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ABSTRACT TITLE: CRITICAL REALIST NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Abstract

During my in-candidature review, a convenor questioned whether narrative inquiry (NI) and critical realism (CR) were philosophically compatible. This questioning prompted deep reflection and extensive reading. Although my study was already well underway using NI, I held a strong affinity for CR's layered ontology and realist stance. I needed to be sure these philosophical positions were reconcilable and meaningfully aligned. This paper introduces a new paradigm: the critical realist narrative inquiry. This paradigm explains that the philosophy of critical realism underlabours the narrative inquiry. I argue that CR's realist ontology and epistemological relativism offer a robust foundation for NI's relational, context-dependent methodology (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). CR does not constrain the narrative inquirer. It deepens it, grounding narrative research in an ontologically stratified world while honouring the subjectivity and temporality of human experience (Danermark et al., 2002; Maxwell, 2012; Trahar, 2009). In this paper, I outline the philosophical intersections between CR and NI and demonstrate how their integration provides a robust framework for understanding the needs of adult learners in complex, open systems. By aligning CR's explanatory depth with NI's experiential depth, this paradigm offers a meaningful contribution to evolving methodologies in adult education research (Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Keywords: critical realism, narrative inquiry, philosophy underlabour methodology, critical realist