# Chapter 3
# Guidelines for Conducting a Critical Realist Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

*The case study is a widely used methodology among qualitative researchers irrespective of their philosophical orientation. While positivist and interpretive philosophies are the two most popular research philosophies across diverse research fields, critical realism offers a third alternative. Critical realism is a research philosophy that assumes the existence of an independent reality but also accepts that there may be varied interpretations of it due to a difference in context. Mechanisms are the theoretical building blocks of critical realism, and presence, absence, or interaction of certain mechanisms may result in the presence or absence of certain events. However, limited guidelines are available on conducting a critical realist case study. This chapter fills this gap by providing some practical guidelines on how a CR-based case study may be planned and executed. Practical guidelines are offered for framing the research question, data collection, writing a narrative, coding, and explanation building aligned with a critical realist philosophy.*

# INTRODUCTION

Across research fields, two most prevalent research philosophies are positivist and interpretive (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Mingers & Standing, 2017). Positivist studies mostly use quantitative methods (e.g. surveys or experiments) to collect data on variables of interest and to statistically test the hypotheses. It may also use qualitative methods (e.g. interview), but the central assumption is that reality can be 'objectively' captured in terms of quantitative variables (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In contrast, interpretive studies assume that one can understand the social world by capturing the first-hand experience of the participants and tries to capture the knowledge of participants during investigation (Burrel & Morgan, 1979). For this reason, interpretive studies often use qualitative methods (e.g. interviews or focus groups) for data collection. If any quantitative data is collected, it is used to capture the context rather than being the central focus of a study (Maxwell, 2018).

In contrast to the positivist and interpretive stance, Critical Realism (CR) has been proposed (Bhaskar, 1975, 1989) as a philosophical alternative. In contrast to the positivist assertion that reality exists and is completely comprehendible, critical realists acknowledge that it is imperfectly comprehendible due to our limited cognition and fundamentally complex nature of reality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, at the same time, CR also admits that our interpretations are always bound by the tolerance of an external reality which exists independent of our cognitive processes (Sayer, 2010). In other words, while CR accepts epistemic relativity – that knowledge is always local and historical, it rejects judgmental relativity – that all viewpoints must be equally valid (Mingers, 2014).

Case study is a widely used methodology among qualitative researchers irrespective of their philosophical orientation. Yin (2017) defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in its real-world context using multiple source of evidence. While Yin (2017) remains a highly reputed sourcebook for cast study research, its focus mainly remains positivist. Alternatively, guidance is also available on employing case study in interpretive research (Andrade, 2009). However, except perhaps for Wynn and Williams (2012), not many detailed guidelines are available on conducting a case study with CR philosophy. This chapter fills this gap by providing some practical suggestions on how a CR-based case study may be planned and executed. The next section provides a brief introduction to the philosophy and the nature of explanation in a critical realism. Subsequent section outlines the role of qualitative method and case study in critical realism. This is followed by guidelines for framing the research question, data collection considerations, writing a narrative, coding and explanation building while following a critical realist philosophy. Future research directions are noted before concluding the chapter.

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