

How do mechanisms' 'tendency' within critical realism influence our understanding of structure-agency relations?

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Abstract

The paper aims to contribute to the literature on the relation between human agency and social structure, where the issue of primacy of either of them over the other, is closely affected by our understanding of the 'causation' mechanism. By taking critical realism's very specific position regarding the ontology of causation, which centers around the concept of 'tendency', stemming from a distinction made between the real and the actual causal power, a new approach in theorizing about the agency-structure relations is sought in the paper. After a concise overview of the major scholarly positions regarding the agency-structure relations, the prominent approaches taken by key figures in the critical realism tradition concerning the same issue are presented. It is argued that, similar to the dialectical approaches, the agency-structure relations in the critical realism accounts are perceived to be mutually constituted. Nevertheless, it is shown that in the explanatory accounts on critical realism, there exist different levels of emphasis on the role of agents vis-à-vis the structures from which originate the causal mechanisms. Finally, and given the recognition of multiplicity of structures co-determining the actualization of causal powers underlying social phenomena (events) within the critical realist accounts, the paper concludes with suggesting a new concept, namely 'emergent-tendencies', for better understanding of agency-structure relations.

Keywords: critical realism, causality, structure, agency, tendency

JEL: B41, O30

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Introduction

The debate around the relation between human agency and social structure has for long occupied theorists and scholars across the social scientific subjects¹. As the issue of primacy of either of them, i.e. agency or structure, over the other, is at the center of this debate, any fundamental discussion concerning the quiddity of *causation* within the realm of social sciences can have important implications for the agency-structure relationship. By taking a very specific position regarding the ontology of causation, critical realism provides, as a philosophical stance in (social) science, a distinct basis for theorizing about the agency-structure relations.

Philosophy of science has historically seen three broad positions developed in it. These include *classical empiricism*, *transcendental idealism*, and *transcendental realism* (Bhaskar, 2008). In a nutshell, while in classical empiricism the objects of knowledge are phenomena constituting natural facts, in transcendental idealism they are human mind's constructs imposed upon phenomena, and in transcendental realism they are real (but not necessarily observable) mechanisms that generate phenomena. While classical empiricism is most commonly represented by David Hume's experimentalism, transcendental idealism is best known by Immanuel Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, and transcendental realism is foremost associated with Roy Bhaskar's critic of both positivist (empiricist) and postmodern accounts of scientific enquiry, leading to critical realism.

¹ Marxian mid-19th century accounts on human versus history is often considered as one of the earliest discussions in modern times on the agency-structure dichotomy (cf. Arab, 2016).

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As another prominent figure in the tradition of critical realism, Sayer (2000) distinguishes realism, within the philosophy of natural science, from empiricism and relativism; and within the philosophy of social science, from scientism and interpretivism. Regarding the latter distinction, which is the main concern here, he explains:

*[...] in the philosophy and methodology of social science, critical realism provides an alternative to both hopes of a law-finding science of society modelled on natural science methodology and the anti-naturalist or interpretivist reductions of social science to the interpretation of meaning. (Sayer, *ibid*, p. 2)*

According to Sayer (*ibid*), realism provides a third way in both cases (of the philosophy of sciences) by challenging particularly their conceptions regarding the issue of causation. In the accounts of Bhaskar's critical realism, then, there are two key elements of causation, namely the *real causal powers* and the *actual causation* (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 44). In other words, according to Bhaskar's critical realism, causal powers as such are mechanisms that are real but not necessarily actual. An explanation for this is that *"[a]ctual events, Bhaskar argues, are not produced by single causes as the covering law model suggests, but by a complex interaction of the causal powers of the entities involved."* (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 47).

Distinguishing between ontological and epistemological concepts of causality, it can be said that in the critical realism tradition, the concept of causal power is designed to address the ontological problem of causality (Kaidesoja, 2007). Then, due to the above-mentioned distinction made between causal powers and their actualization, Bhaskar proposes that the causal laws need to be analyzed as *tendencies* (see also Fleetwood, 2001). In other words, even the exercised causal powers of things might fail to generate the expected effects at the level of actual

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events, and therefore, the causal powers of entities *tend* to generate specific outcomes. It is then the final intention here to discuss the relationship between the concept of tendency (in the critical realism tradition) and the agency-structure relation.

Critical realism

The key premises of critical realism are 'ontological realism' and 'epistemological relativism', respectively meaning that there exists a real world independent of our knowledge, but that our knowledge of that world is contextually and historically conditioned (Bhaskar 1979; 1975). Together with 'judgmental rationalism', the claim that, despite epistemological relativism, there are rational grounds for preferring some theories over others, these three normative elements regarding theory of scientific enquiry have been characterized as the 'holy trinity' of critical realism (Hartwig, 2007).

Critical realism's inception is, as mentioned earlier, commonly credited to Roy Bhaskar, who developed this metatheory initially in two of his seminal books, first of them being *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) on the philosophy of science, followed by *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) on the philosophy of social sciences. The central philosophical positions taken in these two books, namely transcendental realism and critical naturalism, were then combined into 'critical realism' as a new distinctive position in the philosophy of science and social science. Bhaskar's third classic on these philosophies, entitled *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986) had a crucial role in popularizing the term critical realism. The departure point for Bhaskar's classics, however, remains in the distinction and contrast he makes between *transcendental realism* and *empirical*

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realism (the latter being equivalent to empiricism). This distinction stems from the difference recognized by Bhaskar (1975) between *transitive* and *intransitive* dimensions of knowledge. In this account, the objects of science constitute the intransitive dimension of science, and the theories developed about them constitute the transitive dimension of science. Hence, a distinction in transcendental realism is made between the real and the empirical, as the latter incorporates the transitive dimension of knowledge to the former's intransitive content, while in empirical realism, the real is identified with the empirical itself.

The recognition of the existence of an intransitive domain in social phenomena, which is the position taken by critical realism, means that generative mechanisms exist that underlie the occurrence of a social event. For Bhaskar, the social reality is seen as "*social arrangements that are the products of material but unobservable structures of social relations*" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 108). In fact, Bhaskar (1979) counts three basic ontological premises (ontological depth) of transcendental realist social theory about social reality, including *intransitivity*, *transfactuality*, and *stratification*. The first one, i.e. intransitivity, maintains that the mechanisms that science discovers are existentially independent of the scientific process, while the product of scientific process are fallible. In other words, the intransitive domain of knowledge that answers the question of "what is the phenomena", shall be distinguished from the transitive domain of knowledge that answers the question of "what we can know about the phenomena". The second premise, i.e. transfactuality, means that the generative mechanisms of nature are universal and operate in closed and open systems alike. In other words, if a phenomenon appears differently in closed versus open systems, the reason shall be sought in co-determining factors. This implies that the domain of the real is distinct and greater

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than the domain of the actual, and hence, also greater than the domain of empirical. Finally, the third ontological depth, i.e. stratification, refers to rejection of actualism or natural necessity emanating from philosophical problems like induction based on surface sense data. This way a "vertical causality" is recognized between the layers of reality. This is a key feature in the ontological accounts of critical realism which makes distinction between the domains of real, actual and empirical. This has been called a 'stratified ontology', in distinction with 'flat' ontologies proposed by empirical realism. **Table 1** demonstrates the populating entities of each of these domains.

Table 1 - Bhaskar's three ontological domains and their populating entities. Source: Bhaskar (1975, p. 56)

	Domain of real	Domain of actual	Domain of empirical
Mechanisms	x		
Events	x	x	
Experiences	x	x	x

This stratification pointed out that:

[...] reality is constituted not only by experiences and the course of actual events, but also by powers, mechanisms and tendencies - by aspects of reality that underpin, generate or facilitate the actual phenomena that we may (or may not) experience [...] (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998, p. 5)

This is the essence of what distinguishes the ontology of causation in the accounts of critical realism from other prominent philosophical stands on the causal inference. The domain of real represents mechanisms and tendencies which can generate actual events, based on which experiences can be empirically sensed and

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investigated. The next section deals with the issue of causality in the realm of critical realism in more detail.

Causality in critical realism

The most fundamental aim of critical realism is explanation of real world phenomena in terms of causality mechanisms underlying the generation of that phenomena. According to critical realists, real world entities, which exist independently of our knowledge, have causal powers (cf. Bhaskar, 1975; Harré & Madden, 1975; Elder-Vass, 2010), which if and when triggered, create events. Accordingly, the objective of science is to uncover the nature and structure of these entities and to explain their causal powers. In line with this, Blaikie (2000) explains that the intransitive structures and mechanisms "*... are the real essences of things that exist in nature, such essences being their power or tendency to produce effects that can be observed*" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 108).

Discussing Bhaskar's conception of 'multiple determination', which draws on interaction between different causal mechanisms affecting events, Elder-Vass (2010) proposes a *level abstracted* versus *laminated* view of an entity. According to this distinction, the level abstracted view "*considers the effects of the whole entity in isolation from the existence or effects of its parts*" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 49). On the other hand, if a whole entity is treated "quite explicitly as a stratified ensemble of parts at various ontological levels" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 49), a laminated view of that entity is taken into account. Consequently, "*[t]he total causal impact of a higher level entity conceived of in these laminated terms, then, includes the impact of all its lower-level parts as well as the causal powers that are emergent at its highest level*" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 50). He then explains that it is due to actual

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phenomena's being inherently laminated that different real causal mechanisms, each emerging at a specific level, need to be taken into account.

As mentioned earlier, Elder-Vass (2010) clarifies that developing causal explanations, according to critical realism, can be broken down to two complementary processes. One is concerned with identifying causal powers by observing "partial" empirical regularities in order to hypothesize about them. Here, the word partial refers to the fact that only one among several mechanisms affecting the outcome is being studied. The second process concerns identifying the set of causal powers that interact to produce events (or phenomena). In critical realism terms, the former process is called *retroduction* while the latter process is termed *retrodiction* (Lawson, 1997). Therefore, it is needed to complement the identification of entity-specific causal mechanisms – i.e. the "partial" empirical regularities - with the identification of event-specific set of entities that collectively generate the outcome (i.e. the event).

Related to the issue of collective influence of entities, the type of relations between entities is another area of scrutinizing within the realm of critical realism. Sayer (1992) distinguishes between *necessary* and *contingent* relationship between entities. Structure of an entity, in this sense, refers to the set of 'necessary' relationships between the parts that constitute that entity. A contingent relation but refers to a relation between entities that "*is neither necessary nor impossible that they stand in any particular relation*" (Sayer, 1992, p. 89). Based on this, Sayer explains that causal processes could produce quite different results in different contexts, due to the existence of contingent relationships which can generate different effects in different contextual settings. In a similar vein, and based on Giddens' (1979, 1984) discussions of the duality of *agency* and *structure* (see the

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next section), Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that explanation of social regularities, patterns and outcomes, rather than coming from the action of independent variables on dependent variables, come from an understanding of mechanisms acting in social *contexts*.

In a similar understanding of the issue at stake, Fleetwood (2001) points to critical realism's alternative notion of causality and law; that of causality as *power* and law as *tendency*. A mechanism, in this approach, refers to a power that is exercised and hence is generating effects. The typical way of acting of a mechanism is then called tendency. Accordingly, "[t]he mechanism does not always bring about certain effects, but *always* tends to." (Fleetwood, *ibid*, p. 10). In other words, a tendency "[...] can be acting yet generate no events at all, or it can be acting yet generate no event regularities" (Fleetwood, *ibid*, p. 15). Hence, critical realists conceive of a tendency as a force constituent with intransitive mechanisms. Lawson (1997), as Fleetwood (*ibid*) mentions, identifies also four mainstream attempts to interpret Humean laws as tendencies. These, however, as Fleetwood points out, identify a tendency with the outcome or result of some acting force, and not with the force itself.

Apart from these accounts on the ontology of causation, some critical realists have elaborated on causality in a way that links it with the implications for the epistemological dimensions of research. Raduescu and Vessey (2008) compare three most-referenced critical realist explanatory frameworks which deal with the issue of causality, namely Archer's Morphogenetic Cycle (1995), Explanatory Model of Social Science by Danermark et al. (2002), and Realistic Evaluation of Pawson and Tilley (1997). Archer's Morphogenetic Cycle describes the process based on which transformation or reproduction of social reality emerges as a consequence

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of temporally distinct but partially overlapping stages of a cycle during which stratified levels of social reality interact. It is based on this interaction that agents contribute to morphogenesis (elaboration) or morphostasis (reproduction) of structures. Explanatory Model of Social Science of Danermark et al. uses what is termed as "structural analysis" to identify and isolate mechanisms and their necessary properties and relations, a task for which the role of theory is emphasized as the real social mechanisms are not observable. This is followed by a "causal analysis" in order to cover the dynamic aspects of the phenomenon as well. Realistic Evaluation of Pawson and Tilley aims to assess whether a social change can be really considered outcome of a social intervention, and uses experiments to establish this relation. The focus of this kind of research is on 'change mechanisms' within a social program, as well as the 'context' in which the program is implemented, which together generate the outcome.

According to the Raduescu and Vessey (*ibid*), while Morphogenetic Cycle deals mainly with explaining the social change, the Explanatory Model of Social Science is mainly concerned with explaining the events, and the Realistic Evaluation approach aims at explaining the regularities (patterns) of outcome. The role of theory and the expected outcome are also comparted across the three frameworks by the authors. Archer's Morphogenetic Cycle uses theory only in identifying emergent properties of agency and structure, and hence, usually does it at the end of the research process. The output of the model is normally historical accounts of emergence of structural, cultural and agency emergent properties. Explanatory Model of Social Science of Danermark et al., on the other hand, uses theory early in the research process as it sees this a requirement in order to specify the generation of mechanism by structures (which are not observed). The output of

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the framework is a set of manifested mechanisms emanating from structures. Realistic Evaluation of Pawson and Tilley uses theories for elaborating on mechanisms and also hypothesizing for development of context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configuration. The outcome of the framework is a set of CMO configurations about social regularities. Raduescu and Vessey (2008) suspect that *"each framework may be appropriate for addressing different situations with respect to causality in the phenomenon under investigation."* (Raduescu & Vessey, *ibid*, p. 38).

By extending critical realist methodological contributions from the likes of Sayer (2002; 1992) and Danermark et al. (2002), Bygstad and Munkvold (2011) investigate the methodological aspects of causality for empirical data analysis. They do this by proposing steps involved in identifying structural components of a 'mechanism', given that causality in critical realist perspective is expressed in this term. The steps they suggest for critical realist data analysis including 1) Description of events; 2) Identification of key components; 3) Theoretical re-description (abduction); 4) Retroduction: Identification of candidate mechanisms; 5) Analysis of selected mechanisms and outcomes; and 6) Validation of explanatory power.

The proposition of these steps is based on the authors' attempt to uncover the tendency of the mechanisms as well as the contextual influences on the phenomena. Bygstad and Munkvold propose (2011, p. 5):

Thus, first we need to identify the structural components of the mechanism. Then we must understand how these components interact in order to produce the emergent outcome. Then we need to identify and analyze the outcome tendency. And finally, we need to identify the context (i.e. other mechanisms) that influence on the outcome.

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In accordance with these steps, and before some elaboration on the mode of causal inference regarding structure-agency in critical realism (with which the outcome tendency analysis can be done), the next section draws a clearer picture regarding the developments concerning the agency-structure issue in critical realism (with which the structural components of a mechanism and their interactions are identified).

Structure and agency in critical realism

Broadly speaking, social theorists have taken three major positions regarding the relation between human agency and social structure. In one group are those who believe that an agent's activities can mostly be explained as outcome of social structural elements such as norms and resources. According to this view, the social structure cannot be reduced to the sum of its agents' actions, as there is an additional effect from *holism*. This approach is usually termed determinism or structuralism. Within the opposing group, a contrasting viewpoint is adopted, asserting that it is the agents that construct and reconstruct the social structure, and hence, social structure can be explained by sum of its agents' social actions. This approach is usually termed voluntarism or intentionalism. The third approach, however, stresses a mutually constitutive relation between agency and structure, giving none of them primacy over the other. Such approaches are referred to as 'dialectical' (McAnulla, 2002).

Among a number of modern sociologists' theoretical approaches that have attempted to overcome the classical structure-agency divide, Anthony Giddens' 'Structuration Theory' and Pierre Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice' have emerged as two of the most competent accounts (Pérez, 2008). Giddens' structuration theory

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argues for *duality of structure*, meaning that social structure is the medium but also the outcome of agents' actions (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). In this theory, the social structure is both enabling and constraining the agents' social actions. Giddens introduces *modalities* of structuration as the element connecting structure with agents, meaning that structures, which comprise rules and resources, are translated into actions by means of modalities, which in turn include domination facilities (power resources), interpretive schemes of meaning, and norms (rules). Agents draw on such modalities for interactions within the social system, and thereby either *reproduce* or *transform* the social structures.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice describes agents as individuals trying to multiply their various sorts of *capital* (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) through engagement in different social *fields*, such as field of work, field of education or field of politics. These fields are structured based on power relationships, and hence constrain individuals access to the above-mentioned capital resources. Bourdieu introduces another key concept to link the social fields' structure with the agent's actions and that is *habitus*. Habitus is defined by Bourdieu (1977, p. 83) as "*a system of generated dispositions integrating past experiences, which functions at every moment in a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks*". In other words, habitus explains the unconsciously internalized social schemes that guide agents' actions in different social arena (fields). Then, in order to explain how these factors together shape an agent's social practice, Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) uses the formula: [(Habitus) (Capital)] + Field = Practice. Hence, Bourdieu analyzes practice as resulting from social rules applied in a particular field (structure) in which one's

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position depends on his relative amount of various capital, which shape his interaction with a field in confluence with his habitus (agency).

Since the critical realism emphasizes on the co-determination of actual events by a multiplicity of causes, it “[...] provides the framework needed to reconcile the claim for agency with the recognition of the causal impact of external factors on human action (both natural and social)” (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 87). Similar to Giddens' structuration theory, in the tradition of critical realism the relationship between agency and structure is perceived as being mutually constituted. Bhaskar's position regarding the structure-agency matter is reflected in his *transformational model of social action* (TMSA), which emphasizes that agents reproduce and transform social structures via their actions (Bhaskar, 1998a; Fleetwood, 2005). According to this view, the causal effects of the structures are always mediated through agents' intentional actions (see **Figure 1**). What differentiates Bhaskar's TMSA from Giddens' structuration theory is related to the temporal distinction adopted within the TMSA model between agency's action and the creation of structure. As Bhaskar (1998, p. xvi) explains, it:

[...] at any moment of time society is pre-given for the individuals who never create it, but merely reproduce or transform it. The social world is always pre-structured. This is a major difference between Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity and Giddens' theory of structuration [...]

Furthermore, for Bhaskar (1979, p. 118), “agents are defined in terms of their tendencies and powers” and this is them who make conceptions of a social phenomenon through ‘transcendental analysis’, as there is no possibility for isolating the multiple social structures from each other using experimental or statistical techniques (Kaidesoja, 2009).

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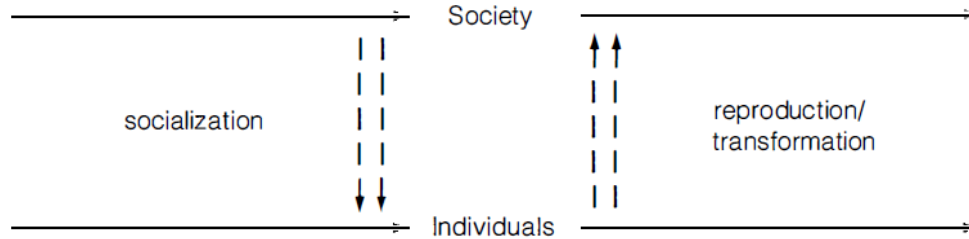


Figure 1 - Transformational model of social action. Source: Bhaskar (1998b, p. 12)

Nevertheless, the position taken by some of the other theorists within the CR tradition are not exactly the same as Bhaskar's. One reason is, as Kaidesoja (2009, p. 13) points out, related to the "exaggerated openness of social systems in Bhaskar and Sayer's accounts of social phenomena", arguing that empirical regularities and statistical patterns can be found in the social life. Back to Raduescu and Vessey's (2008) comparison among three of the most-referenced explanatory CR research accounts, Archer's (1995) Morphogenetic approach to social theory is conceived as an alternative to structuration theory, criticizing this theory for what Archer describes as conflating structure and agency such that their interplay can no longer be studied. As a solution, the Morphogenetic Cycle proposed by Archer adopts what she calls *analytical dualism* instead of Giddens' duality of structure, and confers a temporal difference in the existence of structures versus their appropriation by agents. The cycle involves three temporally distinct phases, including 1) structural conditioning; 2) social interaction; and 3) structural elaboration (morphogenesis) or reproduction (morphostasis). In this account, agents mediate the relationship between structural conditioning and structural elaboration, and they do this through their social interaction which results in either change or reproduction of structures. Mechanisms, which are activated by human actions, are derived from structure, and by Raduescu and Vessey's (*ibid*) assessment, structure is viewed as the most central element in Archer's

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Morphogenetic Cycle. And since agents are seen as mediators of change in the structure which may act irrationally (and hence, unpredictably), their role is also emphasized well in the cycle. Similar to Archer, according to the view of Danermark et al. (2002), structures are the origins of mechanisms. However, agent's role is not emphasized to the same extent as in Archer, even though they enable the change. The reason for this is that here Agents are seen as acting always rationally, which means their role is predictable given that the available choices to them is well described by the structures. Finally, as Raduescu and Vessey (2008) explain, for Pawson and Tilley (1997), this is the context of policy mechanisms that is emphasized, not the structure underlying those mechanisms. Their view about the agents is nevertheless similar to Danermark et al.'s, acknowledging a rational change enabler role for agents.

Conclusion: Emergent-tendencies of agency-structures relations

Since within the framework of critical realism, causation mechanism emanating from the causal power of real, intransitive structures manifests itself as a 'tendency' to generate outcomes, the causal relations between social structure and agency also becomes exposed to contingency. As a result, the events in terms of, for instance, agential decisions exposed to the same structure, would only 'tend' to demonstrate a certain pattern. Whether or not the expected event (outcome) would be observed is contingent on several other factors. Firstly, according to the critical realism, the set of entities co-determining the outcome (the event) needs to be taken into account. Then, the set of 'necessary' relationships between the entities co-determining the outcome needs to be established. In other words, it makes more sense to speak about agency-structures (with emphasis here on the plural 's') rather than agency-structure, so that the multiplicity of mechanisms at

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work is better clarified. This is specifically important since social systems are open systems. As the underlying structures are deemed to be unobservable, the role of theories in describing the partial regularities associated with each agency-structure tendency-generating relation is prominent.

Since each of the structures and their associated mechanisms exert a distinct tendency over the event (e.g. agency's action), rather than individual outcome's pattern the researcher should look for patterns emerging from the combination of involved tendencies. Accordingly, we can expect observing a pattern of *emergent-tendencies* at the level of events. This, I believe, is a key point in understanding the implications of the concept of tendencies within the critical realist research on causalities. Based on this view, finding patterns and regularities within the outcomes from combinatorial tendencies of multiple mechanisms affecting an actual event, is possible at least in terms of a level-abstracted view of the outcome generation. This means that the combination of tendencies from the structures involved in generating an event for the agent can itself show a pattern of emerging overall tendencies. Consequently, it is the contingent-type relations between the constituent entities (mechanisms), which are derived from the contextual factors (like culture), that need to be analyzed in terms of their influence on the event (ir)regularities. Finally, since according to the critical realism's principles the domain of empirical is more limited than the domain of actual events, and that transitive domain of knowledge is fallible but also improvable, it is necessary to stay aware of the limitations in our inferences regarding the causality between structures and agency and pursue their improvement through retroductive research strategy.

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