

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) meets Critical Realism (CR). Conducting QCA-plus-CR-driven qualitative research.

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Abstract

How can critical realist (CR) researchers engage with the uncertainty, openness, and complexity inherent in social systems? Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) offers a compelling methodological response to this challenge. In this contribution, I argue that QCA provides a robust framework for applying – or operationalizing – key epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical realism in empirical social research. The argument is structured in two parts. First, I identify the key epistemological and methodological convergences between QCA and CR. Second, I present a practical example to illustrate how Qualitative Comparative Realism (QCR) can inform CR-based qualitative data analysis.

Four central epistemological and methodological principles are shared by QCA and CR. **First**, both approaches conceptualize social phenomena as complex and contingent, resisting explanation through traditional variable-oriented frameworks. **Second**, they advocate for a case-based comparative approach, wherein social phenomena are understood as configurations of conditions and outcomes. In this view, each case represents a unique combination of conditions in which relational mechanisms are activated to generate specific outcomes. In this regard, cases are emergent entities – wholes – defined by specific combinations of conditions that have the capacity to bring about outcomes. The case-based methodology of QCA aligns with the critical realist (CR) tripartite ontology: each case corresponds to the Actual level (events composed of various instances at the Empirical level), within which particular generative mechanisms at the Real level are activated to produce those outcomes. **Third**, cases are not merely empirical configurations; they require theoretical redescription to be understood as instances of something broader. In practice, this means that researchers must contextualize empirical data through theoretical lenses so that disparate observations can be recognized as belonging to a single, coherent case. In other words, abduction and contextual knowledge are essential for investigating social phenomena. Consequently, causal explanations in QCA (as in CR) are not directly observed but are inferred: researchers first identify sets of cases that share a given outcome and then seek the constellation of conditions that produced that outcome. This retroductive mode of reasoning—moving from observed outcomes to hypothesized generative conditions—is the **fourth** methodological principle that QCA and CR share.

In the second part of this contribution, I apply the aforementioned methodological framework to interview data collected from a research project investigating teachers' emotions. Specifically, I demonstrate how the QCA truth table can serve as a tool for identifying distinct combinations of conditions across the dataset. These combinations reveal how interviews cluster into specific configurations, each of which can be understood as a case wherein relational mechanisms account for the emergence of emotional responses among teachers. Through this approach, I illustrate how QCA, grounded in critical realist reasoning, can be used to uncover the causal complexity underlying emotional experiences in educational settings.