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***Realist ontology and epistemology for rural
research***

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Abstract

In this paper, realist findings from the philosophy of social science are summarised and implications for rural research methodology are drawn out. Four specific ontological claims are fleshed out. These ontological claims act as grounding assumptions for social research and knowledge, but are not foundational in the essentialist sense. Examples are used to illustrate realism in action in empirical research in India. Then several epistemological themes underlying realist village research are also spelt out. The paper offers a very explicit introduction to a range of sophisticated themes in realist social research. Overall the paper contributes an original line of argument to the debate about realist research methodology and techniques.

Keywords: realism, social structures, village studies, ontology, epistemology, case-study method, protocol.

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Introduction

In this paper, themes from the philosophy of social science are probed to see what implications they have for research methodology in rural India. A set of specific claims is fleshed out. These claims are of two kinds – ontological claims and epistemological claims. In this way, the paper offers a very explicit introduction to a range of sophisticated realist work that can be applied to social research. Innovative contributions in this area come from the realists Lawson (Lawson, 1989, 1994, 1997), Morgan (2003a and b), and Sayer (Sayer, 1992, 1997, 2000a, b). The aim is to press these innovations further by seeing how they work when applied in the context of rural India. The points may be worthy of more general attention but are grounded in my field experience.

In carrying out this work I have been aided by the detailed village- and town-level fieldwork of a whole range of authors, such as Harriss-White (2003), Harriss-White and Janakarajan (2004), Harriss (1982, 1993), Ramachandran (1990), and others. Without all these researchers writing up their detailed findings over the years, my own mind would be impoverished in its knowledge of India's variety and diversity.

The first set of claims is ontological. For instance, among realist researchers the following claims – at a highly abstract level – underpin good social research:

- The emergence of properties of institutions in society depends upon the underlying agents, whose conscious decisions and partly-unconscious habitus blend into the resulting phenomena.
- The open systems nature of agricultural markets implies that prices are always subject to both competition and bargaining forces, even when social power relations seem to suggest either monopoly or monopsony or perfect competition. Malleability of social relations in markets is an assumption that results from an open-systems (as opposed to closed-systems) assumption.
- Stereotypes and subjective feelings of what is appropriate, good, deserved, etc. rest upon a basis of both subjective and partially impersonal realities. Therefore, social norms have causal powers.
- Social structures exist and they influence social relations so that 'choices' are often constrained and enabled by limiting structures in practice.

These four ontological claims have already been recognised and utilised in good Indian rural research. They would hardly seem contestable if it were not for the coexistence of alternative research methods which are atomistic, deductive and objectivist (e.g. Mukherjee, White and Wuyts, 1998). Let me begin by setting out what 'ontological'

claims are, and why they are important. Then I shall work through each of the four claims above.

What is ontology and why is it needed in village studies?

The word 'ontology' refers to the study of what really exists. In philosophy, ontologists study the assumptions about existence and which of these acts as a suitable and justifiable underpinning for research. Only the most naïve realist would have an ontology that made simplistic assumptions about what exists, such as 'institutions' or 'causes'. Instead, a series of steps has been made collectively to work out a set of complex and clearly stated assumptions, all backed up by reference to the real world and to specific historical junctures and places, and the result of this effort is known as scientific realism. It is considered scientific in at least two senses. It is rigorous and open to criticism and varying interpretations, first of all. In other words the scientific community has to be continually scrutinising the claims. To give just two examples, Baert developed a sustained critique of critical realism (Baert, 1996) from a constructivist viewpoint, and realists have responded by continuing to argue the case for realist social science (Williams, 2005). Nelson, a feminist economist, also works upwards from specific human realities and moves towards the kind of claims that other realists make, and Nelson's challenge to orthodox economics has been echoed by numerous other realist critics of atomistic and deductivist economics (Nelson, 1995; Morgan, 2006). Nussbaum, a recognised Aristotelian, has introduced realism into the debate about human capabilities and has responded to sustained criticism without giving up her stance, which is basically critical realist (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995; Nussbaum, 1999). Nussbaum particularly distinguishes realism from the post-modern methodological viewpoint, and the contrast of post-modernism with realist positions is reviewed by Parfitt (2002) and developed further by Flyvberg (2001).

Secondly, realists perhaps form a paradigmatic shift away from both positivism and strong social constructivism. Realists today include a wide range of feminists, Marxists, philosophers, sociologists and so on (Hartwig, 2007). For a summary of some of the structuralist claims within realism, Gimenez (1999) is a good introduction. For a summary of some of the methodological implications in geography Yeung (1997) is useful, or see Warner (1993). Realism is an inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary school of thought. It argues that the meaning of 'being scientific' is changing, and that it needs to be coherent across disciplines, rather than being differentiated between disciplines (Walby, 2001).

Because of the inherent difficulties with falsification, realists argue that hypothesis testing needs to be completely reframed by linking it with social constructions. Hunt (1994) shows how hypothesis testing in Popperian science is fundamentally based on a false

pretense of scientific objectivity. When we propose a realist approach, we do not mean to imply epistemic objectivity, but rather a reformed approach to the socially located researcher, whose work has purposes and is a form of social action in itself. Critical realists use a weak constructivism, which puts forward a very moderate view of the objective foundations of social knowledge (Archer, 2000, 2003). We can focus on meanings of social phrases, and deconstruct them and look at their histories, both as representing real histories whose descriptions are socially framed, as well as seeing them as nominal history stories which depict the past in ways that suit some contemporary people.

This weak constructivism is combined with an assumption that the world does have some partially intransitive existence, prior to my current action in the world. I as a knower am placed within the world that I am trying to know about.

Ontology is needed in order to clarify the resulting issues of reflexivity and epistemology, without getting tied up in strong constructivism (May and Williams, Eds., 1998). Ontology is not just a series of foundational statements. In the work of Outhwaite, for instance, ontological statements are very much about hermeneutics and contested meanings (1987). Qualitative research by realists is notable, however, for the willingness to admit that there may actually be referents for the things that people point to when they cite the reasons for things happening. A real referent which is a cause is something that has actually generated the outcome of interest. By contrast, the strong constructivist may focus only on interpretation, and avoid the study of causes altogether.

Realists may be considered essentialist (Baert, 1996), but this is a misnomer related to the wide presence of poor ontological assumptions in quantitative scientific work. Statistics and social surveys often seem to categorise people too glibly, and are at the same time apparently realist. Their positivist stance is a naïve form of realism different from critical realism (Bryman, 1996, 1998, 2001). Bhaskar, in his book on 'naturalism' (1998), argued that 'epiphenomenal' evidence could be raised by the positivist studies. Epiphenomena are empirical data that misrepresent reality. They offer a basis for false claims. For instance, feminists have rightly criticised the survey method for overgeneralising and thus hiding the detail and uniqueness of people's lives. Essentialism (discussed by Sayer 2000b and 1997) is the error of assuming something exists foundationally and then assuming that all instances of that thing are alike. Patriarchy, masculinity and gender are examples of things that often get essentialised. To essentialise might mean to reify that thing, and thus to create its image in the metaphorical shape of the knower, rather than the real shape of the thing. However, since social phenomena are mostly non-material and have primarily metaphorical shapes in their real social existence, it is easy to see why essentialism is so widespread. To a Marxist, for example, classes just exist. They are by definition existing in relation to one another. However, to a critical realist Marxist, e.g. the team of Athreya *et al.* (1990),

a class is something to be explored gently with great sensitivity to its reality. Class is just a broad term to start with and then various details have to be looked into, such as caste, assets, property rights, employment relations and usury. After doing that, Athreya *et al.* end up with a unique and non-essentialist (but still realist) class schema. This is Marxism with an empirical flavour. Indian village studies have excelled at being realist but not essentialist. I could mention Mencher's work (1978, 1988), which is strongly structuralist yet not essentialist; Epstein (1962, 1973; Epstein, *et al.*, 1998); Breman (1989, 1996, 2003); Rogaly (1997); and Rogaly and Coppard (2003) – who track the labour force through its real movements over space and across institutions without essentialising 'paid work'. Sharma (1988) studies occupations and social class without assuming a rigid pairing between them. Interestingly, she thanks the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain for the funds that allowed her to do field research in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh in 1977-78 and 1982-83. The funding of village-level research is one reason for enumerating the advantages of such research so explicitly in this paper.

Finally, Kalpagam (1994) and Kabeer (1994) have integrated feminist insights without essentialising women and indeed without making gender excessively central to their overall ontology. Kalpagam (1994) has the state, policy-making processes, and social class in her ontology. Kabeer has households, families and children in her ontology and is conscious not only of people in the field as 'objects', but also of the scientist in the field as 'subject' (1994). Since the scientist is in the field, the objective study of class and gender is simply not possible in the traditional sense of the word 'objective' (meaning value-neutral, see Lloyd, 1995). Instead, all studies of class and gender are inter-subjective creations rooted in place and time.

Ontology was argued for specifically by Lawson in connection with causality, and Lawson argues primarily that causality is best thought of as a set of tendencies. A tendency to cause an outcome is part of a whole process. Causal mechanisms' effects can be blocked by interfering factors. These 'barriers' are also causal, but do not always take their effect. Thus, we cannot expect empirical regularities always to reveal causes, nor causes inevitably to cause empirical regularities. (A regularity is a correlation or a pattern in some data.) By contrast, the empiricist approach to causality is to seek laws which are everywhere evidenced by patterned regularities in data.

It is a characteristic of open systems that two or more mechanisms, perhaps of radically different kinds, combine to produce effects; so that because we do not know *ex ante* which mechanisms will actually be at work (...) Events are not deductively predictable. . . Most events in open systems must thus be regarded as 'conjunctures'. (Bhaskar, 1997, 119)

Lawson argued that to seek the regularities in the data is to ignore both the complexity of causality (which Sayer mentions can include unique causal processes) and the multiple

causes which co-exist at each point in time. Due to multiple causes we cannot expect all causes actually to force their outcome to occur. Instead they operate transfactorially, says Lawson (1997). Both Lawson and Sayer moved on to advocate the use of case-study and primary qualitative data (see Sayer, 1992, orig. 1984) instead of survey data. This is going too far, though (Olsen and Morgan, 2005). It is possible to learn from survey data whilst being aware of the limitations set by the categories. The question of which categories are excessively general or wrongly worded is an empirical one. Surveys cannot be ruled out in general just because of the social construction of the phrases which frame questionnaire questions.

Moving to specific contributions made by realists in conducting village studies in India, I want to mention four main areas. These illustrate the main strengths of realism, as listed on the first page.

1. The emergence of properties of institutions in society depends upon the underlying agents, whose conscious decisions and partly-unconscious habitus blend into the resulting phenomena. This assertion embodies several ontological assumptions, such as: 'emergence is how causality works in open systems'; 'institutions exist'; 'agents exist and can make conscious decisions'; and 'Bourdieu's concept of habitus is a useful term to summarise some tacit decisionmaking patterns or rules that agents actually observe but of which they are usually and normally unaware' (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977). Suppose we look at the example of bonded labour (Olsen and Ramanamurthy, 2000) to illustrate. Bonded labour involves a debt which the worker owes to the employer, causing a thing in which constraints on the worker's freedom occur, to the employer's advantage. Making bondage illegal is not sufficient to eradicate the debt bondage, for two main reasons. Firstly, structurally embedded inequality causes poor people to continue to seek bondage. Secondly, people act habitually to encourage relationships of trust, and these at some times make the worker appear to be subservient, or cooperative with their own exploitation. This is not just a conscious choice, but is the product of long-term socialisation and our reflection on the real structural barriers to change. Examples from completely different contexts – all based on close village studies or in situ studies of bonded labourers – have reached similar conclusions: that it is not impossible but it is difficult to change the institution within the structured open system in which it exists (Ramachandran for Tamil Nadu (1990); Dacorta and Venkataswarlu for Andhra Pradesh (1999; Venkateswarlu and Dacorta, 2001); and Poitevin and Rairkar (1993) for Maharashtra

Each of these authors is describing a different situation. In each situation the emergent properties are, arguably, unique. It is laudable that they each try to be true to the specifics of the case study area – Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. However it is also valuable to allow some theoretical terms to emerge which are more abstract and do refer to these concrete instances and allow them to be understood by

outsiders and insiders. Examples of such theory include 'false consciousness' theory, 'cooperative conflict', and the study of patriarchy.

If they seem overly general then one has to approach the empirical data again to discern the important schisms, and create multiple theories. There will always be a role for theory, however. There will always be a reality upon which to ground it. There is often a need for some guidance when starting out on a study. I see the village field work as an iteration: review the literature, summarise main findings, study the main theories, set out their ontology carefully, start field work, critique the early assumptions, change them, summarise new findings, etc. The iterative method is also described by Danermark *et al.* (2001), Blaikie (2000), Carter and New (2004), and Downward (2003).

2. Social relations are malleable. They are not fixed and it is awkward that naming them tends to seem to imply that they are fixed. If we say, for instance, that milk producers are price-takers and that village prices are set by a process of bargaining primarily from town buyers to rural transport companies, we are tending to overgeneralise already. Even in agricultural markets where prices may seem to be 'given' to price-takers, there is still an underlying bargaining situation. (Olsen and Ramanamurthy, 2000; Harriss-White (2003, 2005) sees bargaining in much the same realist way.) In the milk price example, suppose more women become involved in milk production by buying cows. They sell more milk to the milk buyer or milk transporter. They can lobby together to sell their milk to an alternative buyer by walking their joint milk up to a nearby road. This dim possibility can become a reality in which 'quantitative pressure converts to a qualitative change' – to paraphrase a common dialectical theme found among Marxists. The quantitative pressure includes the individual's capacity to sell milk at village level and is thus influenced by wealth and inequality in the village. If a suitable buyer is found, then the transport of milk becomes unnecessary. This real potential absence of sale increases the power of the sellers in bargaining with the first buyer. The real-ness of the potential absence of something is an ontological claim that is central to Bhaskar's work. At first it appears like a riddle, until you find yourself applying the same logic once you are embedded in a situation as a self-aware observer.

These dynamics of village markets were studied in detail in Harriss-White. (1999) which stressed the power dynamics underlying agrarian markets. Harriss-White refuses to allow power to disappear off the economics agenda. My own field research taught me that one village could have a dominant usurious moneylender, while another had a bank doing competitive lending and thus developed a range of non-usurious moneylenders (Olsen, 1993). This amazing finding was surprising to me as a 'field Marxist' until I realised how diverse society is. It is real but it is not homogenous over space. It is real but changing. It is real and partly beyond our control, but also subject to our agency. This is critical realism as a series of 'tenets', offering a suitable middle way between essentialism and strong constructivism.

3. Realists argue that norms have causal powers. This is in part because social norms are real. (Yes, still changing and malleable, but real. The test for whether something is real is primarily whether it is found to have some effect on something else.) Knowing about a norm does not force us to conform to it as a rule. But it helps us to know the price to pay for breaking it. Norms such as the preference for women to act as housewives have been unpicked by the realist feminist Mies (1980, 1998). She argues that these norms help to cause Indian women to be exploited by international markets.

Recent work by Venkateswarlu in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh strongly – but independently – supports this general claim (2003). Norms about men being in control of land help to make it very difficult for women to rent in, or own, land in their own names (Agarwal, 1994; 2003). Agarwal is a structuralist and thus draws upon realist thinking. However she also acknowledges and develops close descriptions of normative variation across the south Asian land mass. By recognising the details of reality she avoids essentialism. She sees norms as existing (hence as ‘real’) but also as malleable and potentially under discussion. She argues that Indian women would benefit by owning and controlling more land than they do now – this is not meant as merely a factual outsider’s description of women’s views, but as a scientific orientation towards the subject matter. Agarwal as a scientist has concluded that women and men would both benefit sufficiently to make it worth whatever transition costs might be incurred by the attack on current norms and the proposal of some replacement norms. Andhra Pradesh could be a test case. Agarwal argues that women renting land has worked well there, citing the Deccan Development project. So perhaps the door is open in Andhra Pradesh, whereas it is more tightly shut in other parts of west and north India.

The issue of how easy it is to change things requires delicate handling. Some scientists argue that we cannot study the future. Others think the future of society is wound up with the current state of society. Two linkages that come to mind immediately are hope and predictions people make. These two together influence how people act. Their agency is thus affected by the things they think will or could happen in the future. Therefore it is not right to assume that science can only consider the past or the present. A book arguing for some of the implications of this view was edited by Giri (2004). The general issue of the resistance that society offers to those who wish to change is reframed to become an empirical issue (rather than an ontological or merely epistemological issue) by the great philosopher of science, Brian Fay (1987; see also 1996). He argued that we have to consider the somatic embodiedness of our habits, as well as the social entrenchment of social structures and their supporting discourses.

4. Structures exist. You can see from the above that I am able to assume that social structures exist in the sense of having effects on society today, emerging as more than

the sum of their parts, and involving not only invisible relationships but also ongoing (enforced, often strongly disciplined and voiced) social norms.

Some concluding caveats are needed now. Firstly, we can be careful about assuming that structures act as causal mechanisms. After all, a 'structure' is not an agent. By positing structures as causal, we tend to make them appear almost human. To make an actor appear as if human is to 'anthropomorphise' them. If we anthropomorphise structures, we ignore agency to a dangerous extent. Realists today have a linked and dialectical approach to the interaction of structure and agency. The Transformational Model of Social Action posits agency and structure as in dynamic relation to each other (Bhaskar, 1989; 1993; Archer, 2000). Institutions, in this viewpoint, are a type of structure (Gimenez, 1999).

Secondly, it is important to avoid teleology in our ontology. One cannot assume that the world is simply deteriorating, nor that utopia is our ultimate endpoint. Instead of endpoints we have ongoing processes. For instance, studies of well-being ask people how they would like to live a good life, as well as what well-being is to them. The latter question, though posed in the present tense, often brings out future-tense statements and hypotheticals from respondents (field visit, Daniel Neff, February 2005-January 2006, and own field visit, January 2005; both visits to Andhra Pradesh). These hypotheticals can be made into our real future if we take action to realise them. Seeing people as self-actualising agents of change helps to integrate past, present and future. This is not teleological.

Thirdly, critical realism is inter-disciplinary but this creates a danger of a lack of focus. When research on labour markets engages with sociology and anthropology as well as economics, it may become very diffuse. There is perhaps a practical rationale for disciplines that can replace the current substantive rationale for disciplinary divides and needs to supplant the nonsense of epistemological chasms between disciplines.

When realists do epistemology what happens?

The next part of the paper reviews ten epistemic criteria for good research. I suggest, using these ten criteria, that good rural research will involve discussions and interaction, as well as reflexivity.

How this matches up with realism – only via the phrase critical realism, or, in other words, the kind of 'scientific' realism which recognises the interaction of a person with their surroundings as an inherent part of what it means to be a scientific person – thus what is non-scientific, is an interesting question. (Naïve realism would then be unscientific.)

In the literature on methodology that is used to teach at Masters and PhD level, at least ten different epistemic criteria for good research or reasonable knowledge claims have been adduced (listed below). To have epistemological claims embedded in a paper about realist ontology is to suggest that epistemological and social constructions are an inherent part of reality. The epistemological criteria are criteria for good knowledge. They suggest how to achieve valid or warranted knowledge. Further work on each of these headings is needed.

1. *Ensure practical adequacy of the research design* (Sayer, 1992, orig. 1984)). Sayer calls good research practically adequate and he means by that 'fit for purpose', taking into account three parties – the researcher (s), the audience, and the subjects of research. In spite of being a realist Sayer's 1984 book was a leader in integrating the cultural turn toward reflexivity and multiple subjectivities into mainstream social research. Details he offered include linking academic discourses to lay discourses, having a moral angle to the research so that it suits all concerned, and laying conflicts open to discussion so that people's views move onward from their initial *a priori* views.

2. *Have high communicative validity of the research outputs* (Kvale, 1996). Kvale is a leading exponent of advanced qualitative analysis methods. Kvale argues, like Sayer, but arising independently from a different culture and field research background, that the researcher needs to link their theoretical or discursive framework with those used by policy makers, other audiences, and the subjects of research. Kvale has also sensitively presented the issues associated with mixed-methods triangulation (1996; Olsen (2004) illustrates mixed methods in a rural Indian context). Kvale argues in favour of high communicativeness and hence against abstruse theory.

3. *Introduce a metacritique*, including theoretical triangulation and innovation (Bhaskar, 1993). Metacritique is an overview of the theories and frameworks of reference that operate in a scene. Metacritique leads to a re-appraisal of these theories and frameworks of reference and can often lead to a choice of which discipline or 'school of thought' to follow. For instance, using meta-critique, I introduced feminist ideas into my Indian field work which had previously been limited to Marxist and orthodox economic theories (Olsen, 2003; 2004). I described this change of perspective as a form of methodological pluralism (ibid.). Meta-critique also leads to cross-disciplinary commentaries (Olsen, 2006; Harriss, 2002; Giri, 2002).

4. *Have a rigorous statement of what/who/when the study represents* (Bryman, 2001). Bryman, a social research methods expert, has committed himself to a complex depth realism. He argues that one needs to be systematic and open about what representations of society are going on in a study. This is an important – and perhaps sufficient – plank for him to convince readers that one is being scientific. Other standard

texts by De Vaus (1991, 2001) and Punch (1998) also have moved towards the mixed-methods epistemology and a focus on systematic record-keeping as a way to develop warranted arguments. What is avoided is the assumption that we know already who the study represents, e.g. Indian peasants as an unquestioned category. Even Marxists such as Brass (1986) take considerable care with their categories and in this way satisfy the realist criterion.

5. *Expose the research techniques to scrutiny.* This is a processual criterion which follows from the Habermasian approach to conditions necessary for true statements to emerge, but is also just good sense. See Parfitt, 2002, for a serious discussion of the need for exposing one's techniques to open discussion in development studies. Parfitt notes weaknesses and excessive theoreticity in Habermas's own work, a theme also worked up by Giri (2001, 2002, 2005, and no date).

6. *Use sophistication of technique for good purposes* (ESRC, 1996). A sophisticated technique is one which uses complex data to help us arrive at a better summary answer to a puzzle or problem, compared with earlier answers and compared with our *a priori* thought. The *a priori* thoughts are very important here, and they include a range of assumptions that fall into three categories:

- i. assumptions that are ontological, such as a simplification of the 'water problem' to issues of social institutions (when it really includes the desertification aspect and connections and linkages between social and physical systems; Lemon, ed., 1999);
- ii. assumptions that are purely theoretical, such as a commitment to feminism. These assumptions could be enumerated if we set out our presumptions more clearly and then opened some of them up to criticism. However, all too often, the assumptions are not questioned at all.
- iii. assumptions that are speculative and arise from our deeply tacit, habitual expectations for how a given scene will evolve. Here we have the researcher's stereotypes about 'backward' agriculture, about remote rural areas, about the 'green revolution' and technology, and about women.

The methodological position that begins with ontological sophistication has been urged upon us by the excellent social theorist Flyvberg (2001). Flyvberg gives a detailed set of rationales for choosing cases, and he notes that one might seek illustrative critical cases, comparative cases, contrastive cases, and other types of cases (Flyvberg, 2001). The search for contrastive cases has also been promoted by a number of other methodologists ranging from grounded theorists (see Chamaz, 2006) to Ragin and the comparative historians (Ragin, 1987, 1991). Whilst attacking some specifics of Ragin's

argument, Robert Wade has generally endorsed Ragin's style of realist approach (Wade and Goldstein, 2003; see Wade, 1994; see also Ragin *et al.*, 2003). This debate in the journal *Field Methods* is highly relevant to the present paper's *raison d'être*.

Flyvberg and Ragin's shared idea of searching for contrasts is rooted in scepticism and the assumption that one's well-grounded ideas might be wrong. Since they might be wrong (i.e. they could be wrong, and hence are fallible ideas), it is important to search out instances which would show us exactly how they are wrong. Water shortages resulting from a reduction in rainfall, for instance, would instantiate the case against arguing that all desertification is caused by a failure of human water-management institutions. Once we know the limits to our *a priori* claims, and we have new evidence about events and structural mechanisms that lay outside what we previously knew, we have begun to extend the boundaries of knowledge and it is time to begin to write up what we now know.

7. *Incorporate ethical relevance*, incorporating policy relevance and critique of policy (Ray and Sayer, 1999). Harriss-White's recent works illustrate ethical relevance very well. Janakarajan's chapter (in Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004) comments on the water crisis and its ethical implications. Harriss-White, 2004 and 2005, comments on the male sex ratio and its variation over space and class in India. Her discussion brings an economic dimension into the debate about the male sex ratio. It also brought a close empirical eye to this debate and must have serious policy implications. Agarwal (1994; 2003), too, has repeatedly been involved in actively promoting the ethical implications of the work she has done. The interesting thing about realists is that they assert that the ethical implications are really present in the research practice (Olsen, 2005). This moral realism is a strong standpoint and is not meant to imply universal moral facts. Instead, we argue that the researcher is positioned in a particularly advantageous way. Having done meta-critique, having also engaged in field research, their knowledge claims can be warranted – i.e. justified – in ways that are not available to journalists or the naïve commentator (Sayer 2000a).

Why would it matter to knowledge claims whether they were ethically relevant? Why can't we have pure science separated from the policy realm and hence value neutral? The reasons have been taken for granted by some scholars. See Lloyd (1995) for a sophisticated and erudite review. The value-saturated conclusions of social scientists reveal that they strongly advocate ethical relevance. For instance, Ramachandran's work on bonded labour is strongly in favour of human freedoms, even whilst doing work, and strongly against coercion in whatever form it takes (1990).

8. *Be engaged with diverse discursive communities* (Giri, 2001, 2005). Engagement does not refer merely to using their language but to actually co-experiencing the research events with them. Among various good examples I would include Jejeebhoy

and Sathar (2001), whose research involved three locales, several religions and languages, and a long period of involvement. Participatory and action research take this epistemological tenet as more central than do the other main research methods.

9. *Have a self-conscious etic-emic balance* (May and Williams, 1998). Etic refers to the outsider's knowledge, and emic refers to the insider's knowledge. Balancing these two components of one's psychological, i.e. cognitive, knowledge, is difficult. We are now talking more about the origins of the knowledge than about the nature of the cognition. Therefore experience offers a continual mixture of etic and emic knowledge. We become partial insiders. May is an expert writer on reflexivity, whose work is consistent with standard anthropological approaches to this issue.

10. *Have hermeneutic depth, allowing differences of meaning* (Outhwaite, 1987). Tolerance for others' posited meanings and for others' implicit or explicit ethical stances is critical for knowledge to expand. This is known as hermeneutic depth or depth of meanings. A depth ontology is in part combining the realist's long list of 'things that exist' with the detailed study of social constructions and meanings, not only as texts but also as real things. One soon finds that the 'psychological' is saturated with the social and that 'levels' of society cannot be separated (Heil, 2003).

All the above ten criteria are epistemic, in the sense that they provide a basis to judge how well a study was done and how well it was written up. Epistemology is then the study of epistemic criteria. As an epistemology, my list of criteria is pluralist. I would encourage competing studies to report clashing findings. The 'truth' of the findings can then be discussed.

Practical adequacy, which is listed first, in a sense covers all the other criteria. Sayer has argued that theories and knowledge claims are assessed, practically speaking, for their ability to address pressing problems using frameworks that are recognisable, whilst providing communicative bridges between discourses. For instance, a theory must be adequate to practical research, whilst also serving the purposes of theoreticians, such as revealing something not previously known. Practical adequacy is contextually relative; it is contingent; it never provides universal or replicable validity. If practical adequacy is actually the criterion used by many funding agencies and readers of non-fiction books, it is still not the criterion expressed by most orthodox economists.

A transformative ontology is implicit in the practical adequacy criterion (see Sayer, 1992). This ontology is made explicit in related methodology literature (Layder, 1993) and is part of an ontic turn in social theory. Collier (1994) and Archer *et al.* (1998) explain further the transformative approach to ontology.

This paper has given detailed support to mixed-methods village field research of a multi-disciplinary kind. The special need for 'villages' to be represented emerges as a result of the masking of rural voices in many public fora, such as newspapers. Since village people do not easily get an authentic voice, field visits and interaction between them and others can lead to an insider-outsider shared understanding which can then be voiced, both here and there. Rural sociology can use a range of techniques, but the kind of abstract assumptions described here are needed to underpin it. Being explicit about the assumptions is demanding but is also worthwhile.

Conclusion

To summarise, I have first set out some of the underpinnings of social research as seen by scientific realists. These underpinnings were not essentialist but involved ontological claims at suitable levels of abstraction. This ontology then helps provide a foundation for methodology and social research. Then I looked at the criteria for good knowledge that have been stressed in recent years. Figure 1 summarises this section, showing that critical realism draws upon three traditions to get its tenets.

I want to conclude by reinforcing the point made earlier about the malleability and historical specificity of sets of social-structural relations. I can use rural bonded labour as an example. The re-creation of debt-bonded labour over time has been theorised by Brass, among others (1986). Brass argues that debt bondage ties the worker into unfree social relations which are perceived as more desirable than being a 'free' or unemployed wage labourer. His 'deproletarianisation' thesis has been based on a wide range of field visits and local people's voices in northern India, particularly Uttar Pradesh. However, we also see the re-creation of debt bondage in new forms in south India (Venkateswarlu, 2003). Here the bondage was of a particular type, in which a young boy or girl is bonded to a cotton-seed farmer, who in turn is a sub-contractor to a multinational firm which is producing hybrid cotton seed. The farmer loses some freedom but has room for manoeuvre, which the workers' families do not have. The girls and boys (76% girls in Venkateswarlu's studies) then compete against adult labour and are found to have lower wages than adults in cases for which wages are paid or nominally stated. The debt is incurred and spent by the child's parents. These debts, ranging from Rs. 500 upwards, are not considered to be any affair of the multinational company, yet they are indirectly a way of tying labour into international exploitation. The monetary estimates in Venkateswarlu and Dacorta's recent (2001) study are invaluable, since they make exact reckonings of average wages of men, women, boys and girls and then impute the costs onward to farm profitability. By doing so, they fall into a neoliberal discourse of monetised costs, but they also show the (neoliberal) rationale for returning to bonded labour: it is cheaper to have labour tied like this, and children are more compliant than adults while they are working, particularly when working as bonded labour.

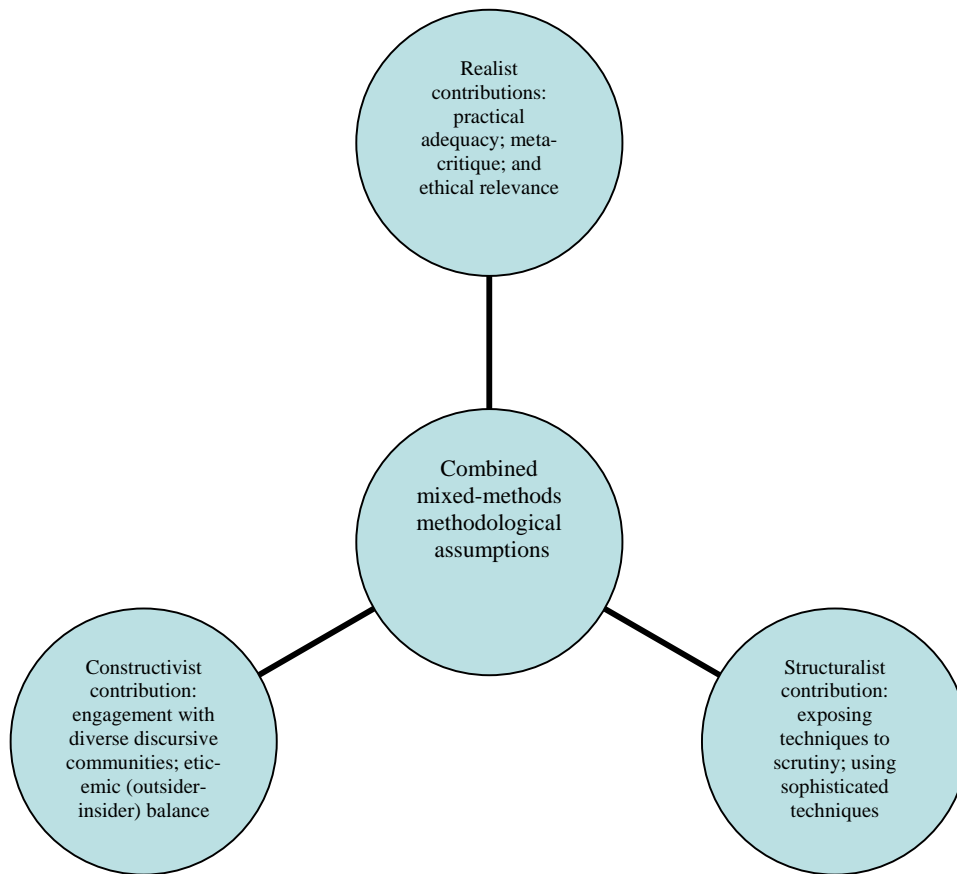


Figure 1: Inclusion of epistemology into critical realist ontological assumptions

In conclusion, it appears that realism is a useful framework. There remains, however, much clarification to do when moving from the realist underpinnings to the particulars of research processes, research design and drawing conclusions.

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