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Theodoros Iosifides

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## Against 'Migration': Using Critical Realism as a Framework for Conducting Mixed-Method, Migrantization Research

Theodoros Iosifides

Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Mitylene, Greece

### ABSTRACT

It is well acknowledged that the categorization of people with specific political, social and economic characteristics as 'migrants' – migrantization – is facilitated by mainstream, positivist versions of science and is associated with the production and/or reproduction of power relations. To date, this important critique has been advanced by academics influenced by interpretivism/poststructuralism who tend to relativize the discussion, and who are unable to provide a space for quantitative research. The main objective of this paper is to offer an alternative approach to avoiding positivism and relativism in 'migration studies', based on critical realism, which I term 'migrantization research'. Critical realist migrantization research is multi-methodological and provides an interdisciplinary framework for conducting mixed-method social research on 'migration'. It aims to discover, uncover or indicate how various causal powers – of structural, discursive/cultural and agential character – interact and produce certain outcomes. It presupposes that both measurable and non-measurable dimensions of the social world are relevant.

### KEYWORDS

Migrantization; critical realism; ontology; epistemology; mixed-methods

### Introduction

The construction of categories such as 'migration' and 'migrant' – which I call migrantization – allows powerful actors to achieve questionable goals by describing some mobilities across space as 'migration'. This results in power inequality, exploitation and domination (see Isaac 1987; Westwood 2002). The naturalization and normalization of these categories in migration studies are known as 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer 2008). Migrantization, in my view, refers to the whole spectrum of discursive constructions and material practices – found, for instance, in 'migration management' discourses/practices and market-oriented utilitarian discourses – that turns some people into 'migrants' and leads to their racist and xenophobic treatment. Thus, migrantization research should be at the centre of critical social scientific inquiry. Deconstruction of naturalized categories 'migrant' and 'migration' uncovers, among other things, whose interests are served by them. In this paper, I join other contemporary scholars (for example, Glick Schiller 2007; Wimmer 2007) in the effort, through deconstruction, to reformulate the field of 'migration studies' away from methodological nationalism. However, where I differ from these

contemporary scholars, and where my main contribution lies, is in the use of critical realism to achieve this goal.

I therefore begin with a critique of positivist and interpretivist/constructionist approaches to migrant studies. I then demonstrate the need to disconnect quantitative methods from positivism and qualitative methods from interpretivism/social constructionism. Finally, I introduce some relevant features of critical realism and suggest the positive consequences of conducting multi-method migrantization research using critical realist meta-theory (Iosifides 2011a, 2011b, 2012).

### **Critique of positivist approaches to migration studies**

Wimmer stresses that past and contemporary 'migration studies' have been strongly affected by Herderian conceptualizations of ethnies and nations (Wimmer 2007, 8). For Herder, ethnies and nations are 'natural', objectified and essentialized collectivities with stable and durable characteristics and so '... the boundaries of culture, category/identity, and community coincide in an unproblematic way' (Wimmer 2007, 9; Rembold and Carrier 2011). Thus, the world is naturally divided into distinct ethnic and national communities with different, bounded and durable 'cultures' each of which can ideally flourish under the protection of its own state. Herderian concepts have had a considerable influence on the theoretical paradigms associated with the broad research field of 'migration studies', from the early assimilation and acculturation theories and multiculturalism, to contemporary theories such as the new assimilation and transnationalism approaches (Wimmer 2007).

Wimmer (2007) identifies three main problems with Herderian approaches, notably that: 'culture' and ethnic/national categories do not necessarily coincide; that ethnic and national categories can differ according to the situational and relational context; and '... the fact that identification with a category and categorization by others might not coincide' (Wimmer 2007, 15). His analysis demonstrates that contemporary 'migration studies' are characterized by explicit or implicit adoption of the 'state logic' known in contemporary literature as 'methodological nationalism'. Methodological nationalism is defined by Chernilo (2007, 1) '... as the all-pervasive equation between the idea of society and the formation of the nation-state in modernity' (see also Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Portes 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006). Nina Glick Schiller (2007, 43) stresses that:

Methodological nationalism is an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states. Nation-states are conflated with societies and the members of those states are assumed to share a common history and set of values, norms, social customs, and institutions.

I would add that methodological nationalism is also the adoption by researchers of the conceptual tools – thought categories, discursive constructions and representations of states and inter-state organizations – associated with nationhood, national belonging and mobility across space. These discursive constructions normalize divisions between citizens and non-citizens, between 'natives' and 'foreigners' and between 'migrants' and 'non-migrants'. This discursive normalization and the practices of discrimination and exclusion which accompany them lead to a series of outcomes, notably, the creation of a sense of community and unity, which is necessary in order to exercise state and social power in

general more effectively and the establishment of various mobility regimes which facilitate accumulation of capital and the reproduction and widening of global socio-economic inequalities (see Samers 2010). Ironically, the increase in state control (including control of migration) that accompanies the rigid linguistic constructions is nevertheless also accompanied by increased mobility across space for other elements, such as capital, commercial goods, information. Significantly, movement for people from the upper classes is significantly easier and freer than ever before. For instance, anyone can immigrate to the USA if they invest \$500 000 in a business in a rural area of the country (Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, 3 December 2016). Borders and bordering have different meaning and practical repercussions for different social strata across the globe and people who are constructed, defined and labelled as 'migrants' and 'foreigners' came to be mainly people of lower social strata. Thus, as Anderson, Sharma, and Wright (2009, 10) note:

The "foreigner" is a very special figure in the global systems of capitalism and national states. Today, the foreigner is someone who can be legally (and often socially) denied most, if not all, of the rights associated with membership in a national state (and the associated ideological understanding of membership in a nation). Mobility controls are largely directed at "managing" the movement of foreigners.

State strategies for control, regulation or illegalization of some movements, notably those of people originated from the global south and the poorer countries (Bauder 2006; Squire 2009), are accompanied by the facilitation of movements of wealthier or more 'skilled' people around the world. The former movements are described, defined and conceptualized as 'migration', whereas the latter movements are increasingly defined with other terms such as, for example, expatriate mobility or mobility of professionals (see Steers, Nardon, and Carlos 2013; Birchnell and Caletríó 2014). More specifically, 'migration' has come to denote a movement across space, mainly of the less privileged, which has to be controlled, regulated and managed and is often illegalized in order to be regulated more effectively. But definitions, terms used and conceptualizations of various movements across space are far from neutral and objective. On the contrary, they are inherently enriched by specific meanings and construct realities of privilege and inclusion for some and discrimination and exclusion for others. Positivism avoids such discussions because, in order to concede that alternative constructions are possible – that they are not simply obvious, natural categories – it is necessary to acknowledge that 'something' results in the privileging of certain constructions over others. That 'something' is the component of reality that underlies empirical reality and that consists of structures and mechanisms. By acknowledging only the empirical component of reality, positivism effectively avoids talk of structures and mechanisms, thus facilitating the naturalization and normalization of migration discourses that privilege certain parts of society over others.

The association of quantitative methods with positivism/empiricism is typically one-sided as positivists advocate measurement of discrete, observable, empirical events as the only legitimate way of investigating social reality (Downward 2007). Empiricist thinking is characterized by, what is called by many critical realists, 'flat ontology' that is by the reduction of social reality to the realm of empirical, observable 'facts' (Cruickshank 2003; Morgan 2007). Empiricism and positivism adopt the notion of causality as 'constant conjunction' between different quantitative variables and equate finding regularities among

discrete, atomistic events with causal explanation of social phenomena and processes (Downward 2007). Moreover, and this point is extremely crucial for quantitative research practice under positivist premises in 'migration studies', empiricism renders its own ideas and research practices as 'neutral' and 'objective' mainly because it adopts the notion of the (impossible in reality) fact/value dichotomy (Iosifides 2012).

In 'migration studies', quantitative research inspired by positivist premises adopts 'methodological individualism', 'a utilitarian ontology of the self' and 'a uniform concept of rationality' (Boswell 2008, 552). It produces findings that, in most cases, reproduce dominant conceptualizations of migrantization processes, take for granted state thinking and logics and reinforce 'common sense' ideas about what is 'normal' and 'problematic' regarding the movement of people across space. That is, it determines – constructs – what problems are in need of appropriate management by state and inter-state institutions. As Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, 310) explain:

In quantitative studies, following the logic of methodological nationalism, immigrants have usually been compared with 'national means' of income, with children per family, with percentages of unemployment and welfare dependence, taking for granted that this would be the adequate unit of comparison [...] They are rarely compared with sectors of a national population that they resemble in terms of income and education.

Thus, most quantitative research of this kind, for example, utilitarian cost benefit, value expectancy or stress threshold models (see Faist 2000, 35–46), implicitly adopts methodological nationalism.

## **Critique of interpretivist/social constructionist approaches to migration studies**

Qualitative methods are associated today with the meta-theoretical assumptions of interpretivism (e.g. phenomenology, symbolic interactionism), social constructionism and post-structuralism. This association is so pertinent that, for many scholars, qualitative methods form a different ontological and epistemological paradigm rather than a set of ways of producing and collecting non-measurable data (see, for example, Marvasti 2004; Stake 2010). Although interpretivism and social constructionism/poststructuralism both reject positivism, I consider them separately as they are based on significantly different assumptions.

### **Interpretivism**

Interpretivism equates reality with individual and/or collective/shared interpretations and meanings of it. Seen from a critical-realist perspective, it confuses ontology with epistemology and so commits the so-called 'epistemic fallacy' (Iosifides 2012). Thus, interpretivists do not acknowledge the independence of reality from human meanings and interpretations and so compromise and limit any attempt of adjudication between different interpretations and any attempt to distinguish between – and thus challenge – interpretations as more or less adequate and truthful.

In this way, they compromise – in most cases independently of intentions – the prospects of emancipatory research since they cannot choose between better and worse interpretations, leaving the question of which interpretation should be used to guide

action unanswered. Giving their exclusive emphasis on meanings, interpretations and understanding (*Verstehen*), interpretivists talk about 'different or multiple realities' (see Stake 2010, 66) and not about different comprehensions of the same reality, privilege human agency and neglect the structural and material conditions of meaningful social action.

Moreover, interpretivism abandons causality in social sciences and causal explanation in the social world mainly because it refuses to acknowledge that human reasons (meanings, interpretations, purposes, intentions, beliefs and so on) are causes of human action. This is because they think that the positivist view of causality is the only possible one and, as they correctly reject it, they abandon causality altogether (see Iosifides 2011a, 97–98). Nevertheless, there are other extremely more fruitful and radically different notions of causality than the positivist one. As I have said elsewhere (Iosifides 2011a, 98), if we adopt the realist notion of causation as consisting of: powers; liabilities; potentialities and tendencies characterizing social agents; and entities and emergent social/cultural properties, then human reasons participate fully in the causal order of the social world (see Witt 2008). This is because reasons and interpretations stem from certain human powers such as intentionality and reflexivity and can bring change in the world; in other words, they are causally efficacious.

### **Social constructionism/post-structuralism**

Social constructionism and post-structuralism are another very important set of meta-theoretical approaches which strongly influence contemporary qualitative research methods (Burr 2003). These meta-theoretical approaches put language, semiosis and discourse at the centre of social inquiry in a way that renders social reality almost totally dependent on them. Thus, for a widespread version of social constructionism and post-structuralism, all aspects of social reality are linguistic and discursive constructions and so any notion of dimensions of social reality existing independently of discursive formations, of assessing the adequacy of different discursive schemes and the possibility of accessing reality beyond discourse is rendered futile (Iosifides 2011a). Ontologically and epistemologically, those versions of social constructionism and poststructuralism are forms of (extreme) reductionism, as they limit and flatten the whole range of complexity of social reality to discursive acts and to interactions between different discursive acts. Moreover, such discursive reductionism leads to one of the most central problems for social inquiry in general and for critical social inquiry in particular, that of relativism (see Iosifides 2012).

Relativist thinking stresses that any social phenomenon, process or entity is relative to something else, for example, to a conceptual or discursive scheme, to a set of theoretical propositions, to a set of meanings and representations and so on (Baghrarian 2004). And it goes on noting that social phenomena, processes or entities are wholly constituted and constructed by those discursive schemes, theories, meanings and representations. Those ideas stem from notions and theories of language as a closed self-referential system of signs which is wholly produced and determined by the, arbitrarily formed, networks or systems of difference between signifiers (words, images) and signifieds (concepts) (Sayer 2000). Discursive reductionism and relativism are characterized by very important inherent limitations and problems and pose a series of threats to critical social inquiry.

First, this kind of thinking is self-defeating and self-contradictory. As Hibberd (2005, 109) rightly argues:

The notion that the meanings of terms and relations are given solely by a closed, autonomous system or framework cannot be maintained consistently. It requires making a distinction between the framework and an external domain of things, and this requires getting outside the framework and seeing it in relation to something else. But, given internal reference, such a distinction cannot be made. It is not possible to “break out” of the system, whether that system be narrowly geometry or, more broadly, the discursive practices of communities ...’

Second, discursive reductionism and relativism lead to abandoning any notion of causality in the social world and any interest in investigating in depth the outcomes of the interaction of real causal powers either agential or structural/cultural. ‘The social world is seen as constructed by authorless discourses which themselves become agents; rather than tension between actors, agents and discourses, concretely negotiated in particular historical settings, there are merely discourses constructing objects and human subjects’ (Carter 2000, 38–39). Third, this kind of thinking neglects linguistic referentiality, the practical dimensions of language (Nellhaus 1998) materiality and the complex ways in which discursive and extra or non-discursive aspects of reality interact and form, influence, shape and create each other. Finally, relativist thinking does not accept any criterion of distinguishing between theoretical and explanatory schemes. It thereby undermines its own assertions as well. Thus, qualitative research inspired by relativist doctrines represses action – it fails to give direction and purpose to activism – because its findings and theoretical formulations are no more important, valid, truthful or objective than any other alternative discursive constructions.

Thus, if we look to some of the most powerful contemporary migrantization discourses, those of ‘securitization of migration’, we can understand why social constructionist and poststructuralist thinking inspired by relativism and discursive reductionism cannot contribute much in the critical analysis of the complex processes related to those discourses (see Balzacq 2010). ‘Securitization of migration’ means the process by which some movements across space (e.g. ‘migratory’ movements) are discursively constructed as security threats and problems (see Watson 2009). But the adoption of a relativist stance in analysing discourse creates unresolvable problems related mainly to the self-contradictory reasoning of such a stance and to the neglect of the ways social structures, discursive representations and individual/collective agents interact and produce certain outcomes. As regards the former point, Hammersley (2008, 118) notes that:

... constructionism seems logically to imply the reflexive application of DA [discourse analysis] to itself: having documented the discursive production of some phenomenon, it apparently then requires a reflexive analysis of how that documentation was itself discursively constructed; and so on, ad infinitum. And, given that this process of self-explication can never be completed, we might conclude that no progress towards self-explication is ever made. This suggests that the moral and political authenticity to which constructionists sometimes appeal is unattainable. Furthermore, this endless reflexivity undermines any claim for research as an activity distinct from fiction writing.

As regards the latter point, the value of taking into account and analysing in depth ‘securitization of migration’ discourses is better realized by taking them to be sets of causal powers in the social world. These causal powers are conditioned by and/or interact with

other distinct causal powers, such as, for example, material and structural socio-economic relations within or between states, political power relations between different inter- or intra-state actors, individual and collective identifications and so on. In this way, discourses, including ‘securitization of migration’ discourses are an integral part of the constant and complex interplay between structures (material and ideational) and agency. They are also linked with non- or extra-discursive elements of the social world and their analysis can point to the discovery of the intransitive dimensions of social reality (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). As regards this latter point, analysing ‘securitization of migration’ discourses may point to the specific workings of causal generative mechanisms, such as exploitation, discrimination and exclusion of migrantized people.

### **Introducing critical realist ‘migrantization research’: avoiding eclecticism and enhancing explanatory power**

Although individual and shared meanings, interpretations and purposes are an indispensable part of any research endeavour, critical migrantization research moves further than this. It moves towards assessing the adequacy of those meanings and interpretations (Manicas 2009) through examining their broader material and societal contexts, taking into account doings and practices of social actors along with their unintended consequences and locating them within the nexus of immediate and broader social relations (Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000). Consequently, critical realist migrantization research uses the intransitive realm of reality to take into account the possibility that social actors have misinterpreted their situations and social contexts in general (Sayer 2000). It also acknowledges the crucial role which a series of such misinterpretations play in the reproduction of unequal and domineering power relations. To give but one example, interpretations which directly connect – through correlative research – migrantized people with ‘criminality’ and unemployment are widespread. Critical realist migrantization research practice takes correlations with criminality into account, but assumes that correlations are neither necessary nor sufficient to give an adequate explanation of the situation. Instead of relying on reified correlations, critical realists prefer to investigate the role of the realities of capitalist relations of production across different spatial scales, which produce social inequalities and result in the processes of criminalization of the underprivileged, including migrantized people. Such an analysis must nevertheless occur in tandem with a discussion of how empirical data can be misinterpreted to mask or distort a truthful understanding of reality.

### **Relevant characteristics of critical realism**

This part of the paper is dedicated to a brief discussion of the central meta-theoretical assumptions of *critical realism* and its contribution to a kind of social research practice which is ‘... simultaneously *explanatory, critical, emancipatory and socio-political relevant*’ (Iosifides 2011a, 237, original emphasis). This necessarily brief discussion of critical realism includes the distinction between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of social reality, ontological depth and generative causality paves the way for a closer examination of their consequences on mixed-method research design and practice about migrantization phenomena and processes.



Critical realism puts special emphasis on ontological questions; that is, on questions about how the social world is, and does not prioritize epistemological ones, that is, questions about how to know the social world (Iosifides 2012; Hartwig 2007). Thus, critical realists accept that there are aspects of social reality which exist independently of our knowledge of them, of their identification as such and of our different conceptual schemes (see Sayer 1992, 5). Those aspects of the social world constitute its intransitive dimension, whereas interpretations, theoretical propositions and conceptual schemes about the social world constitute the transitive one. Thus, for critical realism, the purpose of social scientific inquiry is to acquire access to and knowledge of the intransitive dimension of social reality, although it acknowledges that such knowledge is always provisional, fallible and partial. It is impossible to acquire that knowledge outside of any point of view and of any specific discursive and conceptual scheme, but this fact does not mean that all points of view or all conceptual schemes have equal value as regards their practical adequacy (Sayer 2000) and their orientation to knowledge of the intransitive realm. Therefore, any aspect of the social world, including phenomena and processes related to migrantization, can only be knowable under specific descriptions and constructions. However, some of these constructions reveal what kind of real causal powers are at work, while others obscure them. I argue that critical migrantization constructions and discourses fall into the former category; while state thinking and methodological nationalism fall into the latter category.

For critical realism, empirical events or discursive practices do not constitute the whole spectrum of reality but, on the contrary, they constitute a limited part of it. Due to the prioritization of ontology over epistemology, critical realism stresses that social reality is characterized by ontological depth, multi-dimensionality and complexity. Reality comprises the empirical and subjective realm (interpretive schemes of social agents and events experienced by them) the actual realm (the whole range of events either experienced or not) and the realm of the real (the causal generative, often unobservable, mechanisms which produce certain outcomes) (Danermark et al. 2002). All realms are equally real and causally active for critical realism and interact with each other in causally complex ways. Thus, the purpose of critical realist research is to uncover the interplay between different causal powers and the reconstruction of the complex mechanisms which produce certain outcomes. Those causal powers can be schematically divided into three categories (see Iosifides 2011b). First, there are agential causal powers, that is, individual or collective intentions, reasons, purposes, interpretations, emotions and practices. Second, there are structural causal powers which are the results of social relationality with an emphasis on its material dimension. Finally, there are cultural/discursive/ideational causal powers which are the '... autonomous effects of discourses, ideologies, public meanings and representations that influence social action, promote certain social arrangements or legitimize certain social relations' (Iosifides 2011b, 11). To give but one general example, let us think about the various discourses on criminalization of migrantized people and their practical effects on various social categories and on different socio-political fields. Systematically linking law-breaking activities with migrantized people, often within a direct cause-effect model, is produced by a complex generative mechanism which entails the interaction of agential, structural and cultural/discursive causal powers. For example, agential causal powers may be individual and collective beliefs about basic social divisions and group boundaries, racist and exclusionary beliefs and

practices and so on. Structural causal powers may include systemic needs for the social and economic devaluation of migrantized labour (see Antifa Scripta 2013) and cultural/discursive causal powers may include discourses of national belonging, securitization discourses (Amin-Khan 2012) and so on.

It becomes clearer then that critical realism places causality and causal explanation of social phenomena and processes at the centre of social inquiry contrary to arguments for abandoning causality and causal explanation in social sciences altogether as, for example, in versions of interpretivist, social constructionist and post-structuralist thinking. But realist social causality is radically different from the positivist–empiricist notions of causality (Mumford 2008). Critical realists adopt a generative and relational notion of causality rejecting the empiricist–positivist view of causality as succession of discrete, empirical and observable events (Iosifides 2011a, 63). Causal powers are exerted due to the relational make-up of social entities and due to the second-order interaction of those social entities with each other. Thus, as Iosifides (2011b, 10) notes:

Causality for critical realism is a central and real feature of the social world and has to be understood in terms of capacities (powers) and liabilities of social objects (Danermark et al. 2002). These ... causal powers and liabilities are the result of the specific ways that the various parts that compose the social object at hand are related to each other (Elder-Vass 2010).

This relational notion of causality for critical realism inevitably brings about another central feature of it, that of *emergence* and emergent causal powers. Emergence stems from the relations of different social entities (parts) – for example, individuals, collectivities, institutions, social structures, discourses and so on – with each other and entails the production of social forms or other entities the properties of which are different and irreducible to the properties of the parts (see Sayer 2000). Thus, causal powers – either agential, structural or cultural – are emergent properties of the relational make-up of social entities of any sort. Critical realism distinguishes between internal and necessary relations which produce emergent properties and exert real causal powers and external and contingent relations which affect in different ways the effects or the degree of exertion of causal powers (Sayer 2000). As regards migrantization processes, some possible structural emergent properties may be ‘labour market structures with special emphasis on divisions along “ethnic”, gender and age lines’, global, regional, national and sub-national economic structures including patterns of relations among different sectors and spatial units’, or ‘systemic socio-spatial inequalities at different spatial levels’ (Iosifides 2011a, 89). Moreover, some cultural emergent properties may include ‘prevalent societal values’, or ‘dominant ideological discourses, especially “nationhood” discourses and representations’ whereas agential emergent properties may include personal belief systems as regards social divisions, various interest group formation and action and so on (Iosifides 2011a, 89).

Critical realism is a meta-theoretical approach that justifies combining qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques within the same research endeavour. It achieves this by treating both qualitative and quantitative data as fallible evidence pointing to broader social realities and often unobservable causal generative mechanisms. This treatment presupposes the rejection of viewing quantitative and qualitative methods as different and in most cases conflictual epistemological paradigms and towards viewing them as

practices of collecting or producing data about the different aspects or dimensions of social reality. In other words, it presupposes the disconnection of quantitative methodological approaches from positivist and neo-positivist meta-theoretical assumptions and qualitative ones from interpretivist, social constructionist and post-structuralist thinking.<sup>1</sup> As regards the latter and although individual and collective interpretations play or have to play a crucial role in any critical social inquiry, the reductionism of all social phenomena, processes and practices and the inability to differentiate between interpretations and independent realities has to be viewed as a significant problem as I explain later on. Moreover, critical realism is perfectly compatible with what it may be called *moderate constructionism* (see Elder-Vass 2012). Thus,

*Realism*, [...] may be taken as the belief that there are features of the world that are the way they are independently of how we think about them. By contrast, radical social constructionists deny that there are such any features, or alternatively, that there is anything we can say about whether such features exist. (Elder-Vass 2012, 6).

The disconnection of quantitative methods from positivism and qualitative ones from interpretivism/social constructionism is necessary in order to achieve compatibility between different methodological approaches and to avoid methodological eclecticism that is of using different methods along with implicitly adopting divergent epistemological and meta-theoretical assumptions for each method.

Taking into account the above discussion, it is extremely difficult to imagine how it is possible to engage in fruitful mixed-method research about migrantization processes, and about any social process in general, without resolving specific ontological and epistemological concerns and facilitating consistency between them and methodological choices. One way of proceeding, in my view, is to adopt the critical realist meta-theoretical premises as guides for mixed-method social research. This way of proceeding has been already adopted by various scholars who apply critical realist premises in mixed-method research (Danermark et al. 2002; Lipscomb 2008; Schuyler House 2010) or who advocate approaches such as the 'transformative' one which have a lot in common with realist epistemological and methodological thinking (see Mertens 2007; Shannon-Baker 2015). Critical realism views the traditional opposition between quantitative and qualitative methods as unconstructive and unnecessary and their combination as an important condition for successful investigation of complex problems and realities. Of course, this combination presupposes the conceptualization of those methodological approaches as different ways of producing data about different aspects and domains of the same reality and not as different paradigms which are inherently connected to either positivist or interpretivist, constructionist or poststructuralist premises. To put it in other words, for critical realism, it is impossible to mix positivist with interpretivist or constructionist assumptions without avoiding serious problems in explanatory power (Scott 2007; Lipscomb 2008), but it is possible and indeed highly desirable to mix quantitative with qualitative methods.

For critical realism, both quantitative (extensive) and qualitative (intensive) methodological approaches have the common purpose of investigating how different causal powers interact with each other and what exactly are the results of this interaction (Danermark et al. 2002; Iosifides 2011). Quantitative methods are utilized as powerful means for discovering, what various critical realist researchers call, 'demi-regularities', that is, regularities between empirical events which are active within particular social and spatio-

temporal contexts (Danermark et al. 2002). Discovering those demi-regularities is extremely important because they can act as pointers to the further investigation of possible causal generative mechanisms at work. Nevertheless, discovering and establishing the existence of demi-regularities, that is, the relations between different quantitative variables do not mean that we have achieved causal explanation, and this point is extremely crucial for realist thinking and for the necessary delinking between quantitative methods and positivism. Discovering demi-regularities, that is, discovering common patterns and similarities in specific populations is, for critical realists, just a stage of the whole explanatory endeavour because regularities themselves need further explanation and are not synonymous to it (see Sayer 1992). This point differentiates sharply the treatment of quantitative methods between positivism and critical realism. For the former, causality is synonymous with regularities between observable, discrete empirical events, whereas for the latter regularities are pointers for further investigation of the relational make-up of social entities which are often unobservable at the empirical level and produce those regularities (Sayer 1992; Danermark et al. 2002; Elder-Vass 2010; Tacq 2011).

For example, I was involved in a research project conducted several years ago that investigated the stances and attitudes of 'local' population towards migrantized people in the region of western Greece. We found that there was a strong association between generally positive attitudes with other variables, such as gender, occupation, official educational credentials and age (see Iosifides et al. 2007). These results appear contrary to current dominant conceptions of negative attitudes towards migrants. Perhaps this was because we did not use demi-regularities to explain the differences in stances and attitudes towards migrantized people. Instead, we used intensive case studies to discover how various causal powers (agential, structural and discursive) interact and produce both those regularities and differences in stances and practices towards migrantized people.

Critical realist research practice delinks qualitative methods from their conventional theoretical premises, for example, interpretivism, social constructionism and post-structuralism. It does this by viewing qualitative methods as strong and powerful means of discovering real causal generative mechanisms and by bringing back causality – a non-positivist generative form of causality though – to the centre of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research inspired by critical realist meta-theoretical premises pays equal attention to individual/collective meanings, representations and public discourses and to social practices, ideational and material contexts without privileging any of them. It seeks to connect and link them together in order to engage intensively with social reality and to get 'closer' to it through the involvement to the social lives of people (Iosifides 2011b). This approach to qualitative method aims at the investigation of the 'qualitative aspects of social reality' that is '... the character, nature and essence of social relations and the relational make-up of social objects' (Iosifides 2011b, 17). Furthermore, qualitative data are treated not as just texts waiting to be interpreted but as '...evidence (though fallible) for getting access to broader social realities' (Iosifides 2011b, 17). The term 'qualitative' in this kind of research practice means the investigation of social qualities, that is, of the investigation of how exactly various social objects, entities and forms (individuals, collectivities, structural contexts, ideational environments, discursive practices) are related to each other. This enhances our understanding of how different causal powers

are exerted and exercised and makes the overall purpose of achieving causal explanation more viable.

Therefore, by delinking quantitative methods from positivism and qualitative methods from interpretivism/constructionism/relativism – and adopting the realist meta-theoretical premises – quantitative and qualitative methods become ontologically and epistemologically compatible. Within this framework, different methodological approaches highlight different aspects of the social world; but their different findings must eventually be combined to provide, as far as is necessary, a complete account of the causal generative mechanisms at work. For example, demi-regularities (statistical correlations) obtained by extensive variable-oriented research can be further explained through intensive, case-oriented research.

An illustrative example of critical realist mixed-method research on ‘migration’ processes is provided by Hedberg (2004). She explores: the conditions and causal mechanisms behind movements of Finnish-speaking Swedes to Sweden; and the changes in the way that Finnish-speaking Swedes self-identified after their movement to Sweden. Hedberg adopts a critical realist rationale for conducting this research and opts for what critical realists call ‘critical methodological pluralism’ (Danermark et al. 2002). She mixes quantitative (survey) and qualitative (biographical narrative) methods in a theoretically informed way in order to highlight the complex processes of interaction between structural, cultural/ideational and agential causal factors which produce certain movements across the Finnish–Swede border, identification changes and formation and integration patterns (see Hedberg 2004; Iosifides 2012). As Hedberg (2004, 2) explains: ‘An individually based, statistical data set focused on the extension of the Finland-Swedish migration pattern, whereas an in-depth interview study was used to analyse the deeper causes of migration and integration’. Hedberg investigates a series of processes which may be termed as migrantization processes, notably the role and causal powers of institutional and social networks, processes of identification formation among Swedes in Finland, media representations and constructions and structural labour market processes (Hedberg 2004). Due to space constraints, it is impossible to elaborate further on the theoretical and methodological details of the study, but it is worth mentioning that by disconnecting quantitative methods from positivist assumptions and qualitative ones from interpretivist or constructionist premises, Hedberg made their mixing ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically consistent and constructive. As the author stresses:

When a researcher collects data, it is never a neutral process but one that is already “pre-conceptualized” [...]. Nonetheless, the concepts refer to an object that is real, constituted by necessary relations, and they involve important dimensions of material practices [...], such as social institutions and power structures. It is the task of the researcher to come as close to the real dimensions as possible, by way of conceptualisation and practice (Hedberg 2004, 43).

Therefore, by mixing different methods under the critical realist rationale, Hedberg contributed substantially to the identification and separation of causal internal relations from contingent ones and to the overall multi-level and multi-dimensional explanation of the movement of Finnish-speaking Swedes to Sweden.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was not to offer explicit guidelines on conducting mixed-method research on migrantization processes but to discuss some crucial ontological and epistemological issues which are implicated with it. Being critical about processes of movements across space presupposes the abandonment of concepts, meanings and terms associated with the term 'migration', the appropriation of which by states, inter-governmental organizations and various social groups is used for the legitimation, normalization and naturalization of exploitative, exclusionary and discriminating social relations across different spatial scales. This does not mean that everyone who uses the term 'migration' adopts an uncritical or methodologically nationalist stance. To the contrary, it means that the categorizations related to 'migration' have been increasingly adopted by social actors for strengthening domineering relations. Re-conceptualizing the research field in such a way calls for the adoption of a mixed-method research practice, which is necessary for investigating such complex processes. For instance, quantitative research and its empirical methods can provide the details and facts upon which to base theories of the structures and mechanisms of domination. Qualitative research can provide a way of understanding the structures and mechanisms behind the oppression of migrants by: explaining which social actors are involved in the categorization of migrants, and for what purposes; describing the structural and ideational preconditions for this categorization and the consequences for different social categories and groups; and illustrating how our actions are influenced by these categorizations. In this paper, I have outlined the theoretical and epistemological advantages of critical realism as a meta-theoretical guide for conducting mixed-method research on migrantization processes, notably: the avoidance of eclecticism; the facilitation of ontological, epistemological and methodological consistency; the re-orientation of both quantitative and qualitative methods; and the enhancement of explanatory power.

## Note

1. There are, of course, different strands of positivist and neo-positivist thinking and different versions of interpretivism, social constructionism and post-structuralism. Space constraints and the overall purpose of the paper make impossible to discuss them in detail. Instead, some of their more common premises are pointed out and critiqued.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

*Theodoros Iosifides* is a sociologist and human geographer. He has published extensively on epistemology and methodology of social sciences in Greek and English. His research interests include epistemology of social sciences, qualitative research methods and migration.

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