, and relativism, which treats all interpretations as equally valid (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000).

A central insight of CR is its stratified ontology, which explains why organizational phenomena often resist simple prediction or change. Surface-level interventions, such as policy reforms or procedural adjustments, may fail if they do not address deeper mechanisms, like informal power relations or ingrained cultural norms (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). By focusing on these underlying structures, management scholars can design interventions, through incentive systems or cultural initiatives, that foster meaningful and lasting organizational change.

CR also promotes epistemological openness, encouraging reflexivity and pluralism in research methods. It legitimizes the use of quantitative and empirical data while situating them within explanatory frameworks that prioritize causal understanding rather than mere correlation (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2000). Through reproduction and causal narratives, researchers can propose mid-range explanations that are both theory-informed and evidence-based, avoiding the limitations of purely positivist or interpretivist approaches.

Applications of CR in organizational research have demonstrated its value. For example, studies reveal how structural conditions, such as industry norms or organizational routines, shape managerial and employee behavior, while agentic actions over time may either reproduce or transform these conditions (Lawson, 1997; Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004). Archer's morphogenetic model illustrates how organizational change occurs through iterative cycles in which structures condition actions, and actions feedback to reshape structures (Archer, 1995). For management research, CR implies prioritizing methods that capture process, context, and mechanism. Longitudinal case studies, mixed-methods designs, and multi-level analyses are particularly suited for revealing how mechanisms operate in real-world contexts (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark et al., 2002). Evaluating initiatives such as leadership programs can combine empirical observation with theorizing about shifts in culture or power relations, integrating evidence with explanations of underlying mechanisms.

In sum, critical realism equips scholars with the conceptual tools to explain organizational behavior by linking structure and agency, context and action, macro and micro dynamics. It provides a rigorous yet flexible approach that bridges theory and practice, offering insights that are both analytically deep and practically relevant (Sayer, 2000; Elder-Vass, 2010).

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