

Title: Critical Realism for Health and Illness Research

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Priscilla Alderson's book 'Critical Realism for Health and Illness Research' is a wonderfully written, rich discussion of a vastly underused and underappreciated theory approach in British sociology. It is one of the best introductions to critical realism I have come across. The book evolved from a reading group formed by key founders of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, Alan Norrie, Mervyn Hartwig, which no doubt inspired the applied style of this introduction and its wealth of helpful hands-on real-world research examples.

'Critical Realism for Health and Illness' is intuitively structured, starting with a reflection on the enormous scientific and policy challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic to exemplify the weaknesses and dangers of a positivist response, the UK government's favoured approach in trying to address the public health crisis at the time. This is followed by a discussion of key ontologies and epistemologies in Sociology, the classic paradigms in sociological and health research, interpretivism, structuralism and post-structuralism, realism, the critical Marxian lens. The latter provides critical realism's dialectic foundations to synthesize the best of existing methodologies and to bridge across competing paradigms. This is explained well in chapters 2 and 3.

The author takes a problem centred approach throughout the book, which works extremely well as a resource for undergraduate and Ma-level students of applied social sciences. As a sociologist of child welfare and health inequalities, I have used a critical realist lens in my work and have included it in my teaching on social research methods modules. This has been a learning curve, due to the theory's complexity. Perhaps this complexity explains why mainstream British sociology has, for a long time, tended to overlook critical realism altogether and has instead too often indulged in dated paradigmatic in-fighting and the bashing of positivist strawmen. I heard, on numerous occasions, sociologists who identify as "qualitative" interpretivists equate all quantitative approaches with "positivism". This is especially problematic if it happens in undergraduate classrooms.

Critical realism's fresh dialectic lens offers to overcome longstanding paradigmatic tensions in Sociology and utilises the best of various approaches (qualitative as well as numeric) to achieve what should be the ultimate goal of all social science – the solving of real-world research problems.

Alderson provides a clear, yet comprehensive discussion of key critical realist theorists and she nicely situates critical realism within sociological theory more broadly. The book helpfully gives brief and concise introductions of other theories such as interpretivism, positivism, symbolic interactionism and grounded theory, as well as other (non-CR) flavours of realism. This is accompanied by helpful visualizations, making Alderson's book very accessible for undergraduate sociology students who often struggle with complex theories and methods. Alderson succeeds in making the study of critical realism and its applications entertaining while also demystifying some of the complexities and intricacies of its reasoning.

The final aspect I found really valuable about Alderson's introduction is its strong focus on interdisciplinarity. Academic disciplines are arbitrary and whilst they are often based on longstanding histories of academic thought and tradition, they are not in themselves meaningful to students aiming to gain the foundations and skills they need to tackle real-world social problems. In today's academic and policy landscape, there is a need to work together across and beyond disciplines to tackle urgent policy challenges. Alderson's book lays an excellent practical foundation to do just that.