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Learning to *Absent* the Absent: Critical Realism and Social Work Education

Social work is continuously extending its explanatory reach by drawing on theories from the social sciences. In particular, the field of meta-theory is beginning to ignite scholarly interest. Regarding the latter, some commentators have highlighted how critical realism can assist the profession to apprehend the deep-seated causes of behaviour and human oppression. However, how to convey the schematic and abstract nature of critical realism to social workers, presents a real challenge. This chapter addresses this necessity by arguing that problem-based learning presents a model of inquiry that enables students to grasp and apply critical realism's core tenets to practical concerns in the social world. In doing so, it enables them to respond to human oppression in a more insightful way.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in Roy Bhaskar's (1978; 1993; 1998) critical realism, and its contribution to social work, even though little has been written on the subject. The challenge of making the former more pertinent to the latter may lie in Bhaskar's use of technical terms, neologisms and acronyms when presenting his ideas. Another barrier is that philosophy can be viewed as an arcane subject for social work: one that is difficult to apply in practical, real-life circumstances. Yet, social workers practice in a world of ever increasing complexity and oppression. Critical realism has so much to offer in this context, because it can act as an *under labourer* (Locke, 1700/1979) to the profession; that is, it winnows away the kernels of misapprehension, bringing a clear-sighted awareness of the causes of human suffering.

If there is merit in this proposition, the quintessential question at this point can be articulated as follows: how can critical realism be introduced to social workers in a meaningful way that enables them to apply its philosophical tenets with confidence? Relatedly, how can social work educators, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, realise the potential of this body of thought and convey it adroitly to students in the classroom? Lastly, how can social workers extrapolate their (critical realist)

learning to the social world in order to tackle oppression and promote transformative practice aimed at enhancing the well-being of service users?

In this chapter, I will tackle these questions by arguing that the key tenets of critical realism can be adeptly conveyed in the classroom and skilfully applied through Problem-Based Learning (Clouston et al, 2010). This enabling approach is student-centred and organised around andragogical principles (Knowles et al, 2005). Andragogy recognises the centrality of the adult learner, where percipience comes about through self-reflection and group-based inquiry. Here, education is seen as investigative and propelled by an ineluctable curiosity. Such learning principles are most compatible with critical realism which seeks to encourage critical questioning, insights into causality and, most importantly, transformative praxis aimed at either removing or alleviating social injustice.

To consider this area in a structured way, I will first of all consider a number of key sources applying critical realism to social work. Overall, not much has been written on the subject from an educational stance. Thus, my intention is to show that a critical gap exists in our understanding of how critical realism can be introduced to social work students, whether in higher education settings, or in other learning sites. Having presented the rationale for this inquiry, I will then outline what I consider to be the essential tenets of critical realism that social work students need to know if they are to adopt its perspective of the social world and the oppression that lies therein. As part of this elucidation, I will consider Bhaskar's work (1993) on *dialectical change*, a treatise that has received very little attention by the social work academy but nonetheless has considerable ramifications for emancipatory practice. This will then lead to an introduction to Problem-Based Learning and, finally, an attempt to utilize it as a crucial method for making critical realism accessible to social work students.

A Review of Key Sources

The existing literature (written in the English language) on critical realism and social work can be divided into three broad areas, namely: (a) research applications (b) practice considerations and (c) epistemological (or knowledge-based) reflections. Although the sources within these areas do not consider how to educate social

workers on the theme of critical realism, they provide a necessary resource for social work students seeking to understand the philosophy, and apply it within Problem-Based Learning.

Regarding research applications, in a previous publication (Houston, 2010) I made the case for adopting critical realism in qualitative approaches to data acquisition and analysis. Specifically, the article suggested that there was a concordance between critical realist premises and action research with its cyclical inquiry and advancement of social change. I contended that the combination of critical realist principles and action-oriented method, provided a framework for anti-oppressive social work research. On further reflection, action research can be viewed as a form of problem-based learning given that it encourages a group-based analysis of presenting challenges, how to respond to them, and finally evaluate the outcomes of such endeavours.

Oliver (2012) has also made a convincing case for applying critical realism within qualitative research. In her view, critical realism is harmonious with recent attempts to re-work grounded theory in ways that enable the method to take stock of the socially constructed nature of the social world; move beyond induction as the primary research orientation; and inquire critically into the interplay between agency and structure. With these modifications in place, Oliver argues that grounded theory can assimilate the critical realist approach of *retroduction*: a way of reasoning systematically about why events happen in the way that they do. (Later on in this chapter, I will explain the notion of retroduction more fully and integrate it within the stages of Problem-Based Learning). Overall, Oliver's contribution is useful in that it argues that middle-range theory should build from, not only empirical observation and surface description, but also the causal level of unseen mechanisms. As has been argued elsewhere (Houston, 2005; Craig & Bigby, 2015), realist-informed qualitative methods should be seen as part of an evidence-informed paradigm of social work inquiry.

One other research-related application needs to be considered in addition those presented above. It sets out Longhofer and Floersch's (2014) impassioned plea for a 'values-informed' social work research. Drawing on a critical realist approach to

ethics, they reject the 'fact-value' distinction and argue that social work practice and research are inherently normative. Thus, ethics ought to be centre-stage in all inquiry. The 'ought' is what matters most to people as do people themselves; and the social act, whatever its nature, is rarely value-free. The salience of ethics in social work research applies also to social work education where students must be afforded the space and time to cogitate on complex value-dilemmas including how to juxtapose care and control responses in an increasingly regulated profession.

The second area, categorised above as 'practice considerations', has generated a few written outputs most notable of which is Blom and Moren's (2010) inventive CAIMeR Theory. This contribution to knowledge amounts to a conceptual framework examining how outcomes in social work arise from various contingent factors: situational contexts, actors, interventions and results. Moreover, the theory is animated by critical realist ideas that specifically address the role of generative mechanisms at different levels, and how they create an understanding of both the 'how' and the 'why' of change: prising open the 'black box', as it were. Unfortunately, the authors only make a very brief reference to social work education. This is a lost opportunity as the theory is comprehensive and schematically sophisticated.

The third categorisation centres on epistemology in social work. Mäntysaari (2005) poses a rhetorical question under this rubric: 'can a philosophical position called realism act as a foundation for social work knowledge in the three applications of social work: research, education and practice'? In response to this question, he argues that the antimony between objectivism and subjectivism in social research can be resolved through adopting a realist stance on knowledge production. This is because it respects objective causation and subjective meaning (see also, Author, 2001). Mäntysaari's stance chimes with Longhofer and Floersch's (2012) concerns regarding a knowledge crisis in social work. For the latter, critical realism is the solution to this crisis because it transcends the limitations of positivism and conventionalism in social work: two methodological perspectives that, they argue, have truncated knowledge production in social work.

The afore-mentioned valorisation of critical realism in these sources, while not directly addressing the theme of social work education, is nonetheless important for

students. Indubitably, they need to know about the structural constraints shaping social work interventions (Briar-Lawson, 2012) including those arising from neo-liberal contradictions in society (Houston, 2012).

Key Tenets of Critical Realism for Social Work Students

Critical realism is a philosophical perspective which provides an explanation of how complex mechanisms co-mingle in the social world to produce often unpredictable events. Given this emphasis, it has great relevance for social workers who need to understand causation when assessing and intervening in multi-faceted situations involving child and adult trauma. In this section, I highlight the central tenets of Bhaskar's critical realism (1978; 1993; 1998), those which I consider most apt for a Problem-Based Learning approach geared towards social workers' learning and development. This summary is broken down into various parts, namely: (a) *ontology* – covering the nature of our being in the social world; (b) *stratification and emergence* – delineating the different, yet interlinked domains of existence; (c) *epistemology* – addressing what we can know about the social world; (d) *ethics* – looking at the moral principles underpinning critical realism; and (e) *causality and change* – describing the theory of the dialectic lying at the heart of critical realism.

Ontology

For Bhaskar, actors shape their social worlds but are, in turn, constrained by social structures embedded in the fabric of social life. However, it is the nature of these structures that takes on a particular purchase in critical realism. In order to grasp the significance of social structure in critical realist philosophising, we must turn to Bhaskar's view of the social world. His ontological conceptualisation comprises three levels of reality, namely: (a) the *empirical* level (b) the *actual* level and (c) the *causal* level. The first is reflected in what we experience through our senses. We hear discordant themes in a piece of classical music eventually leading to a climax of resolution. We see a broad vista appear before us out of the mist. We taste a much anticipated, fortifying meal. Such are examples of the empirical engagement with reality through the senses.

By way of contrast, the actual level of reality is what happens regardless of our engagement with it. Hence, events occur beyond one's sensory experience. The fact

that a person cannot hear a concert taking place in a far away location does not mean that it has not occurred. One's range of sensory experience is truncated and restricted by spatial and temporal contexts yet there is still an awareness that others are 'going about their business' and life continues in 'far away fields'. Reality does not have to be experienced by everyone for it to have ontological substance.

Lastly, the causal level has a major import in social life. Operating below the meniscus of the empirical and actual levels, are unseen, causal mechanisms including many of the mechanisms generating adversity and trauma in people's lives. These mechanisms work synergistically to produce discernable effects in the empirical and actual levels of experience. In fact, it is by noting these effects that we can hypothesise about the existence and nature of these mechanisms.

An example from the natural sciences illustrates this point. Thus, consider a sheet of paper spattered with iron filings. To the eye there is nothing in the presentation of the filings signifying order. They appear as a random spread across the sheet. However, when a magnet is applied below the paper, the filings fall into a pattern around each pole of the magnet. The pattern is seen by the observer. It registers at the empirical level of reality. However, what is unseen, is the mechanism of magnetism operating at the causal dimension. It is axiomatic that, just because we cannot see immaterial forces with the naked eye, it does not mean they do not exist. Evolution has been an inexorable, causal mechanism in the phylogeny of human development yet has no visible properties *per se*.

These afore-mentioned examples come from the natural sciences. Yet, Bhaskar is keen to extend his thesis on the causal level to the psychological and social aspects of being. A second example from the psychological domain illustrates his stance with reference to the subject of childhood well-being. Take a young child removed from his parents' care and placed with a stranger. Most children who are securely bonded with their parents will show evident distress, anxiety and, ostensibly, rage given this situation. If the child is re-united with his parents after a short while, though, he slowly returns to his secure mode of being, feeling safe to explore and welcoming the parents' proximity. What the observer sees is the child's distress and subsequent calm. What is less clear, at this empirical level of observation, is what is causing the

child's reaction when separating from, and reuniting with, his loving carers. In this regard, John Bowlby (2005), a child ethologist, suggested that children develop through an unseen mechanism of *attachment*. When they feel secure in their parents' care, they are empowered to explore their worlds and develop cognitive and social skills. However, when threatened, they return to their secure base.

Bowlby's work highlighted the existence of the psycho-social mechanism of attachment in social life. Beyond this domain, however, are wider social structural mechanisms operating at the causal level to make events happen, some of which lead to adverse consequences, others to fortuitous events. In neo-liberal economies, for example, the pervasive mechanism of *commodification* acts to reduce social life to objects that have monetary value, that can be purchased, traded or cashed in. Commodification works in tandem with other neo-liberal mechanisms such as deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation to shape the nature of modern life, its cultural forms, media representations and civic engagements. Empirical evidence (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011) of growing inequalities, social pathologies and diminishing measures of well-being in many countries falling prey to the neo-liberal global order, testifies to the work of these unseen mechanism operating within the sphere of political economy.

The combined effects of these mechanisms operating at the causal level create an unpredictable *smorgasbord* of cause and effect, with some mechanisms complementing each other, while others acting in countervailing opposition. That said, far from being a deterministic philosophy, critical realism gives a central place to human agency in shaping outcomes in social life. Actors are affected by myriads of mechanisms but, through their intentions in different times and social contexts, they often modify their effects. Therefore, causality is a complex affair involving the human being's subjective engagement with unseen forces that have an objective power.

Stratification and Emergence

Such mechanisms operate within a stratified world comprising numerous, interlacing systems. In short, reality is layered. If the scientist targets one level of reality and identifies the mechanisms within it then, unquestioningly, there is an aspect of reality

lying beneath it, one giving rise to its fundamental laws and processes. Thus, the characteristics of many animals and plants can be explained by physiological mechanisms but they, in turn, can be explained by deeper-level chemical mechanisms, a prominent one being photosynthesis. So, one can delve deeper, or 'drill down', increasingly into the microstructure of nano-particles.

Equally, reality builds from these microscopic layers to the larger social domains comprising institutions and political economy. This multi-layered world can be studied by discrete disciplines ranging from quantum physics upwards through physical chemistry, organic chemistry, physiology, psychology, the social sciences, humanities, philosophy and theology. In all of this, one layer of reality generates the next in a process of continual emergence yet, crucially, critical realism avoids attempts to reduce one layer to its deeper emergent base. For instance, human psychology should not be reduced to human biology and it to chemistry. Reductionist explanations fail to do justice to the discrete objective properties of each layer *sui generis*.

Epistemology

Bhaskar's articulation of the three different types of reality - empirical, actual and causal - constitutes the main frame of his ontology of the person-in-society. But what can be said regarding his view of epistemology? Here, Bhaskar makes a distinction between the *intransitive* and *transitive* dimensions. The former is the world that objectively exists. The latter is a human construction of that reality. In the transitive world, actors see reality through their perspectival lenses coloured as they may be by theory, bias, past experience and cultural habitus. This notion reverberates with Immanuel Kant's distinction between 'things-in-themselves' (the noumenal world) and 'things-as-we-see-them' (the phenomenal world), and our limited apprehension of the former through innate, *a priori* mental structures. Yet, as our theories develop over time, as social science evolves, the gap between the intransitive and transitive domains narrows, it is contended, much as in the metaphor of Plato's cave when light illuminates previously distorted and misapprehended images revealing a more perspicacious view of reality as it really is.

Ethics

These central tenets on the nature of ontology and epistemology are complemented by a discerned position on ethics. In this context, critical realism does not subscribe to the notion of a value-free science which maintains 'the facts – value' distinction defended rigorously by many positivists. Critically, if one discovers the presence of oppressive mechanisms operating at the causal level of reality, then the social scientist is morally obligated to apply measures to negate their effects or at least expose them for what they are. Hence, when discovering the alienating effects of commodification, one might advocate for de-commodifying measures (for example, removing means-testing procedures from welfare entitlements). In this way, Bhaskar sees a connection between the production of knowledge in society and human emancipation. Essentially, negative value judgements can be made on phenomena which can be shown, through reason, argument or evidence, to be false, hegemonic, misanthropic or exploitative. There must be a presumption in favour of making the truth of the case known through what we have found in our research endeavours.

Causality and Change

Bhaskar went on to further develop his thinking on causality and change in his path-breaking work, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993). Here, he presented an in-depth examination of the *dialectic* as a force for transformation, freedom and emancipation: three imbricated areas that are central to critical social work practice. In order to make this case, Bhaskar critiqued (what he saw as) Hegel's misplaced view of the dialectic. When considering change, Hegel had made the mistake of starting affirmatively with what was present (that is 'identity'). He then proceeded to consider how this presence was overcome, negated and subsumed through the contradictions it generated in a dynamic movement towards the whole. Over time, according to Hegel, the dialectical impulse would transcend contradiction and act as a progressive, cumulative movement towards a final totality.

By way of contrast, Bhaskar argued that dialectical processes did not necessarily eventuate in synthesis, nor were they determined by an unfolding positive teleology, or characterised by opposition. Rather, such forces might be signified by connection, separation or juxtaposition. Putting this another way, the dialectic could be regarded as any interplay between differentiated but related causal elements. Causal powers

were a mix of interconnection as much as distinction. In all of this, Bhaskar attempted to unravel the dialectic from its Hegelian moorings.

So, rather than staring with 'identity', (that is, what was there, or present), as Hegel had done, Bhaskar contended strongly that 'absence', (that is, what was not present), was the defining, inexorable starting point or prime mover of the dialectical impulse. 'Absence' was the *sine qua non* of change: the impetus for the removal or 'absenting' of constraints on human flourishing. To be clearer, 'absence' was synonymous with 'non-being', 'non-existence' or 'negation'. It could refer to a deficit in our conscious thinking (for example, our lack of awareness or understanding of the role of hegemonic powers in social life), or an absence of some entity, property or attribute (for instance, an impecunious existence marked by the social ills of poverty and isolation). Critically, 'absence' was ontologically real, concrete and tangible as opposed to existing at the level of mere ideation (as Hegel would have it).

The notion of something being 'absent', conceived of as a noun, could be thought of etymologically in another way, argued Bhaskar. Thus, the corollary of the noun was the verb 'to absent'. Simply put, 'to absent' meant to remove some lack or deficit. We might attempt, as social workers, to eliminate or 'absent' constraining social forces, perhaps xenophobia, that lead to stigmatisation and shame. Or the absenting focus might be on patriarchy, racism or sectarianism. This is the 'absenting' of 'absence': the eradication of something, or a property or state of affairs that has deleterious consequences for social well-being. Expressed somewhat differently, social justice eventuates out of incompleteness.

'Absenting' could also be subversive and iconoclastic and result in conscientization: a position where the contradictions in life are understood and acted on. A conscious, critical awareness of 'absence', and the conjoined process of 'absenting', was the lynchpin of the dialectic, argued Bhaskar. 'Absenting' absence is consequently a driving negativity, a negativity that propels change. 'Negativity is the hub not only of existence but also of causality. Quite simply, to cause is to absent' (1993, p. 240). Out of insuperable incompleteness, or 'absence', arise various types of contradiction, dissonance, bind, strain, tension, and discord that inject a yearning for freedom in sub-altern populations. These contradictions come to the fore when human needs

are not being met, or are being threatened. Clearly absences have causal effects: a government moves to pump prime austerity measures culminating in a legitimisation crisis that forces a political climb down; the absence of social support following a bereavement causes depression in a vulnerable subject. Not having something can generate the agitation preceding change, the restlessness of activism.

Bhaskar's arguments for the analytical primacy of 'absence' (over 'presence') in propelling social justice have merit. To apprehend any entity, we must be aware of what it is not – its 'absence'. Any kind of identification of an object presumes that we are aware of the conjoined state where the object does not exist. Thus, a conception of material well-being is underpinned by the related notion of penury and vice versa. In this way, 'absence' and 'presence' exist in a conceptual bipolarity that is ingrained in human thought. Moreover, it seems fallacious to view change as coming from 'presence': social change arises when the human subject is aware of what he or she lacks. Human rights are predicated on infringements, past status injustices, reification, or the objectification of the person (Nussbaum, 1995). Recognition eventuates out of misrecognition (Honneth, 1995).

Arguably, social work is a profession that ought to be critically attuned to 'absence' in the psychological domain of broken narrative, trauma, loss and attachment but also on the societal plane of marginalisation, exclusion, deprivation, incarceration and dispossession. Vitally, what critical realism offers to social work is an understanding of the deep-rooted, unseen (to the empirical eye) causal mechanisms that engender and sustain such absences and also the ones that lead to the absencing of such absences. Critical realism empowers social workers to 'drill down' below the meniscus of the everyday empirical world as part of an inquiry into 'depth' rather than skimming superficially on the plane of 'surface' impression.

With 'absence' at the heart of the transformative process, we can now consider Bhaskar's overarching view of the dialectic, comprising four critical moments, namely: *non-identity*, *negativity*, *totality* and *transformative praxis*. It is best to describe these interlinked moments through a practical example. A perilous food shortage in a country becomes apparent and we need to analyse the situation in order to arrive at credible solutions and change strategies to address the problem.

The first moment of *non-identity* involves an analysis of some of the causal, generative mechanisms operating at the 'real' level of reality which might include natural, environmental factors (for example, drought, pestilence, water shortages, or the effects of pollution). Here, we are factoring in the awareness that reality is stratified, differentiated and emergent, and therefore that the problem must be investigated at these different levels. What Bhaskar means, essentially, is that we must not be led down a blind alley of only looking at the problem through the lens of the 'empirical': what our sense impressions make of the problem. We may see things and hear things but they are only occluded impressions.

The second moment, *negativity*, looks critically at what is 'absent' in the situation and how to transform that absence through working with the contradictions it generates. Absence in the example proffered might refer to the loss of health, adequate nutrition, the right to life, and social wellbeing. It could highlight contradictions in governmental policies aimed at resourcing local communities in times of need, create oppositional movements, in terms of local activism, and lead to advocacy at the internal level of aid.

The third moment, of *totality*, considers how events are caused by a raft of interconnected processes operating at the 'micro', 'mezzo' and 'macro' levels of reality. In the example posited, we could consider how psychological, social, environmental, economic, political, and cultural mechanisms, operating at the level of the 'real', create and sustain the food shortage. For instance, neo-liberal policies of free trade, austerity, circumscribed aid, and unregulated markets, might provide an important backdrop to the reluctance to intervene politically in the issue. The notion of totality requires us to think ecologically and in a systemic way about causation, taking account of how various contingencies operate in an imbricated way to affect people, social groupings, institutions, and societies. Totality rests on the premise that phenomena must be seen as part of the whole and, that while the former is determined by the latter, both are equiprimordial.

The last moment, *transformative praxis*, occurs when we combine our analysis resulting from the previous three steps. Based on this holistic constellation, we are now in a position to understand more fully the deep-rooted causes of the problem,

not on a surface, superficial level but in terms of the domain of the 'real'. Actors can reflect on this deeper understanding and initiate transformative measures to attain desired goals. Thus, an international aid agency can develop and institute a perspicacious change strategy aimed at enhancing positive generative mechanisms while ameliorating the negative ones.

Problem-Based Learning and Critical Realism

Problem-Based Learning (Clouston et al, 2010) is an educational method which involves students in formulating a problem in the classroom, and then supports them to examine it systematically as active learners. We can trace its origins back to Socratic forms of critical inquiry and Aristotlean attempts to interrogate 'appearances' so that our understanding of them deepens. A more recent philosopher, Dewey (1944), also embraced the essence of the approach by arguing that knowledge-acquisition was an active process, one involving a problem-solving course of development. The role of the educator was therefore to:

'organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of a constructive imagination, is what needs to be done to improve social conditions' (p. 137).

There are a number of central principles underpinning the Problem-Based Learning stance, namely that:

- Learning is an active and developmental process shaped by a range of psycho-social, contextual factors such as past experience, achievement, access to learning resources and method of instruction;
- Students are active learners who bring their experience and perspectives to create meaning when faced with challenging scenarios in the classroom;
- Educators are viewed as 'facilitators', 'cognitive coaches' or 'pedagogic mentors', as opposed to formal 'chalk and talk disseminators', of knowledge;
- The learning experience revolves around the consideration of a relevant, open-ended problem that serves as a catalyst or stimulus for critical inquiry;

- Knowledge-acquisition is student-centred and occurs within small groups who take ownership of the problem-solving process by applying relevant knowledge, recommended resources and past learning;
- Active learning involves applying, not only relevant domain knowledge, but also critical thinking skills, so that students become effective problem-solvers;
- The educator, as facilitator, guides exploration, and stimulates critical thinking, reflection, problem-solving and reflexivity, by providing a theoretical scaffold for inquiry, understanding, knowledge-acquisition and learning;
- The problem under inquiry is 'open-ended' requiring students to embrace notions of complexity, fluidity, inter-connectedness, contradiction and spatio-temporal contingency; and
- Students are encouraged to form and test hypotheses concerning the underlying mechanisms ostensibly causing and ameliorating the problem.

These principles, which can be viewed as essentially constructivist in orientation, inform a typical Problem-Based Learning process of inquiry. This starts with an elicitation of the problem. Essentially, students should feel that the problem resonates with their core interests, needs, tasks and responsibilities. It must be worth the attention. If the subject matter is nugatory, it will be hard to sustain their interest. Problem identification is therefore a process of mutual deliberation and often driven by ethical considerations or unresolved exigencies within the practice field.

The next step involves the facilitator guiding the students to a procedure or scaffold for investigating the problem. This helps to provide direction when it comes to examining the problem and brainstorming ways of addressing it. In other words, it generates practical advice as to how to think through the problem systematically, analytically and thoroughly. As Gallagher (1997, p. 337) says, 'students receive systematic instruction in conceptual, strategic, and reflective reasoning in the context of a discipline that will ultimately make them more successful in later investigations'. For example, the process at this stage might involve setting out initial premises about the problem, followed by any facts that can be gathered about it, any theoretical considerations relating to it, the learning implications coming from these

deliberations, and finally an action plan for resolving it. Later on, I will argue that the critical realist, investigative process, known as retroduction, fulfils this role amply.

After the above step has been clarified, it is a matter of enacting it, preferably in small sub-groups (of four to five students). Critically, the students must take responsibility for this step of inquiry using the facilitator as a resource person. The facilitator can direct the students to useful conceptual frameworks or theories that might illuminate different dimensions of the problem but these domains of knowledge are not exclusive nor exhaustive. Students at this stage are encouraged to think laterally, logically, experimentally and hypothetically. They are also asked to think reflexively by examining how their assumptions about the problem reflect their own personal and social characteristics. Essentially, how does their class, race, age, gender and culture influence their construction of the problem?

As soon as each of the sub-groups has completed their inquiries into the problem, they are invited to reassemble into the large group. Here, each sub-group reports on their findings including their analysis of the problem and action plan for resolving it. Participants are encouraged to share any evidence for their conclusions, how they have applied critical thinking and made use of the theoretical scaffolding. Ideas and facts are shared. Key learning issues are highlighted. Any additional learning resources are indicated. Importantly, any new information is proffered.

When each group has reported on the above areas, the facilitator helps the participants to evince summative themes and learning points, both on the causation of the problem, and also on the means for tackling it. Any disagreements on problem causation are debated. The facilitator will try to work towards a consensual understanding within the large group based on reasoned argumentation and evidence. The force of better argument should prevail.

Finally, the participants are asked to evaluate their own performance, their sub-group's contribution and that of the whole group. Essentially, how effective have they been in connecting with the problem, generating ideas and hypotheses about it, searching for facts and analysing feelings, formulating learning issues and developing a plan of action? Moreover, to what extent did they probe sufficiently,

adopt higher-level thinking, utilise reflection and, critically, use group processes in a positive, collegiate way?

Clearly, there is a deep affinity between these learning principles and processes, and the critical realist precepts outlined earlier on. First, the emphasis on the student as an active inquirer, or co-producer of knowledge and action, chimes with critical realism's view of the human subject as possessing transformative agency. Thus, even though there are wider structural constraints inhibiting and re-producing knowledge-manufacture and action, people can make virtuosic responses, bringing individual interpretation and meaning to socially construct their social worlds. To reiterate, Bhaskar's final moment in his articulation of the dialectic, is the appreciation of the transformative praxis that arises from reflexive awareness of 'absence' in social life.

Second, the focus on a deep-seated exploration of an open-ended problem, where learners appreciate the reality of complex and multifaceted causality, reverberates strongly with the critical realist emphasis on the 'real' domain of cause and effect, the domain that goes beyond the 'empirical' level of seen and felt experience. Problem-Based Learning, furthermore, acknowledges that reality comprises imbricated, intermeshed, internal and external causal processes much like Bhaskar's notion of 'totality' where an understanding of absence necessitates a comprehension of how sub-systems affect the whole system and how the whole system, in turn, shapes the sub-systems.

Thirdly, the need for a method, or procedure of inquiry, within Problem-Based Learning (as set out above) can be compared with critical realism's advocacy of *retroduction* as an analytical process for gaining insight into causation. The next section will explore this process in some detail as, within critical realism, it is the problem-solving method *par excellence*. The contention, here, is that it can be introduced to students within the problem-solving sequence explained earlier. Thus, the argument is that retroduction becomes the principal tool of inquiry within Problem-Based Learning and that, the critical realist ideas outlined above, act as a theoretical source supporting the problem-solving process.

Retroduction, Dialectical Change and Problem Based Learning

Sayer (1992) says retroduction involves the inference from a description of some phenomena or problem, to an understanding of the causal properties producing it. In retroduction, the researcher seeks to apprehend how an event 'B', the problem, was produced by 'A'. This is an *a priori* process of thinking backward, one that tries to identify the causal mechanisms giving rise to the event. To expand on the nature of this investigation, the inquirer starts with a *transcendental* question. Kant said such questions should take the following form: 'what must be the case in order for events to occur as they do'? In other words, an inquirer has observed something of interest - in this case, the problem - and now wants to understand the factors that have brought it about.

Inquirers respond to transcendental questions by developing hypotheses about what causal mechanisms may be operating in a given sphere. Such hypotheses often take the form of metaphorical hunches, inferences, models or analogies rather than tightly defined, scientific conjectures that are meant to be tested empirically in controlled conditions. For example, a study of the properties of electrons might compare them to the flow of water molecules along a river. Alternatively, a study of organisational life might compare it to a psychic prison. Or, a study of patients in a mental hospital might conjecture that the experience amounts to a divestiture of their social identities. In retroduction, the aim is to hypothesise about the likely influence of multiple mechanisms producing inter-linked effects in social life.

Given this is a complex task, the inquirer needs to draw on theories that purport to examine deep, causal properties in psychological and social life in order to gain a tentative understanding of what mechanisms are at play. For example, in social research, these may be theories of identity, face-to-face interaction, and institutional life. Additionally, retroduction can be linked with *complexity theory* (Mason, 2008): the construction of an overall system by defining its constituent parts (or sub-systems) and how they are linked together to produce discernable effects.

Once hypothetical mechanisms have been elicited, the inquirer then seeks for evidence to either confirm or disconfirm their presence. For example, if a mechanism of commodification was really at work, then the inquirer would expect to see

evidence of human life being reduced to monetary factors or life being intractably linked to market principles. If however, evidence from the empirical world is lacking, then alternative hypotheses need to be propounded and tested (using perhaps a different set of theories), up until the point the inquirer has sufficient evidence to make a compelling case regarding some of the factors affecting causality in the area of inquiry pursued. This can compare with a medical physician who observes outward symptoms in the patient, develops hypotheses about their underlying causes, tests whether they are present and re-formulates her hypothesis if required.

Finally, if there is a strong case for believing that a number of oppressive mechanisms have been located, then the inquirer is duty bound to take actions to offset their effects. For example, if commodification is evidenced, then the inquirer might resort to a set of policy recommendations highlighting the need for de-commodifying measures. In a welfare context, this could include arguments for removing means-testing for essential child-care services. In all of this, it is essential to remember that outcomes in social life are the combined effect of, not only deep-seated mechanisms, but also human agency working in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Human agents, far from being cultural dopes, reflect on their circumstances. They use conceptual space to deliberate on constraints and enabling factors and to take action accordingly.

From what has been said, retroduction focuses on an event, or a problem to be understood, at a deep causal level. However, the notion of a problem-situation can recast as an 'absence' to be interrogated, if we are to embrace Bhaskar's work on dialectical change. In other words, we start with a notion of 'absence' in social work: the lack of emotional well-being, the want for better housing conditions, the non-existence of social amenities in a deprived area. What causes each of these absences and how do we *absent* them? To reiterate, the problem becomes synonymous with a defined 'absence'. This notion of an 'absence' kick starts the retroductive, problem-solving process and its ensuing steps. So, the transcendental question asks: 'what must be the case for this particular 'absence' to exist as it does'? Secondly, 'how do we *absent* that absence'?

Retroduction, reworked in this way to accommodate the notion of 'absence' as the central driving force of inquiry, can be integrated within the Problem-Based Learning approach, to enhance its capacity to unravel complex problems or absences. But how exactly? Earlier, it was suggested that Problem-Based Learning relied on a procedure or scaffolding: a sequence of stages through which students might begin to examine the problem systematically. It is here that retroduction can be introduced and explained to social work students and examples provided showing its application to real-life situations of concern.

The Challenge for Social Work Education

Clearly, there are a set of conceptual and practical challenges for social work educators in integrating these separate, although compatible, elements of inquiry. First, there is the need to explain the essential tenets of critical realism and retroduction to students. Second, there is the necessity for students to understand the logistics of Problem-Based Learning, its rationale, focus, steps and stages. Last, there is the challenge of integrating critical realism with the Problem-Based Learning approach and enabling students to apply it to a chosen problem/absence. To take stock of these challenges, I suggest social work educators might consider structuring their input to students around three inter-linked orientations followed by a Problem-Based Learning Project. At the outset, these dimensions of the learning input should be briefly summarised before addressing them in more detail. At this beginning stage, it is important that students realise the value of combining an active, student-centred learning approach with a philosophical perspective aimed at understanding human oppression.

The first orientation aims to present the core tenets of critical realism (covered earlier) to the students, including the retroductive inquiry process. Because critical realism is largely theoretical and conceptual in content, and hence does not lend itself to easy explanation, it is important to provide examples from the social world demonstrating its applicability. I have provided some illustrations in this chapter. In addition, students should be encouraged to read the existing social work literature on critical realism, most of which I have summarised or referenced above. Primarily, this first orientation seeks to enable students to move from 'surface' to 'depth', to inquire below the meniscus of everyday sense impressions. Practical examples will help but

educators might also resort to metaphors to clarify key concepts. For example, the notion of stratification might be represented analogously with reference to the structure of a Russian doll with its nested figurines.

The second orientation involves explaining the Problem-Based Learning approach to students. The principles and processes underpinning it, described earlier, could be clarified by providing examples of how it might be used to tackle a problem in social work that students may have encountered while on placement. How to marry the need for relationship-based social work with the demands of organisational regulation, is perhaps a common challenge within Anglophile countries. Thus, the model is presented both conceptually but is also anchored within real-life demands. The educator should remind students that they will get a further opportunity to understand the model by applying it later on to a problem/absence of their choice.

The third orientation attempts to meld, or merge critical realist thinking within the Problem-Based Learning method. I have suggested that this is best done by introducing critical realism as an overarching theoretical scaffolding for analysing the chosen problem/absence. In doing so, students are encouraged to view the problem through a realist lens: one which involves an inquiry into depth, and the unseen causal mechanism perpetuating and assuaging the problem. Importantly, the retroductive process allows students, acting as self-directed learners, to draw on a wide range of theories to explain what is happening beneath the surface. Human behaviour in social work can be understood, *inter-alia*, through attachment and object-relations theories, social learning theory, systemic perspectives, and through bio-psycho-social understandings of the person in her environment (Pilgrim, 2015). Critical realism requires students to construct hypotheses about the problem/absence, using pertinent theories. More than that, it requires them to test the plausibility of the hypothesis. Without question, they are active learners in this process.

The final stage of learning invites students to apply the third orientation to a problem in social work of their choice. This is the practical component of the learning sequence and can be viewed as a working project. It is meant to broadly apply the stages of the Problem-Based method (outlined above) albeit using retroduction as

the prototypical, problem-solving procedure. This will necessitate students working in small groups as advocated by the method, reporting back to the larger group on their findings, with the social work facilitator/educator drawing out summative learning themes at the end of the process. It is vital at this stage of practical implementation, that social work educators reiterate the meaning of complex ideas (as and when needed), and remind students of the process being followed, acting as an informational resource when there is confusion or when students are veering off the task.

Conclusion

So, to summarise, I am suggesting that critical realism offers social work students a veritable way of thinking about the social world, in order to understand the deep-seated causes of different events, including critical absences in social life. Because it has mostly been articulated as an abstract body of thought, it presents challenges for the social work educator when applying it to real life situations. Social work educators, it is contended, can rise to this challenge, by integrating critical realist ideas and procedures within the Problem-Based Learning approach. Because the latter focuses on real life problems, or absences to be solved, it acts as a vehicle for critical realist problem-solving in social work. Not only do both approaches share a similar approach to human agency, the need for transformative praxis, and the nature of problem-formation and causation, they also insist on a robust means of interrogating problems to elicit causative factors and plan action strategies. Centrally, both start with a problem or absence to be determined. In short, they are commensurate and compatible sources of understanding.

More specifically, by co-opting the retroductive procedure within the Problem-Based Learning sequence of inquiry, students move from a surface exploration of the problem/absence to one of depth understanding. Additionally, they are given a practical *modus operandi* for utilising critical realist ideas which, arguably, should be linked to real world concerns, if they are to have any meaning at all. Problem-Based Learning provides a lens through which critical realism can be viewed in a practical way, as it grounds the approach, making it relevant to social work concerns. *Ipso facto*, critical realism invigorates Problem-Based Learning and it, in turn, widens the accessibility and applicability of critical realism: the connection is symbiotic. Putting

this another way, social work students need to see the relevance of ideas for practice. Problem-Based Learning provides this template of understanding, and it is one that social work educators, who are animated by critical realist ideas, might consider using.

Stan Houston practiced social work with children and families in Northern Ireland for around twenty years before entering higher education. He is interested in the application of critical social theory and philosophy to social work.

Lorna Montgomery practiced as social worker in Northern Ireland for around twenty years, mainly in the area of mental health. She is interested in the application of theory to social work, and in research around mental health, adult safeguarding and bereavement.

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