

Peer Review

Review of: "Conceptual Architecture for a Critical Realist Synthesis of a Universal School-based Mindfulness Intervention"

Dave Elder-Vass¹

1. Loughborough University, United Kingdom

I was interested in this paper because I contributed to a paper a couple of years ago (which the authors cite) that advocated careful attention to the conceptual architecture of research projects (Nichol et al., 2023). I assume I was invited to review it because of that paper and my background in critical realism. We argued in our paper that all research projects have a conceptual architecture, including philosophical, theoretical, and methodological commitments, though it's not always explicit or coherent, and that making it explicit helps researchers to ensure that the different elements of their project are mutually consistent. So it was intriguing to see how another group of authors had gone about doing that.

Having said that, I don't think we expected to see researchers producing standalone papers about their conceptual architecture. I thought of this partly as 'behind the scenes' work, and partly as something that would surface here and there amongst other work. I could imagine a chapter of a PhD thesis or a book addressing its conceptual architecture – indeed, in practice, some 'methodology' chapters do that already. Or perhaps elements of it would be covered in the conceptual preamble to a paper about the findings of a research project. My concern with devoting an entire paper to a project's conceptual architecture is a suspicion that most social science audiences might have much less interest in a paper that covered only the conceptual architecture of a project and didn't address its findings.

So at first, I was surprised to see a standalone paper like this one. Having read it, though, I'm not sure it really is a standalone paper. The introduction suggests that it's a paper about the project's conceptual architecture, but it doesn't explain the purpose of providing such a paper and why it should be of interest to its potential readers. What is the reason for sharing the conceptual architecture of the project with the scholarly community; what do you expect readers to get from reading it? It feels, instead, like part of a larger project that has its own (very persuasive) justification: a critical realist synthetic review of the

literature on school-based mindfulness interventions (SBMI). Its status as part of something larger seems to be confirmed by the way the paper cuts off abruptly at the end. Rather than a conclusion, we have a single paragraph on methods. I would have expected a conclusion that sums up the purpose of the paper and how it contributes to the larger project and/or to the literature in general.

What we seem to have here, then, is a section of a larger project rather than a paper in its own right. But perhaps this is one of the things that Qeios is useful for: trying out sections of a larger project and obtaining feedback on them while the larger project is still a work in progress. Still, that could be made clearer in the introduction, and the complete absence of a conclusion is disorienting, to say the least. If this is really only a fragment of something larger that is being shared for the purpose of obtaining feedback, I would expect that to be stated. Alternatively (and preferably), tell us in the introduction why we should be interested in a project's conceptual architecture without the project's results, and explain that again in a conclusion!

Having said all that, perhaps the most important thing about the paper is whether the conceptual architecture it outlines is coherent, convincing, and appropriate to the larger project. The project itself is well justified – as in many areas of social research, the literature appears to be predominantly empiricist but provides materials that could be employed to look beyond appearances to understand the mechanisms at work. Hence the possibility of developing a project that explains “how SBMIs work, for whom, and under what circumstances.” The account of critical realism as an alternative to Cartesian and post-Cartesian approaches is well-informed and persuasive. I also like the account of critical realist ontology, and I don't recall seeing its complexity summarised across three dimensions in quite the way that is presented in Table 3. One strength of the discussion of conceptual architecture is that it is regularly referred back to, or illustrated with, issues from the substantive analysis of SBMIs. I can't comment on Pearlin and Bonnell's contributions as I am unfamiliar with their work, but superficially, they do appear to fit comfortably into the critical realist framework. Overall, the conceptual architecture seems sophisticated, coherent, and highly appropriate to the case.

Let me pick up on one point of detail: The authors write that critical realists “reject naïve realism, that is, to believe our perception of the world reflects it precisely as it is, unbiased and unfiltered. Bhaskar refers to this as the epistemic fallacy, the tendency to conflate ontology (what is) and epistemology (what we can know).” The first sentence is certainly true, but I don't think that's what Bhaskar means by the epistemic fallacy. As I understand it, the epistemic fallacy is the fallacy of substituting beliefs about knowledge for beliefs about the world itself. For example, to believe that we can know nothing about the

world in itself and so that all of our discourse really refers only to our beliefs about the world. To put it in the authors' terms, while naïve realism is a problem of the Cartesian approach, the epistemic fallacy is a problem of the post-Cartesian approach, or at least of some of the more extreme constructionist varieties of it.

References

Nichol, A. J., Hastings, C., & Elder-Vass, D. (2023). Putting philosophy to work: developing the conceptual architecture of research projects. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 22(3), 364–383.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2023.2217054>

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.