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# **THE USE OF REALIST PHILOSOPHY AS A METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

by

*Paul Freathy*

## ***Abstract***

Considerable academic debate surrounds the use of methodological frameworks in the social sciences. Traditionally, the positivist school has been instrumental in structuring the means by which research was conducted. More recently however realist philosophy has been used as the foundation for challenging the differing forms of empiricist research. This paper considers how a realist methodology differs from the traditional school. It highlights how the role of the academic can be extended beyond the collection of basic aggregate data and emphasises the importance of actual events to both observable and non-observable structures.

## ***Key Words***

Methodology; Realism; Philosophy; Abstraction; Causal Mechanisms

## ***1. Introduction***

The thought of undertaking a major research programme that will be the subject of close academic scrutiny is a daunting undertaking for any person. When an individual or institution's reputation depends upon the outcome, the task is even more challenging. What is therefore essential is the need to develop a planned programme of study that not only seeks to meet the objectives set, but achieves this aim through a consistent and logical methodological framework. The purpose of this paper is to put forward one research method that has become increasingly popular in UK social science research. Realism has grown up as a reaction to the logical positivist approach of the 1960s and 1970s. Increasingly advocated as a means of understanding the operation of social structures its popularity lies in the acceptance of spatial and temporal factors affecting specific empirical outcomes.

In putting forward the realist view of social science this paper will be divided into three sections, the first examines the traditional method of research to which realist methodology was a reaction, the second considers the strengths of realism over alternative

research methodologies. The final section provides a series of conclusions concerning the use of realist methodology as a methodological research tool.

## 2. *Traditional Methods of Social Science Research*

Research in the social sciences has a long tradition, and controversy still surrounds the different methods considered appropriate as theoretical frameworks.

One of the most influential methods used in the 1960's and 1970's was positivist explanation. For the positivist, science is the method through which individuals try to understand, rationalise and predict the world around them. The basic notion is that the social sciences may be reduced to a series of general laws and rules. There is no knowledge prior to, or independent of experience. As knowledge progresses the aim is to attain the state of exact knowledge evidenced in nature (Layder 1985; Outhwaite 1987).

This position is achieved through the construction of generalised statements which attempt to formalise relationships between different events in the natural world. Explanation or prediction results from the empirical testing or observation of these laws. Positivists argue that it is not the purpose of science to determine the mechanisms behind these relationships as there is no logical or necessary connections in nature (Badcock 1984). This essentially *atomistic* view, that individuals and not structures are a moving force in history is integral to positivist thought. Despite the positivist approach being a dominant form of UK social science research in the 1960's and 1970's, the approach has come under increasing criticism.

The basic assumption of positivism, i.e., that social science is reducible to a series of general laws of nature, is fundamentally flawed. Social structures, unlike natural ones, do not act independently of the systems they govern (Williams 1981). Moreover, social structures, unlike natural ones, do not exist independently of the agents conception of what they are doing in their activity.

A second weakness of the positivist approach is in its deduction of relationships from observable trends. Such an explanation assumes the existence of a "closed system" for it is only within the framework of a regulated environment that the regularity of events becomes constant. This represents a fundamental flaw in the positivist approach for it fails to distinguish between the ontological and epistemological dimensions in social science. That is, real objects exist outside the scientific process and that knowledge of these objects exist only in historical forms. By reducing knowledge to experience the positivist approach denies the need for an ontology.

A third and equally serious problem relates to the positivist approach to enumerate judgement or statistical aggregation (Allen 1984). Events are added up with little consideration of what the underlying relationships are or why such relationships occur. Positivists in the search for general principles and laws have undertaken a more quantitative approach that looked for broad tendencies and generalisations rather than seeking out formal relationships between specific objects. Generalisations as used in the positivist context incorporates terms like "tends to" or global statements like "most countries".

This is not to deny the importance of aggregate level data, however such generalisations should not be seen as ends in themselves (Sarré 1987). Generalised statements de-historicise their objectives often ignoring their historical or culture bound nature. For example, race discrimination is a phenomenon witnessed on a global scale. However the specific processes that have led to such outcomes cannot be explained without reference to the operative spatial and temporal conditions.

A failure to recognise the importance of time and space in determining outcomes prompts a further criticism of the positivist approach. At the aggregate level, there is little indication of whether entities are related to each other. From generalised outcomes it is not possible to specify whether there exists purely formal relations of similarity or actual connections between events. This has led Sayer (1984) to criticise the generalists “ecological fallacy” whereby group level characteristics are drawn from individual observations. For example the high level of unemployment characteristic amongst young UK ethnic minorities can lead to the assumption that all in the group are lazy and unwilling to look for work. Such a correlation is spurious for it ignores the multifarious processes that are operative within the labour market to make young blacks the victims of recession and social injustice.

The traditional approach to social science research therefore seems to be in need of a radical realignment to account for such criticisms. The remainder of this paper will provide an alternative methodological framework for the social science.

### ***3. The Realist Approach to Social Science Research***

Realist philosophy acts as a framework for the social sciences and has come to be recognised by many as challenging the differing forms of empiricist research (Allen 1984; Sayer 1984; Collier 1984).

Realist methodology fundamentally differs from the positivist. It rejects the notion that observable regular conjunctions are an adequate conception of causality. Realism extends beyond the establishment of regularities to consider the generative mechanisms which produce these events. Causality as defined within a realist interpretation must consider why any regularities exist in terms of the mechanisms that generate them. Entities as they exist may be observable or unobservable and both may be as real as each other. Accepting this has the advantage over positivism in that knowledge is not dependant upon a conception of the approved or observable world.

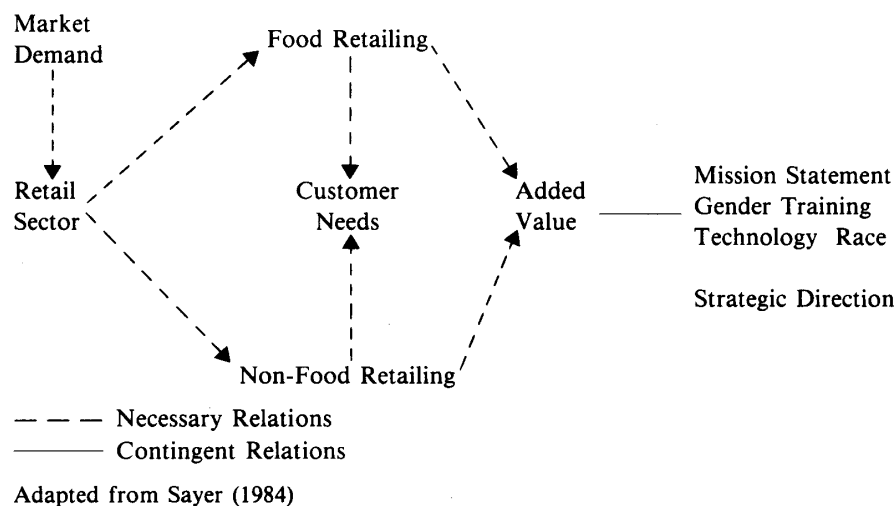
The realist approach does not reject the collection of aggregate data as a research tool, rather it acknowledges that generalisations are acceptable as the first stage of a more intuitive examination process. Broad trends and tendencies observable at the macro level are useful in themselves when no more intensive explanation is possible. The aim of a realist methodology however is to go beyond this, through the process of abstraction it seeks to identify the mechanisms and causal processes that are responsible for a particular outcome.

The processes that contribute to what are described as social or economic relations are the outcome of a multitude of factors interacting or having the power to interact

across spatial and temporal boundaries. The determination of any specific event will be the result of some or all relevant factors being operational. To determine which processes are relevant within a particular context a system of abstraction must be applied. What is abstracted from are the many other aspects which together constitute concrete objects such as economies, nations or institutions. For example identifying the factors behind the contribution of the retail sector to a nation's overall competitive performance may be reliant upon identifying too general a range of empirical phenomena. Realism advocates the abstraction of an object (xi) out of the structure in which it operates  $S_1$ . Thus food retailing may become the object of study with research focusing upon the causal processes operating within that sub sector.

A further distinction may be drawn between chaotic abstractions based upon non necessary relations and rational or necessary abstractions (Allen 1984). The relationship between a retailer and customer is necessary in that both are interdependent. However, the relationship between an organisation and a village is contingent in that each can exist independently of the other. This concept has been expanded by Sayer (1984) who introduced the notion of asymmetrical relations in which one object can exist without the other but not vice-versa. For example an employee can exist without a trade union but this situation is not reversible. A combination of any such set of objects constitute a structure which is enduring and has associated resources constraints and rules. A simplistic model of a necessary and contingent realist structure is given in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. A Simplified Realist Structure



A central point to realist research is that structures do not explain their own origins (any attempt to do so could lead to criticisms of functionalism) and although enduring such structures can be gradually transformed. The individuals who comprise them should therefore not be viewed as passive recipients but as actors who have the power to influence the structures under which they exist.

A further element to the realist approach is understanding the concept of causality. The progression beyond positivism is based partly upon the realists ability to progress

**Fig. 2 The Structure of Causal Explanation**

Object X	Mechanisms $M_{1-n}$	Conditions $C_{1-n}$	Events $E_{1-n}$
X	$  \begin{array}{c}  M_1 \\  \swarrow \quad \searrow \\  CP_1 \quad L_1  \end{array}  $	$C_1$	$E_1$
Abstraction of X from $S_1$	$  \begin{array}{c}  M_2 \\  \swarrow \quad \searrow \\  CP_2 \quad L_2  \end{array}  $	$C_2$	$E_2$
Structure $S_1$	$  \begin{array}{c}  M_3 \\  \swarrow \quad \searrow \\  CP_3 \quad L_3  \end{array}  $	$C_3$	$E_3$

**Fig. 3a The Application of Causal Explanation to the Competitive Environment in Area A**

	Mechanisms	Conditions	Events
$X_1$ Food Sector	Technological Advancement	Sub Sector Investment in technology	High Productivity
	Marketing Strategy	Growth of lifestyle marketing	
$S_1$	Human Resources Policy	Centralised physical distribution	High Employee Turnover
Retail Sector	Physical Distribution	Strong local collective bargaining low local unemployment	

beyond empirical observation and prediction to consider the generative mechanisms behind such events. Causality therefore does not refer simply to cause and effect but to the causal powers ( $CP_1$ ) and liabilities ( $L_1$ ) of an object. Both can exist whether or not they are being exercised. For example, an unemployed person has the potential to work whether or not they are doing so at any particular time. Whether a causal power or liability is activated or not is dependent upon the locally contingent conditions operating at that particular point in time (Allen 1984). While both sets of outcomes may exist by virtue of the nature of the object which possesses them, it is contingent as to whether they

**Fig. 3b The Application of Causal Explanation to the Competitive Environment in Area B**

	Mechanisms	Conditions	Events
X <sub>1</sub>	Technological Advancement	Sub Sector Investment in Technology	High Productivity
	Marketing Strategy	Growth of Marketing	
S <sub>1</sub>	Human Resource Policy	Centralised physical distribution	Low Wages
		Weak local collective bargaining	Low Employee Turnover
Retail	Physical Distribution	High local unemployment	

will ever be activated. Thus whether a person uses their labour power is dependent upon them finding employment.

What determines whether a causal mechanism or liability are activated are the operative conditions  $C_{1-n}$ . Operative conditions may operate at any level (local, national, regional) and differ across both time and space. Typically an event is the result of a combination of a number of conditions enabling causal mechanisms to become operative. See Fig. 2.

If the operation of a realist methodology is applied to the competitive environment of the retail sector, then one may wish to understand the reasons for differing economic performances across geographical locations (Figs. 3a and 3b).

Figs. 3a and 3b illustrate how operatant conditions at the local level affect the outcomes at an empirical level. Such events illustrate the limitations of aggregate research in that generalised data collection fails to account for such variance. Furthermore the use of a realist methodology in this way illustrates the importance of the spatial and the temporal dynamic inherent within social science research.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to provide a basic insight into an alternative methodological framework for the social science. The use of positivist explanation has become increasingly open to criticism. In its place has developed a new methodological framework that seeks to extend the role of the academic beyond the basic collection of aggregate data.

Realism accepts the contradictions inherent within open systems and acknowledges

the importance of both time and space in determining actual events. Its use as a framework within the UK has therefore become increasingly popular for social scientists due to its linking of actual events to both observable and non observable structures. Furthermore its acceptance that events, conditions and mechanisms are not fixed elements within a structure reinforce the need for empirical research.

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