



Working Papers

Paper 43, August 2011

A generic conceptual model for conducting realist qualitative research

Examples from migration studies

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This paper is published by the International Migration Institute (IMI), Oxford Department of International Development (QEH), University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK (www.imi.ox.ac.uk).

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Abstract

In this paper I propose a generic conceptual model for conducting qualitative research within the meta-theoretical premises of critical realism. I also make an effort to demonstrate the advantages of such a framework using examples from migration studies. Qualitative methods are predominately linked with meta-theoretical commitments related mainly to interpretivism, social constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism. Influenced by 'cultural/linguistic turn', qualitative research has followed a path towards discursive reductionism and relativism. I contend that this path circumscribes the inherent strengths of qualitative methods and limits their explanatory power. Recently however, there have been calls for other 'turns' which are more or less compatible with a critical realist alternative to strong social constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism – namely ontological, practice, complexity and materiality 'turns'.

Drawing on these developments, I propose a generic model for doing qualitative research the realist way. This model is based on ways of researching real causal powers (structural, ideational and agential) and their – synchronic and diachronic – interplay, in a qualitative manner. The model views qualitative methods as powerful means for the identification of complex, causal generative mechanisms which produce certain effects and (re)connect qualitative inquiry and research with reality and, especially, with the depth investigation of its intransitive dimension. It does that by utilizing the realist concepts of 'emergence', 'emergent properties' and 'substantial relations', which are predominantly concerned with qualitative changes and real connections characterized by causal powers of their own.

The advantages of adopting such a model are shown by discussing its potentials for conducting qualitative migration research. More specifically, I use four examples from Greece which concern migration-related processes and phenomena. These examples concern informal immigrant employment in Athens, social mobility of immigrants in Greece, social capital and social incorporation of Albanian immigrants in Athens and the evolution of citizenship regime in the country. Through these examples I intend to demonstrate why merging realist meta-theoretical commitments with the inherent strengths of qualitative methods can result in more thorough and comprehensive understandings and explanations of migratory phenomena.

The last part of the paper concerns a brief discussion of the urgent need to re-orient migration theory and research practice away from empiricist and relativist inclinations, and the central role that realist qualitative research can and should play in meeting this need.

Keywords: Qualitative research, critical realism, migration studies

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Acknowledgement: An earlier version of this paper has been presented in the IMI 'Workshop on Social Theory and Migration: Dialogues on Critical Realism and Migration Research', Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 28 April 2011. I am grateful to Cindy Horst, Agnieszka Kubal, Oliver Bakewell, Robin Cohen and all participants of the Workshop for their constructive comments. I also wish to thank Panagiota Aggelopoulou, PhD student at the Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Lesvos, Greece, for kindly allowing me to refer to some examples and details derived by her doctoral research (see sub-section 3.2). Finally, many thanks to E. Nikolarea for helping me with language editing.

Contents

1 Introduction: from cultural/linguistic to other ‘turns’	5
2 Qualitative research into real casual powers	7
3 Realist qualitative research on migration: some examples from Greece	17
3.1 Informal immigrant employment in Athens	18
3.2 Social mobility of immigrants in Greece	22
3.3 Social capital and social incorporation of Albanian immigrants in Athens	24
3.4 The evolution of a citizenship regime in Greece	25
4 Some concluding comments on theory	26
References	28

1 Introduction: from cultural/linguistic to other ‘turns’

What characterizes much of today’s social theory and research practice and, for the purposes of the present paper, the meta-theoretical assumptions of qualitative methods, is anti-realism. Bryant et al. (2011: 4) brilliantly refer to anti-realism using Meillassoux’s term *correlationism*, according to which:

...we can aim our thoughts at being, exist as beings-in-the-world, or have phenomenal experience of the world, yet we can never consistently speak about a realm independent of thought or language. Such a doctrine, in its countless variations, maintains that knowledge of a reality independent of thought is untenable. From this correlationist stance, there results a subtle form of idealism that is nonetheless almost ubiquitous. (Bryant et al. 2011: 4).

Correlationism or anti-realism is a common feature of both traditional and contemporary empiricism and relativism of various kinds (social constructionism, post-structuralism or post-modernism). In the former case, reality is exhausted in ‘...sense-data, which since they are purely appearances in the minds of individuals, have nothing to be mistaken about, and cannot themselves have mistakes about them’ (Collier 1994: 13). In the latter case, reality is reduced to what is taken to be by various ‘conceptual schemes’ or ‘discourses’, and in a more extreme but very usual twist, is wholly absorbed to and totally constituted or ‘constructed’ by discourse (see Cruickshank 2003).

Often and very commonly, these two versions of correlationism and anti-realism are viewed as opposites and as alternatives, while their similarities are systematically overlooked. Especially in social sciences, and more specifically in the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of much of contemporary qualitative social research, the reaction against positivism and empiricism followed, to a great extent, the relativist path. This path was indeed so strong that the meta-theoretical assumptions of various versions of interpretivism, social constructionism and post-structuralism came to characterize ‘qualitative research’ and ‘qualitative methods’ *per se*. In other words, for many scholars, doing qualitative research or collecting qualitative (non-numeric, observational, textual, visual or unobtrusive data) entails the acceptance of certain epistemological theses. As Gorard and Taylor (2004: 9) point out: ‘There is, among some researchers who use only qualitative methods, an assumption that adopting a method automatically means adopting an entire ‘paradigm’’. Of course, a reaction against a largely flawed paradigm such as positivism and empiricism does not guarantee its fruitfulness (see Iosifides 2011). Indeed, the interpretivist, and especially the ‘linguistic/cultural turn’ that has informed much of qualitative research practice so far has embraced different forms of relativism which have resulted in various serious dead ends:

1. The ‘turn’ entailed the almost total abandonment of any notion of causality in the social world mainly because it ‘borrows’ the definition of causality from positivism and empiricism.
2. Language and discourse are given prominence and priority over practice and materiality, leading naturally to a crude reductionism and ontological flattening.
3. The joint workings of social agents within certain structural/cultural contexts and their effects disappear from the scene of social inquiry and instead ‘authorless discourses’ (Carter 2000) take their place. As Carter (2000: 38–9) points out: ‘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’.

4. I think that relativism, stemming from linguistic/cultural turn, seriously circumscribes any attempt to reach positive, though fallible, knowledge of the social world and inevitably leads to a form of unsustainable scepticism (Hammersley 2008).

In the last decade or so, the negative consequences of privileging language – or to be more accurate, of privileging a certain theory about language – in investigating social reality led to calls for other kinds of ‘turns’. For example, there are calls for a ‘practice turn’ (see Schatzki et al. 2001) in social theory and research, and a view of discourse ‘as the recontextualization of social practice’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 5). The trend to focus on social practices viewed as assemblages of material/ideational activities is consistent with critical realists’ assertions about the ‘primacy of practice’ over language, and doings over sayings (see Archer 2000). Furthermore, as van Leeuwen (2008: 6) points out: ‘It is important to stress the difference between social practices and representations of social practices’. This difference between on the one hand actual social practices, their complex contextual environments and their effects, and on the other, the interpretations of, discourses about and conceptualizations of them, enables us to re-introduce referentiality to our linguistic and social theoretical reasoning. As Sayer (2000: 93) rightly puts it: ‘there are several definitions of homelessness, but who would care to argue that it is merely a discursive construction? *The practice or referent is usually more important than its concept*’ [emphasis added]. Even inside the ‘powerhouse of the linguistic/cultural turn’, social anthropology, there are signs towards more practice, materiality and power-oriented approaches. The relatively recent publication of books such as *Critical Junctions, Anthropology and History beyond the Cultural Turn* (Kalb and Tak 2005) and *Materiality* (Miller 2005) indicate just that.

Also, dissatisfaction with the state of much of contemporary social science due to its discursive reductionist and idealist leanings led to a corrective resurgence of ‘new materialisms’ (Coole and Frost 2010) – that is, of new non-anthropocentric conceptions of materiality, material causality and materialization and their importance for social life. Thus, as Coole and Frost (2010: 6) stress:

...we are summoning a new materialism in response to a sense that the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn is now more or less exhausted. We share the feeling current among many researchers that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy. While we recognize that radical constructivism has contributed considerable insight into the workings of power over recent years, we are also aware that an allergy to ‘the real’ that is characteristic of its more linguistic or discursive forms – whereby overtures to material reality are dismissed as insidious foundationalism – has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require. (Coole and Frost 2010: 6).

This new contemporary trend towards materialism has also been linked more explicitly with various versions of realism, as it is conspicuous in the works of thinkers such as Alain Badiou,

Slavoj Žižek, Quentin Meillassoux, Manuel DeLanda, Bruno Latour and others (see Bryant et al. 2011). Moreover, there is ample evidence for a revitalization of interest in ontological questions in social science philosophy (see Lawson et al. 2007), a turn to social complexity, often explicitly linked with causal realism (Walby 2009), as well as for increased attention to and research into the cognitive mechanisms that mediate among human action and various socio-cultural processes (see Hart 2010). All these developments – more or less compatible with critical realist meta-theoretical principles – are indications of departure from the ‘cultural/textual model’ of viewing the social world and for the search for ‘real’, that is, non-relativist and non-scepticist alternatives to contemporary empiricism and neo-positivism. To this departure I myself intend to contribute by discussing, in the next section, some ideas of how qualitative methods can be utilized in realist social research.

2 Qualitative research into real casual powers

Despite the contemporary explosion of social research practice inspired by critical realist principles (see Iosifides 2011) and the extensive use of qualitative methods for causal, explanatory purposes in this research practice, much of today’s conventional qualitative methods are still confined within the sterile opposition between qualitative and quantitative ‘paradigms’. This opposition has been built upon two unnecessary interrelations: the alleged inherent connection of positivism and empiricism to quantitative methods, and that of interpretivism, textualism and relativism to qualitative ones. Of course, this opposition is between two equally anti-realist camps that, in my opinion, are not real alternatives because they share a lot in common – notably ontological flatness, conventionalism, meaning as use and phenomenism (see Hibberd 2005). Thus, the necessary precondition for the relativist and scepticist slippage of strict social constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism is the actual acceptance of the positivist definitions of causality and objectivity. As Mohanty (2000: 36) points out, post-modernism:

...remains within a specifically positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge. It assumes that the only kind of objective knowledge we can have is independent of (socially produced and revisable) theoretical presuppositions and concludes that the theory dependence of experience is evidence that it is always epistemically suspect. (Mohanty 2000: 36).

Now, and as already noted above, much of today’s qualitative research is still defined, conceptualized and presented as inherently linked with various versions of interpretivism, textualism and relativism. For example, Stake (2010: 11) reduces the qualitative element of qualitative research in human perception and understanding and renders qualitative methods as ‘interpretive’, ‘experiential’, ‘situational’, ‘personalistic’ and ‘emic more than etic’ (Stake 2010: 15–16). The same author talks about ‘multiple realities’ (Stake 2010: 66) rather than multiple interpretations of the same reality and hence, confuses ontological with epistemological questions committing the ‘epistemic fallacy’. He also treats causality with suspicion mainly because he adopts the positivist, ‘independent cause and effect’ notion of it. Moreover, he deprives causality of any real character, reduces it to the level of meaning and persuasion and renders it into a mere convention that researchers use for their own purposes (Stake 2010: 20–5). In his own words:

We seek to understand how something works. Whether we are quantitative or qualitative researchers, we do need to search for causes, for influences, for preconditions, for correspondences. Our findings and stories can enlighten those

seeking to understand the history or the problem or seeking to change the policy. But the data, however analyzed, do not themselves resolve the problem. It is the interpretation of the data, of the observations and measurements that will stand, not as proof but as persuasion of one meaning more than another. We think about causes because it helps discipline our research. (Stake 2010: 25). [Emphasis added].

Another conceptualization of qualitative research is offered by Marvasti (2004) in a conventional handbook of qualitative methods in sociology. There, the author stresses that ‘...*qualitative research* provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience’ (Marvasti 2004: 7), and presents as alternatives just positivism and social constructionism, linking quantitative methods with the former and qualitative with the latter. Finally, commenting on the contents of a constructionist handbook, Christian Smith (2010) stresses the ontological and epistemological confusions, contradictions and dead ends that anti-realist rhetoric inevitably faces. Smith (2010: 126) convincingly argues that:

Many [constructionists] write in ways that make it unclear what is reality, what is ‘reality’, what is reality ‘for us’, and what exactly those might mean. Similarly, the meanings of ‘person’, ‘self’, ‘human’, ‘lived experience’ and ‘subject’ also undergo frequent elisions in constructionist writings. The same is true, too, when it comes to the world, the ‘world’, worlds, ‘accounts of the world’, etcetera. Such ambiguities and slippery connotations seem to allow writers to pitch various edgy social, epistemological, and ontological claims while leaving open an escape door of plausible deniability in case anyone detects strong constructionism lurking. (Smith 2010: 126).

I could of course, go on with many more examples of the ways qualitative methods and qualitative data are presented as inherently connected with anti-realist and relativist principles, but I think the above few are enough to make my point. My point is that social inquiry in general and qualitative research practice in particular are so strongly influenced by anti-realist doctrines that for many researchers, practising qualitative research means a secure road towards notions of ‘reality’ through various interpretivist, constructionist and relativist lenses.

It is my purpose to challenge this conventional wisdom about qualitative methods, and fortunately this wisdom has already and increasingly been challenged in practice by scholars and researchers who employ qualitative methods and use qualitative data within realist, causal-explanatory research endeavours. This challenge presupposes a different set of notions and views about the character of social reality and a different set of notions about the role of qualitative methods in researching this reality. The deficiencies of interpretivist, constructionist and relativist ontological and epistemological commitments and associated research practices – notably obscurantism, internal inconsistencies, self-defeating contradictions and explanatory limitations (see Sayer 2000, Cruickshank 2003, Judd 2003, Hammersley 2008, Smith 2010) – urge for a different, realist notion of society and social relations. This notion stresses that much of social reality exists and is characterized by causal powers independently of ideas, beliefs, interpretations and concepts about it, that reality is ontologically deep – that is, stratified, complex and layered, and also relational, open and emergent. This is a social reality characterized by the constant interplay of real, causal powers of people and their relations, so causality – of a sharply different kind

than that of positivism – has to be placed at the centre of social inquiry and research practice.

For critical realism, reality is not exhausted in what people (and researchers) can experience or perceive but it also comprises layers and strata that are not directly observable or comprehensible. Those strata are the ‘deep’ domain of social reality (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000: 13) and refer to ‘structures, mechanisms, powers and relations’ (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000: 13) of social entities and objects which, through their interplay, produce events, a fraction of which are experienced and conceptualized in various ways. For realism, a large part of social reality exists independently of human perception and experience because reality is characterized by ‘ontological depth’. Thus, answering questions about existents in terms of the ways of knowing them is the wrong approach for social theorizing and research, but a common feature of both empiricism and relativism. The independent existence of the reality of structures, powers and mechanisms in the social world is what enables concepts, theoretical models and scientific interpretations to acquire their truth values; in other words, to represent what *is* with different degrees of validity. Without this differentiation between the ‘intransitive’ and the ‘transitive’ dimensions of knowledge (Sayer 2000), theories would be either mere descriptions of atomistic, discrete events (positivism) or performative representations with only pragmatic, action-driven value (relativism). But theories and theoretical language can occasionally represent quite accurately, though fallibly, various social phenomena and processes, and the validity of these representations can be assessed in practice (Sayer 1992). This feature of theoretical language derives from a characteristic of language in general. Contra post-Saussurean accounts, language is not a closed, relational system between signifieds and signifiers but an open system that is an integral part of practical social life and inconceivable without taking into account referents and referentiality towards objects independent of it (Sayer 2000). The negligence and denial of this crucial dimension of language by contemporary idealist and relativist trends (various forms of constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism) led to the treatment and analysis of society and culture *as language* (in post-Saussurean terms) (see Pavel 1989). But as Archer (1995: 165–6) rightly points out:

Society is not like a language with an orderly, enduring syntax whose components are mutually invoking. Society is not a simple cybernetic system, which pre-supposes a particular structure capable of carrying out goal directed, feedback regulated, error-correction. All of these are special kinds of system and society is another, which is only like itself because it is open, and is open because it is peopled, and being peopled can always be re-shaped through human innovativeness. (Archer 1995: 165–6).

The strength of the ‘linguistic metaphor’ for social and cultural analysis and for qualitative research practice is one of the most pervasive causes of the centrality and all-encompassing role that various interpretivisms and constructionisms granted to language, meaning and discourse in contemporary qualitative research. Challenging this requires grasping reality in all its ontological depth and systemic complexity and placing language, meaning, interpretations, discourses and human reasons within the overall societal causal order. Let me start with a quotation derived from Bryant et al. (2011: 5–6):

Against all forms of reduction to physical objects, cultural structures, systems of power, texts, discourses, or phenomena in consciousness, Latour argues for an

'irreductionism' in which all entities are equally real (though not equally strong) insofar as they act on other entities. While nonhuman actors such as germs, weather patterns, atoms, and mountains obviously relate to the world around them, the same is true of Harry Potter, the Virgin Mary, democracies, and hallucinations. The incorporeal and corporeal realms are equally capable of having effects on the world. Moreover, the effort to reduce one level of reality to another invariably leaves residues of the reduced entity that are not fully translatable by the reduction: no interpretation of a dream or a historical event ever gets it quite right, nor would it even be possible to do so. (Bryant et al. 2011: 5–6).

The above quotation can serve as a pointer to the realist conception of the social world I advocate; that is, a world comprised of a series of interacting 'entities' or 'things' (Sealey and Carter 2004), each possessing distinct and irreducible causal powers. 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 powers and liabilities are *necessarily* present as tendencies by virtue of the *qualities* of the social object; that is, by virtue of the relational makeup of the social object. In other words, 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). The powers of social objects *emerge* from this specific relational makeup of them and are not reducible to the qualities, properties and characteristics of the parts (Elder-Vass 2010). In other words, causal powers are *emergent properties* (Archer 1995). Emergent properties of any kind are the result of *structural relations*, that is, of *internal and necessary relations* among parts. As Archer (1995: 173) explains:

...the primary distinguishing feature of any emergent property is the natural necessity of its internal relations, for what the entity is and its very existence depends upon them. To focus upon internal and necessary relations between components as constitutive of an emergent property is to set them apart from relations which are external and contingent. In the latter case, two entities or items can exist without one another and it is neither necessary nor impossible that they stand in any particular relation to one another, for the nature of either does not depend upon this'. (Archer 1995: 173).

Now, these relational social objects, entities or 'things' (Sealey and Carter 2004) may be of different kinds. They may be *people* – individual and collective social agents – and their powers (People's Emergent Properties – PEPs), or the results of the interaction and interacting activities of social agents, that is, structural and cultural emergent properties (SEPs and CEPs respectively) (Archer 1995, 1996; Sealey and Carter 2004). Agential causal powers are the results of emergent processes originated by combinations of parts that compose 'our physical brains and bodies' (Elder-Vass 2010: 92) and include among others, 'reflexivity' (Archer 2007), 'sensations, beliefs, desires, intentions, reasons and decisions' (Elder-Vass 2010: 89). Smith (2010: 55, Table 1) refers to 30 different human causal capacities divided into 'existence' 'primary experience', 'secondary experience', 'creating' and 'highest order' capacities related to 'subjective self', 'social relationships' or/and 'material world'. Smith (2010: 42) explains that these causal capacities 'are emergent from the human body, particularly from the human brain, as it operates in its material and social environment' and that they 'endow humans with the ability to bring about changes in

material or mental phenomena, to produce or influence objects in the world'. This account of human causal powers places subjectivity, reasons, intentionality, meaning-making, interpretative and symbolization abilities within the reality's causal order. For this account, human reasons – conscious, deliberate, unconscious or habitual (Elder-Vass 2010) – can be causes of action although always partial and incomplete. Moreover, agential causal powers may refer not only at the individual level but also at the collective and group levels. Interaction among social agents results in the formation of what Archer (1995: 185) calls 'corporate agents', 'with emergent powers of promotive organization and articulation of interests'.

Structural causal powers are the emergent results of social interaction and are a special set of social relations. They 'are specifically defined as those internal and necessary relationships which entail material recourses, whether physical or human, and which generate causal powers proper to the relation itself' (Archer 1995: 177). Porpora (1998: 343) quoted in Elder-Vass (2010: 85) defines social structure:

...as a nexus of connections among [human actors], causally affecting their actions and in turn affected by them. The causal effects of the structure on individuals are manifested in certain structured interests, resources, powers, constraints and predicaments that are built into each position by the web of relationships. These comprise the material circumstances in which people must act in certain ways. (Porpora 1998: 343 quoted in Elder-Vass 2010: 85).

Thus, structural causal powers are emergent properties of relations among various interrelated social positions or social locations which acquire their qualities and identities through certain internal and necessary relations with other social positions or locations.

Finally, *cultural or ideational causal powers* are the emergent results of combinations among ideas; that is, logical relations of complementarity or contradiction (Archer 1996; Carter 2000). Moreover, ideational causal powers refer to the autonomous effects of discourses, ideologies, public meanings and representations that influence social action, promote certain social arrangements or legitimize certain social relations. For example, Hart (2010), utilizing insights from critical discourse analysis, evolutionary psychology and cognitive linguistics, shows how various discourses related to immigration have effects on manipulation, predication, proximization and legitimization strategies, and the role that 'conceptual metaphors' and 'conceptual blends' (Hart 2010: viii) play in fulfilling these strategies.

Now, phenomena, events or processes that take place in the social world are the result of a multiple, multi-dimensional and complex interplay of a series of causal powers of social objects and relations. This interplay, which is in most instances a combination of necessity and contingency, may be termed as a 'generative mechanism'; that is '...that which can cause something in the world to happen...' (Danermark et al. 2002: 55). The identification of generative causal mechanisms responsible for observed patterns is known as 'retroduction' (Elder-Vass 2010: 48), whereas the identification of '...the set of causal powers that interacted to produce...' (Elder-Vass 2010: 48) specific events is termed 'retrodiction'. Of course, due to space constraints, it is impossible to elaborate more on the realist rationale of social explanation, but I would like to stress the role of theoretical reasoning in achieving this. Given that our access to the deep levels of reality is always partial, incomplete and indirect, what we can do is to formulate various conceptual abstractions and theoretical models about the nature and causal powers of social relations

and then check and test these various models in practice, by independent evidence (Sayer 1992). As Manicas (2006: 99) rightly argues: ‘...among competing explanatory mechanisms, there are different consequences and these are testable’. Thus, saying that the interplay of causal powers is not directly observable at the level of empirical events does not mean that its identification is impossible or that demonstrating its reality is a mere speculation. For the intransitive dimension of reality always puts limits on and interacts with our conceptualizations and theories about it. An intense engagement with social reality – that is, with the lives of real people, real situations and ongoing social processes, provides, I think, the means for successful identification of causal generative mechanisms and demonstrations of their plausibility in practice.

In this paper I propose a re-orientation of qualitative methods as methods of *intense engagement* with social reality with the purpose of identifying the workings and interplay of real, causal powers. This is, of course, a major re-orientation, as much of contemporary qualitative work is practised within, implicit or explicit, meta-theoretical commitments, which do not allow for even the possibility of existence of a deep stratum of reality independently of conceptualization or identification. This trend is ironic as, in my mind, the stronger inherent strength of qualitative research is its ability to get ‘closer’ to reality (Miles and Huberman 1994 Robson 2002). Thus, referring to ethnography, Robson (2002: 188) points out that:

[C]lassically, ethnography was seen as a way of getting close to the reality of social phenomena in a way which is not feasible with experimental and survey strategies. The Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer talks about using ethnography to ‘lift the veils’ and to ‘dig deeper’, illustrating his realist assumptions [...]. (Robson 2002: 188).

Being ‘closer to reality’ means employing methods for gathering information and insights about real people, real situations and real relations. It means gathering information and learning by talking with people about their perspectives, meanings, actions, practices, experiences, situations, social positions and contexts. It also means a more direct involvement with social reality, by more or less actively participating in social situations, processes and phenomena; and by observing and analysing the discursive and non-discursive practices and developments in the social realm. As viewed in this paper, qualitative methods are not confined to the study of personal meanings and public discourses alone; more than this, qualitative methods are viewed as *powerful means for the study of the character and nature of social relations of all kinds*, from social relationships among individuals, to relations among social positions, ideational and discursive elements, structural with cultural properties. In other words, they are powerful means for the study of different causal powers of social objects along with their constraining and enabling effects. Researching, understanding, analysing and explaining the *relational make-up of social objects* is a deeply *qualitative task* because it is the ‘qualities’ – that is, the specific ways that the parts are related to each other – that determine which causal powers can be exerted and exercised under the right circumstances and conditions. *Realist qualitative research is the ‘art’ of connecting rather than conflating*: connecting individual meanings and perspectives with their referents (see Wengraf 2001, Sayer 2000 and thus assessing their adequacy as well (Manicas 2006); discursive with non-discursive practices and social relations (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999); perceptions about the character of social practices and courses of action with the real character of practices and courses of action

(Sayer 2000; agential with structural-material and cultural-ideational causal properties and powers. This 'art of connecting' presupposes, apart from the intense engagement with social reality which qualitative methods facilitate, having the right ontological and epistemological commitments along with a set of appropriate explanatory theoretical frameworks (Danermark et al. 2002). On the one hand, these frameworks of linking agential with structural and cultural causal powers are absolutely crucial for guiding research endeavours. On the other hand, intensive research of concrete situations and real-life cases can lead to the improvement and refinement of explanatory schemes. The whole enterprise, if successful, can result in the identification of causal generative mechanisms at work and the indication of the complexity and ontological depth of social phenomena and processes.

The above remarks lead us to re-think qualitative research in a manner which moves away from the interpretivist and relativist traditions, as follows:

First, there is no 'qualitative epistemology' and there is no 'quantitative epistemology' *per se*. The intrinsic linkage of qualitative and quantitative research with certain epistemological commitments reproduces the false dichotomy of positivism vs. interpretivism/relativism and is a recipe for disaster. This is because it circumscribes the potentials of both qualitative and quantitative research and precludes their effective combination. There are only qualitative and quantitative aspects of social reality and social objects and qualitative and quantitative data.

Second, qualitative methods are more appropriate for investigating the qualitative aspects of social objects; that is, of the ways that their various parts are related to each other and result in possessing certain causal powers.

Third, following the second point, and in contrast with interpretivist and constructionist views, qualitative methods are indispensable in researching social causality and explaining different aspects of social reality. This time of course social causality is viewed as a generative, not a successionist one; it is a causality based on intrinsic causal powers of social entities and relations as well as a causality that incorporates human reasons, meanings and interpretations along with relations, doings, practices and actions:

Given the contextual nature of efficient causes (= reasons for actions) – and the ubiquity of qualitative change and variation – qualitative language and methods are needed to identify the relevant structures and causal powers, and to show how and why objects possess these causal powers. In this sense, qualitative data is ontologically primary [...] [emphases added] (Patomäki 2003: 210).

Thus, because of the nature of social reality itself and of social entities – characterized by relational emergence and thus qualitative change – '...qualitative analysis of objects is required to disclose mechanisms' (Sayer 1992: 179). For critical realism, of course, both quantitative and qualitative methods have a role to play in the identification of generative mechanism, but the former are more appropriate for 'causal descriptions' while the latter for 'causal explanations' (Elliott 2005). As Elliott (2005: 112) argues:

A useful distinction can perhaps be made here between 'causal description' and 'causal explanation' (Shadish et al., 2002). Shadish et al. argue that experiments are useful for discovering the consequences of deliberately varying some factor or 'treatment'. This can be thought of as 'causal description'. However, it is much more difficult to use experimental methods to understand the mechanisms through which the relationship between two variables operates or the context in

which the causal relationship holds. This might be thought of as 'causal explanation'. (Elliott 2005: 112).

Fourth, some intrinsic characteristics of qualitative methods – notably their emphasis on context, process, complexity, case-based investigation and configurations – can enhance the explanatory potential of social research when being understood and utilized within critical realist ontological and epistemological principles. Thus, *context* for realist qualitative researchers means taking into serious account the contingency of interaction among different causal powers, and the vital causal role contextual 'factors' play in the phenomena under investigation. As Maxwell (2004a: 6) points out:

Realist social researchers place considerable emphasis on the context dependence of causal explanation (e.g., Sayer, 1992, pp. 60–61; Huberman & Miles, 1985, p. 354). Pawson and Tilley (1997) sum up this position in their formula 'mechanism + context = outcome' (p. xv). They maintain that 'the relationship between causal mechanisms and their effects is not fixed, but contingent' (p. 69); it depends on the context within which the mechanism operates. This is not simply a claim that causal relationships vary across contexts; it is a more fundamental claim, that the context within which a causal process occurs is, to a greater or lesser extent, intrinsically involved in that process, and often cannot be 'controlled for' in a variance-theory sense without misrepresenting the causal mechanism (Sayer, 2000, pp. 114–118). (Maxwell 2004a: 6).

Now, the emphasis of qualitative methods on *process* rather than on variance (see Maxwell 2004b) can be understood, in realist terms, as an emphasis on the specific ways that substantial social relations are formed and modified. The specification of *how* social entities are substantially (rather than formally) related to each other is extremely important because it exemplifies the role that necessity and contingency play in producing certain social outcomes. In this way, *how* and *why* questions can be combined and answered in a non-contradictory manner, as understanding a specific social process means the simultaneous explaining of certain outcomes linked with it. Investigating social processes qualitatively is mostly appropriate as qualitative methods allow for 'intensive, long-term involvement' in the field, the collection of 'rich data' and the employment of 'narrative and connecting analysis' (Maxwell 2004b: 254–5). Finally, qualitative research is intrinsically case rather than variable oriented. Realist qualitative research treats cases as configurations (see Ragin 2000) of different characteristics, features and powers, and through their in-depth investigation it aims at understanding their *complexity* and multidimensionality. Ragin (2000: 90) points out that in-depth, case-based research:

...has the advantage of providing the investigator intensive knowledge of a case and its history and thus a more in-depth view of causation. Case-study researchers are able to triangulate different kinds of evidence from a variety of different sources in their attempts to construct full and compelling representations of causation in the cases they study. In short, case studies maximize validity in the investigation of causal processes. (Ragin 2000: 90).

Fifth, realist qualitative methods depart from privileging agency, action, meaning and discursive practices (and also the 'micro-level', the 'cultural' or the 'subjective'). Courses of action, meaning-making activities, lived experiences and discursive practices always and inevitably take place within certain structural (material and ideational contexts) which exert

their own, distinct causal powers. Thus, a phenomenological study of lived experiences of immigrants without papers in a certain area which does not concern itself with the ideational environment that various contradictions between discourses on 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'national belonging' create, or with the materiality of relations between immigrants and their employers, leaves the whole picture at least incomplete. Worse than that, when qualitative research practice of this kind leans towards reducing 'reality' and 'knowledge about reality' to what individual immigrants conceptualize of their lived experiences, then ontological flatness reigns, causal complexity is ignored and explanatory potential is seriously limited. In contrast, a realist kind of qualitative research entails the investigation of the complex ways that subjective-agential powers interplay with objective ones (ideational and material). It also entails the departure from the sole preoccupation with meaning, interpretation and discourse and focusing on doings, practices and relations as well. For, doings, practices and relations are possible only within certain causally efficacious contexts.

Sixth, qualitative methods can serve well the movement from observable phenomena at the empirical level to the deeper conditions and realities which generate them. In other words, they can contribute considerably to the proper operation of the basic realist mode of inference, that is, *retroduction*. Qualitative methods are usually characterized as *depth* methods but in realist terms 'depth' means also to go beyond the given. Referring to depth, qualitative interviewing, Wengraf (2001: 6) takes the realist side when he defines depth as follows: 'To go into something in depth is to get a sense of how the apparently straightforward is actually more complicated, of how the "surface appearances" may be quite misleading about "depth realities"'. Retroduction may be achieved by 'counterfactual thinking', by 'studying pathological circumstances and extreme cases', through comparison of 'different cases' (Danermark et al. 2002: 101, 104–5), by 'searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases' (Maxwell 2004b: 258) and so on. Now, qualitative methods have inherent characteristics which when utilized within realist research designs can facilitate retroductive reasoning. These are mainly openness, depthness and flexibility. As McEvoy and Richards (2006: 75) put it:

...qualitative methods can be adapted more easily to pursue alternative lines of inquiry in the search for retroductive explanations. It is obviously far easier to change a line of inquiry as potential explanations emerge during the course of a series of conversational interviews, as the interviewer is not committed to the measurement of predetermined variables. (McEvoy and Richards 2006: 75).

Seventh, we live in societies characterized by highly asymmetrical social relations, that is, 'power2', 'generalised master–slave relationships' (Creaven 2007: 32). These are '...relations which govern the distribution of material goods, political and military authority, and cultural status (e.g. stratification by class, gender, age and ethnicity)' (Creaven 2007: 32). Thus, realist qualitative methods have to be simultaneously explanatory, critical and emancipatory. Investigating the 'quality' of social relations has a double purpose: *first* a scientific, causal-explanatory one, that is, comprehending their causal powers, and *second* an ethical one, that is, assessing their constraining or enabling character or in other words, assessing their capacities to cause 'human flourishing or suffering' (Sayer 2005: 11).

Now, despite the fact that much of contemporary qualitative research practice is still dominated by interpretivist, constructionist, post-structuralist or other relativist modes of thinking, there are some very encouraging, relatively recent developments towards a realist

re-orientation of qualitative inquiry. I think that it is worth mentioning some of them in brief:

1. The work of Martyn Hammersley and especially the insights contained in his recent book *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry* (2008). There, Hammersley engages in one of the most convincing critiques and exposures of relativist (constructionist, post-structuralist and post-modernist) qualitative research practice I am aware of, indicating its fallacies, dead-ends and extremely negative consequences for understanding and explaining the social world.
2. The work of Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman on *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1994) and the more recent work of Joseph A. Maxwell (2004a, 2004b). These scholars advocate a realist qualitative research practice oriented towards causal explanation, and offer invaluable theoretical and practical insights for this purpose.
3. The work of Norman Fairclough (2001, 2003, 2005) on a critical realism inspired Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and on a realist conception of language and semiosis (see Fairclough et al. 2004).
4. The work of Charles C. Ragin (see for example Ragin 2000) on a case-based multi-method approach. This approach – now the ‘tradition’ of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) – treats qualitative methods as an indispensable means for the investigation of causal complexity of configurational cases.
5. The book by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000). There, the authors develop a Kleinian psychoanalytic approach to qualitative, depth and biographical interviewing which is extremely interesting from the realist point of view. This is because the approach is critical to linguistic imperialism and discursive reductionism of conventional qualitative interviewing; is explicitly anti-relativist; is oriented towards discovering the truth about social phenomena and processes under study; and aims at assessing the adequacy of lay meanings and interpretations; and accounts for the interplay between subjective and socio-cultural realities. As the authors explicitly assert: ‘In capturing something of the complexity of our subjects, we offer something true about them. In this respect, our method is different from most contemporary approaches in that it is neither relativist nor constructionist. The discursive turn has been valuable in disrupting the traditional idea of the transparent, unmediated self, but it renders issues of the (relative) honesty and truth in research accounts impossible to grasp. We hope that our approach stops short of throwing out the baby of truth with the bathwater of certainty, and can hang on to sociological insights without reducing our subjects to such merely social determinants.’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 156).
6. The work of Tom Wengraf on *Qualitative Research Interviewing* (2001) in which he treats qualitative and biographical interview data as sources of *knowledge* about discourses, *objective referents* and subjectivities (see Wengraf 2001: 6–10).
7. The work of Pawson and Tilley (1997) in which qualitative data is treated as evidence for evaluating theoretical frameworks and explanatory abstractions (see also Pawson 2006).

Finally, numerous contemporary researchers and scholars increasingly employ qualitative methods within realist, causal-explanatory research endeavours, as the impressive production of realist-oriented social scientific papers, books and conference presentations indicate. The vast majority of these scholars and researchers utilize qualitative methods not

only to comprehend meaning and achieve interpretative understanding but to explain the outcomes of the interaction of various causal powers of social entities.

Table 1: A generic conceptual model for conducting realist qualitative research

Meta-theoretical orientations of realist qualitative research	A realist understanding of qualitative research	Researching real causal powers qualitatively
<p>Some elements of reality exist independently of identification and thought</p> <p>A 'thing', depth and stratified ontology</p> <p>A relational, open and emergent social world</p> <p>A generative view of causality</p> <p>Avoidance of 'correlationism' and privileging language, discourse, meaning, 'culture' or the 'subjective'</p> <p>A re-orientation towards incorporating insights from 'practice', 'cognitive' and 'new materialisms' 'turns'</p> <p>Moving away from notions about the existence of separate and inherently opposing 'qualitative' or 'quantitative' epistemologies</p>	<p>Qualitative methods as <i>intense engagement</i> with social reality (talking to and learning from people, observing and participating in social situations, observing and analysing the discursive and non-discursive practices and developments in the social realm)</p> <p>Qualitative methods as means to get 'closer' to reality</p> <p>Qualitative methods as means for researching the 'qualitative dimensions' of social reality; the character, nature and essence of social relations; the relational make-up of social objects</p> <p>Qualitative data as <i>evidence</i> (though fallible) for getting access to broader social realities, to subjective realities linked to agential action and to their interplay</p>	<p>The '<i>art of connecting</i>' rather than conflating: individual meanings and perspectives with their referents and thus assessing their adequacy as well; discursive with non-discursive practices and social relations; perceptions about the character of social practices and courses of action with the real character of practices and courses of action; agential with structural-material and cultural-ideational causal properties and powers.</p> <p><i>Researching real causal powers qualitatively entails, means or requires:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relating agential actions and reasonings to material and ideational causal contexts • identifying causal generative mechanisms • incorporating meanings, reasons and interpretations in the causal order • focusing on doings, actions, practices, positions, relations, interests, materiality and ideational context • viewing 'context' as an integral part of causal complexity and as a contributor to emergent properties • adopting a 'process' approach, that is, how relational make-ups of certain social objects became possible and how the causal powers of these objects interact with the powers of other objects • accounting for 'depthness', that is retroducting conditions and realities beyond the empirical level; this also entails a constant dialogue between theory, abstraction and concrete evidence • adopting a case-oriented approach and viewing cases as configurational and complex • engaging in open, flexible, multi-sourced research practice • adopting an ethical stance in the sense of uncovering constraining, asymmetrical and domineering social relations

I think that the above analysis, though preliminary and inevitably incomplete and partial, gives some ideas for a *re-orientation* of qualitative methods away from their 'deadly' embracement by interpretivist and relativist doctrines and towards the investigation of the operation of real causal powers in the social world. Very schematically, some basic ideas for this *re-orientation* are summarised in Table 1.

3 Realist qualitative research on migration: some examples from Greece

This section of the paper is dedicated to a brief discussion of some examples from Greece as regards the advantages of researching qualitatively migration-related phenomena and processes within a critical realist framework. But first, let me start with the following quotation from Pharo (2007: 487):

Consider, for example, the case of racist stigmatization. Of course, the association of migrants and foreigners with wicked and dreadful characteristics is clearly a type of social construction that we find in many societies. But, as I have tried to show elsewhere (Pharo, 2001a, 2001b), the reciprocal acts of rejection or aggression, the political instrumentalization of foreigners, the numerous ordinary decisions associated with in-group/out-group perceptions and relations, the secessionist consequences of exclusive forms of self-esteem, are not at all social constructions. (Pharo 2007: 487).

Pharos' remarks, point at the limitations of a strong social constructionist (or strict post-structuralist and post-modernist) approach to researching migration-related processes become evident. Taking the anti-realist stance, in other words denying that there is a reality – that is, certain causal powers – outside discourse and discursive practices has dire consequences for research practice and theorization. For then nothing forbids us from taking the unequal relations of power between 'immigrants/foreigners' and 'natives' as 'discursively constructed' themselves, or worse from taking the view that these relations exist not objectively but only within certain 'discursive frameworks'. The very principles of strong social constructionism and other versions of relativism lead, in most cases involuntarily, to so extreme a relativization of the social that any positive assertion about the nature of social relations is precluded. I think that the inevitability of 'ontological gerrymandering' (see Hammersley 2008: 116) of relativist research commitments calls for a qualitative research practice that is based on realist premises. This kind of research practice aims at exploring the real, causal powers of asymmetric social relations which exist independently of discursive constructions of them along with the causal powers of discursive and ideational forms in legitimizing and reproducing those relations.

The rest of this section of the paper is dedicated to a brief presentation of some examples of qualitative research on migration, which were conducted within the principles discussed in the previous section. Three of those examples – on informal immigrant employment in Athens, on social mobility of immigrants in Greece and on the role of social capital in social incorporation processes of immigrants from Albania to Athens – concern completed or ongoing research studies, in which I was or am involved. The fourth example is a hypothetical one. It concerns the advantages of a realist qualitative approach in the investigation of the evolution of the citizenship regime in Greece and of processes of 'boundary change' in general, arising from a recent major citizenship reform in the country.

3.1 Informal immigrant employment in Athens

This example comes from my early, DPhil research on the labour and housing market arrangements of immigrants in the Athens conurbation (see Iosifides 1996, 1997, 2003) and is extended by some thoughts about a new research project on the social and economic

incorporation of immigrants from Africa into Greece,¹ in which I will participate when it begins in due course.

Back in the early 1990s, when immigration into Greece, especially from the Balkans and from other areas, was perceived as 'new' and 'sudden' and when the vast majority of immigrants were without papers and working in the 'informal sector', I conducted field research with immigrants from Albania, Egypt and the Philippines. Research was mostly qualitative and was based on a series of depth interviews with immigrants, employers, landlords, policy makers and representatives of NGOs, and some participant observation in leisure, work and public places of intense immigrant presence and use. Research was also complemented by basic data gathered through 141 questionnaires administered almost equally to the three immigrant 'groups'. For the purposes of the present paper I want to focus on the investigation of social relations which produce the 'continuum of formal and informal economic activities', in many cases even within the same enterprise; on the relations between employers and immigrants; and on those between the 'organisers' of informal work and the 'dependants' on it for social reproduction and survival. I also want to focus on the ways that qualitative methods and data were utilized for getting deep insights into the workings of various real causal powers in the domain of immigrant employment.

The main economic activities of immigrants from Albania, at the time this research was conducted, were construction (household and public works construction sector), cleaning, and small firms (restaurants, takeaways, clothing, footwear, removal companies etc.), while those of immigrants from Egypt were mainly construction, small firms and street vending. Almost all immigrants from the Philippines (predominantly women in contrast to the other two 'groups') were employed in the 'domestic sector' (Iosifides 1996). Now, in the cases of the public works and small firm sector the formal/informal division was found to occur within the same enterprise or within the same 'project'. This division reflected in an almost perfect way the split between 'primary' and 'secondary' jobs in those sectors. The former were registered, 'high-skilled', formal jobs while the latter were undeclared, 'low-skilled', precarious and flexible jobs occupied by immigrants without papers. In the case of the small firm sector the 'organizers' of informal work were the owners of those firms while in the case of public works the 'organizers' were subcontractors. In both cases the dependants were immigrants, the vast majority without legal status in the country. In the household construction sector the 'organizers' of informality and precariousness were either the household leader(s) themselves or subcontractors who, although they were maintaining a formal economic relation with household leader(s), were employing immigrants informally, that is without social security and other benefits and with much lower wages than those who were employed according to official standards. The characteristics of the cleaning sector resembled those of the household construction sector while in the case of the domestic sector the picture was quite different:

The Filipino case differs markedly from the cases of the other groups of immigrants, not only because of the gender difference and the higher degree of employment specialisation but also because of their legal status and its implications for their employment arrangements. The vast majority of Filipino immigrants in Athens enter the country holding a work permit. This is arranged

¹ Project title: 'Researching Opportunities for the Social and Economic Integration of African Migrants in the Greek Receiving Society'. Funded by ESPA-SYREGASIA. Scientific Co-ordinator: Apostolos Papadopoulos, Department of Geography, Harokopion University of Athens.

by recruitment agencies in the Philippines. They are bound to one specific employer who is responsible for the renewal of their work and residence permit in the country. When Filipino immigrants decide to leave their employer for another one, they usually lose their work permit and become illegal immigrants. Their vulnerability increases even further when employers hold their passports and other legal documents and threaten not to renew their work permits and to report them to the police if they leave or if they disagree with the employer's terms and conditions of work. The implication of this legal and labour market situation for the Filipino immigrants in Athens is that they are divided into two categories: those who work holding a work permit, and the undocumented. The latter work, in most cases, under totally informal conditions, with low payments, long hours of daily work, no social insurance and health benefits, restricted outings and hardship. But even the former category does not escape informality because household leaders employ them in the first place in order to organise informal arrangements to their benefit. For example, even when employers contribute to the social insurance of their immigrant employees, their contribution is much lower than the legally required amount. As several Filipina immigrants in Athens reported, in this case usually the employer contributes 50 per cent of the amount and the other 50 per cent is contributed by the immigrant worker. In that way employers reduce their working costs and introduce informal practices to their benefit as the two parts, the employer and the employee, are so unequal in terms of power. Not surprisingly, one of the most important demands of Filipino immigrant representatives in Greece is the abandonment of the link between work permits and one specific employer. (Iosifides 1996: 15).

Finally, the only set of economic activities where immigrants had some autonomy in the organization of their own informal way of making a living was street vending (of goods, such as clothing, footwear, perfumes etc.) (Iosifides 1996). A large proportion of immigrants from Egypt were involved in these activities. Nevertheless, there was '...a relationship of hidden dependency in many cases: the relationship between the provider of the goods and the immigrant seller/trader. In many instances the provider of traded goods keeps a proportion of the total earnings, a very rare practice in formal supplier-trader economic relationships. In this way suppliers not only assist the organization of informal trade activities but make additional profits firstly because the activity is informal and secondly because the vendor is an immigrant, weak in socio-economic and legal power and rich in vulnerability' (Iosifides 1996: 16).

From the above brief presentation of some of the research findings, the complexity of the labour market and social situation of immigrants becomes evident. Divisions of gender, skill, task, legal status and job position interrelate and produce precariousness, instability and insecurity for some and benefits and excess profits for others. The above divisions are the products of the causal powers of certain social relations; of predominantly unequal power relations which take complex, and often mutually implicated, classed, gendered, ethnicized and institutionalized forms. Qualitative research proved to be crucial in understanding the workings of these causal powers on the ground. I paid attention to investigating the meanings and perspectives of immigrant workers and employers themselves and especially those that were related to stigmatization and racist categorization of certain groups by employers and 'natives' in general, and those that were important for the 'negotiation' by immigrants of the terms of their incorporation in the

labour market. Meanings, reasonings and interpretations were important, both at the 'micro-level' of everyday interaction between immigrants, employers and 'natives' and at the 'macro-' discursive/ideational level where notions of 'belonging' are formed and then imposed in practice. Meanings, reasonings and interpretations were treated as important causes of social action while their adequacy was assessed against reality. I also paid equal attention to practices, courses of action, positions and relations. This was done by collecting detailed data on the processes of immigrant labour market incorporation and engagement with informal economic activities and on employment relations in concrete cases (either at individual or firm level). The close examination of immigrants' practices, relations, positions and courses of action helped to retroduce conditions of possibility and to understand the 'logic' and role of various structural and ideational constraints (legal constraints, 'us/them' constraints, macro-structural features of the 'Greek economy', micro-structural intra-firm features and so on). The open and flexible character of research, the cross-checking of sensitive information about certain practices and the multi-sourced nature of investigation allowed for the identification of basic material, ideational and agential powers which shaped immigrant employment arrangements. Of course, it is impossible to reproduce here all research findings but my main purpose is to make a comment on the significant contribution that qualitative research can make to the holistic investigation of real-life complexities. Finally, theory and theoretical frameworks played an invaluable role in guiding the whole research endeavour. Theories on the formal/informal interplay, socio-economic restructuring and informalization and especially on labour market segmentation (see Iosifides 1997) were utilized critically and always 'in dialogue' with data and insights derived from concrete research practice.

Leaving the 1990s, I would like end this sub-section by synoptically presenting an 'abstraction exercise' which I intend to put in practice (along with others of course) in the research project about social and economic incorporation of immigrants from Africa into Greece that is going to begin in few weeks. From my experience, living in Athens last year during my sabbatical, I observed that most immigrants from Africa work as street vendors in various areas of the city (or better that most street-vending activities are carried out by immigrants from Africa). I engaged in a few informal conversations with some of them and I was told that they work long hours (10 to even 14 hours every day). The reason they gave for this situation was that long hours of work mean more money to satisfy their needs and especially the needs of their family members back in their country of origin. Of course this reason seems straightforward and quite plausible but agential interpretations need to be taken into account against deeper causal processes and realities. Thus, I am in total agreement with Sealey and Carter (2004: 105) who point out that:

[respondent's accounts]...are inescapably partial, and this in two senses: the purpose of everyday understandings is practical adequacy in the context of daily life and not the practice of social scientific enquiry; respondent accounts, insofar as they remain grounded in this practical adequacy, also remain tied to a less objective view of the social world than that sought by researcher. It is the very opacity of social life that requires us to develop theoretical accounts if we are to grasp those features of it that are not given in our everyday, phenomenal experiences. (Sealey and Carter 2004: 105).

The theoretical account (abstraction) that I formulated and intend to investigate in practice goes as follows. The causal mechanisms that produce hardship, insecure working conditions,

low earnings and thus long hours of work are related to the nature of social relations within which immigrants from Africa are embedded: predominantly to the nature of their relations with suppliers of the goods they sell in the streets. These relations probably determine the low profit margins that immigrants face in engaging with this trade and long hours are just a specific effect or just one of the prices that they have to pay to make ends meet (see also Iosifides 2011). Of course relations between sellers and suppliers are themselves embedded within other broader socio-economic relations which result in the proliferation of processes of economic informalization. All these relations are internal in the sense that the characteristics of the parts would not be the same unless they are related in a specific way and within certain ideational and material contexts. Intensive, qualitative research seems to be the most appropriate way for trying to investigate the plausibility of this abstraction/hypothesis. Learning from immigrants and suppliers (through depth interviewing and participant observation) about the processes of their mutual implication and the negotiations involved in their 'economic partnership' would do the trick. Collecting rich, detailed and multi-dimensional qualitative data from carefully designed case studies would be invaluable in the effort to understand the conditions of the development of this activity and the nature of the complex relations that this development entails.

3.2 Social mobility of immigrants in Greece

This example comes from some doctoral research I have supervised in the Department of Geography of the University of the Aegean during the last one and a half years.² This research concerns social mobility of immigrants in Greece. Its main methodological approach is a qualitative-biographical one and is carried out within a critical realist meta-theoretical framework. The main aim of the study is to identify basic causal generative mechanisms that are responsible for social and occupational mobility of immigrants in Greece and develop an understanding of the ways that material and ideational causal powers are linked with agential ones to produce specific life and work trajectories. The study is based on various methods, such as quantitative critical event-history analysis, depth interviewing with key actors and policy makers related to migratory processes in Greece, content and discourse analysis of official and other texts related to immigrants' incorporation into the country, and a thorough utilization of all available secondary data, but its main focus is an intensive, biographical investigation of the life and work course of immigrants who reside for several years in Greece. To avoid 'methodological nationalism' (see Chernilo 2007), prospective research participants were not grouped together according to 'ethnic' background but selected according to social and occupational mobility categories. For example, two of the categories of occupational mobility that guided us to select participants are:

- Movement from a dependent, waged working position to an independent one (entrepreneurial activity or self-employment)
- Upward hierarchical mobility within the same firm

In this research, intensive, biographical interviews with immigrants are conducted in a realist manner. In practice, this means that:

² This doctoral research is conducted by Panagiota Aggelopoulou, PhD student in the Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Lesvos, Greece. The provisional title of the PhD thesis is: 'Life Trajectories and Socio-Spatial Mobility of Immigrants in Greece: A Narrative-Biographical Approach'.

- We take qualitative, biographical data as pointers to realities beyond the ‘interactional encounter’ between the researcher and the participant (see Wengraf 2000, Hammersley 2008). These realities are on the one hand the subjective realities of individual reasoning that partially guide certain modes of action and behaviour and on the other hand the objective realities of structural and ideational constraints and enablements that every kind of agential action inevitably faces (see also Iosifides and Sporton 2009). In this respect biographical research becomes perfectly adequate ‘for relating the personal and the social’ (Chamberlayne et al. 2000: 2); that is, in realist terms for exploring the ways that personal and socio-cultural causal powers interact with each other, producing certain outcomes.
- Qualitative, biographical data are not treated merely as ‘texts’ to be interpreted but as evidence of broader phenomena and processes that need to be explained (see Alexiou 2007).
- We focus equally on collecting detailed data about accounts of decision making and action reasonings and on actual practices and actions along with their outcomes. We also place great emphasis on collecting data about the social positions of research participants within their multiple webs of social relations.
- We use the biographical data in order to retroduce certain plausible material and ideational conditionings and then test our ‘abstractions’ in practice. This occurs either by seeking further evidence through repeated interviews with the same participants, by cross-checking information between different participants or by relying on other available, independent evidence (see Sayer 1992).
- We do not use the qualitative, biographical data in a manner that privileges the ‘emic’ over ‘etic’ perspective, but as material for reconstructing complex causal processes with the aid of specific social scientific theoretical categories (Alexiou 2007). Thus although participants’ meanings and perspectives are seriously taken into account, we place more emphasis on actual doings, practices and relations along with the reasons of congruence or incongruence between agential purposes and intentions with actual accomplishments and outcomes.

So far, eight biographical interviews with immigrants have been conducted within the ‘pilot phase’ of the overall research. I think that some specific finding fragments derived by two cases are worth mentioning in order to indicate how realist biographical research can enhance our comprehension of the effects of the interplay of different causal powers. The first case concerns a man from Albania who after years of working as a dependent labourer in the private construction sector became an independent subcontractor and an employer, remaining in the same sector. Nevertheless, he exclusively employs other immigrants from his own country of origin because from his whole immigration experience he formed the notion that no Greek labourer would agree to work for an ‘Albanian’. This finding is an indication of how various material and ideational powers produce *ethnicized* labour market *niches* which then constrain subsequent action in certain ways. In this specific case, for example, the confinement of the potential labour pool of the subcontractor to immigrants from Albania or to individuals of Albanian origin only, limits his available choices and increases his competitive disadvantages in comparison to other subcontractors in the same sector. The second case concerns another immigrant from Albania who has worked in the same firm (a hotel business) for about 18 years. He started as an irregular, unskilled labourer for some years, and after moving upwards in the internal job hierarchy of the firm, he now holds a managing position. His adventurous trajectory and the detailed data we

collected about it point to the workings of a series of causal powers: macro-structural powers responsible for producing fluctuations in the performance of the tourist sector; micro-structural powers responsible for the intra-firm division of labour into primary and secondary/informal/flexible/multi-tasked jobs; and personal powers, which in this specific case, mean the long-term toleration of extremely hard, low-paid and exploitative working conditions which were the 'price' for earning the management's 'trust'.

3.3 Social capital and social incorporation of Albanian immigrants in Athens

This example comes from a research project in which I have participated, concerning the role of social capital in processes of social incorporation of immigrants from Albania to Greece (see Iosifides et al. 2007). As social capital we defined '...the qualities, characteristics and properties of networks of social relations which are formed, evolved and dissolved within wider institutional and socio-economic environments...' (Iosifides et al. 2007: 1344–5), and the central methodological approach of the study was depth, qualitative interviewing with immigrants from Albania who resided and worked in the country for several years. Depth interviewing with immigrants focused on a series of themes, perspectives, relations and specific practices, the most important of which are the following:

The interviewees' immigration trajectory from Albania to Greece; their geographical mobility within Greece; economic and employment arrangements; leisure and recreation habits, social relations with family members in Greece and Albania, with relatives, other immigrants and Greeks; relations with public agencies and authorities; along with issues concerning their broader social and civic participation. Special attention was paid to the role that family/kinship, ethnic and other social networks play in immigrants' incorporation processes in the country. (Iosifides et al. 2007:1346)

In this research, qualitative interview data were treated predominantly as *evidence* (though fallible) for getting access to broader social realities, to subjective realities linked to agential action and to their interplay (see Hammersley 2008: 91, Maxwell 1996: 57). In other words, qualitative data were used as '*recourses* rather than as *topics*' (Carter 2000: 110); that is, as pointers to real social processes and their outcomes. Openness, depthness and flexibility allowed for constantly cross-checking critical information, an emphasis on understanding the role of context, engaging in retroductory exercises and thoroughly exploring immigrants' relations and practices. Investigating the role of familial and kinship social relationships along with 'ethnic' social networks, relationships with Greeks in various contexts, and with authorities and public agencies, was one of the main concerns. Moreover, accounting for the specific type of embeddedness of those relationships within broader social relations – such as for example class, gender and 'ethnic' relations – was crucial in order to explain the role of social capital in immigrants' social incorporation processes. Space constraints prevent me from reporting in detail the main findings of the study, but what is more important for the purposes of the present paper, is to stress that collecting rich and detailed qualitative data about real people's lives allowed for understanding the causal powers of specific types of social relationships/relations in regards to immigrants' social incorporation: symmetrical relationships/relations of solidarity and mutuality (mainly familial/kinship relationships, relationships within some 'ethnic' social networks and in some instances social relationships between immigrants and Greeks within certain contexts) or asymmetrical, unequal, exploitative and domineering relationships/relations (relationships

within some 'ethnic' social networks, broader gender and class relations, relationships between employers and immigrants, relationships between immigrants and authorities/public agencies) tended to produce different outcomes regarding the terms of immigrants' social incorporation into various social domains such as the labour and housing markets.

3.4 The evolution of a citizenship regime in Greece

I would like to end this section of the paper by briefly referring to a crucial topic which could be explored in depth and thoroughly with the aid of realist qualitative methods. This topic concerns the evolution of a citizenship regime in Greece and its recent transformation. In 2010 the Greek parliament approved a citizenship regime reform that allows immigrants residing legally in the country and their children to become Greek citizens under certain presuppositions and conditions. What is important for the purposes of the present paper are not the details of the reform but the fact that for the first time the traditional *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) Greek citizenship regime was transformed into a mixed regime due to the introduction of *ius soli* (right of soil) regulations. This reform of course has significant implications for the terms of political and social incorporation of immigrants in the country but most importantly it is a classic 'boundary change' (see Glick Schiller 2007; Samers 2010); that is, a change of the notions that determine 'us/them' power relations and relations of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. These relational dynamics which affect the evolution of the citizenship regime in Greece would be investigated in depth using Margaret Archer's realist morphogenetic approach. This approach has been used with great success by Bob Carter (2000) for explaining the dynamics of post-war UK migration policy and the role that ideas about race played in its shaping, and I think that it is the most adequate stance for explaining long-term processes of change and transformation such as citizenship regime change in Greece.

The turning point of the early 1990s where hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mainly from the Balkans, came to Greece (see Iosifides 1997) and worked, at least for some years, as labourers in the informal sector, could serve as a period of structural and cultural conditioning for subsequent social and socio-cultural interaction and developments. The dominant discourses in that period framed 'Greek society' positively as 'ethnically and thus culturally homogeneous society' but socio-economic and labour-market structural needs led to the permanent incorporation of a large proportion of immigrant labour. Subsequently the two relatively extensive regularization programmes of 2001 and 2004 marked the official acknowledgement of this permanence. Cultural and structural causal powers along with their contradictory interplay created certain environments for agential (individual and especially collective) action that led to the partial erosion of dominant discursive formations of 'nationhood' and 'national belonging', and subsequently to the introduction of novel citizenship regulations and to the granting of new socio-political rights to immigrants (for example the right to vote in local elections for immigrants residing legally in the country for over five years).

Explaining the workings and outcomes of the interplay of various structural, cultural and agential causal powers would require engagement with depth, multi-sourced qualitative research. A realist, explanatory 'historical narrative' (see Carter 2000: 108–110) of transformational processes such as the one that concerns us here, would be based on a synthesis of data derived by content analysis of media coverage of migration issues from the

early 1990s until today, depth interviewing with key formal and informal political, social and economic actors in this period, and an analysis of how contradictions among ideas of 'democracy', 'human rights', 'social inclusion' and 'nationhood' created an environment for action towards the change of criteria of becoming a 'citizen' and of belonging to the 'nation'. To end this sub-section, I would like to stress the value that realism brings in 'boundary change' research. This value lies in the departure from the idealist leanings of much research of this kind and from privileging the 'agential' or the 'interactional' element. The emergent causal properties of objective structural and cultural relations are 'equal' partners in explanatory efforts of how definitional boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are maintained or transformed.

4 Some concluding comments on theory

In this paper, I have advanced a kind of qualitative research practice which is quite different from the 'conventional' one. This kind of qualitative research practice departs from the two major 'traditions'. First, it departs from focusing exclusively on social agents' perspectives, interpretations and meanings and thus, reducing the social world to these elements only. This is interpretivism; that is, another version of methodological individualism and empiricism (see Bunge 2003; McAnulla 2006; Hartwig 2007). Second, it departs from treating qualitative data predominantly as 'texts' and focusing on the 'discursive practices' behind their production (or better their 'co-production' by the research and research participants). This is discursive reductionism of various versions such as social constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism, which suffers from all the inconsistencies and contradictions that characterize every kind of relativism. Contrary to these 'traditions', realist qualitative research practice aims at acquiring knowledge about the intransitive dimension of social reality, and one *basic ingredient* for achieving this is to question and assess the adequacy of lay interpretations, perspectives and meanings, and to learn about concrete social practices, positions, and relations of real people in their actual (immediate and broader) structural and cultural contexts. The other *basic ingredient* for achieving this is theory. Realist research practice treats qualitative data as evidence and this entails their 're-description' and their conceptualization with the aid of theoretical categories and language (see Danermark et al. 2002; Alexiou 2007). Hence, explanatory abstractions and theoretical reasoning is vital for coming to valid conclusions about how different causal powers interplay and produce certain outcomes. The dialectical relation of these two ingredients would be of broader advantage for social research and social theorizing in general. It would contribute to the formation of what Rob Moore (2009: 57) calls 'vertical and hierarchical knowledge structures' and to abandoning the fragmentary 'horizontal knowledge structures' and 'theorising' of various 'posts'.³

Now, in migration studies, realist qualitative research can contribute to the development of comprehensive theoretical frameworks and simultaneously be guided from theoretical reasoning which takes into account the ontological complexity and depthness of social reality. Fortunately, such theoretical reasoning has already been advanced in migration studies. First, there have been explicit calls for abandoning 'methodological nationalism' in migration research; in other words, for de-constructing dominant categories

³ These remarks do not imply that quantitative methods are of no use in social science. Far from this. When disconnected from positivist and empiricist assumptions, quantitative methods can be an integral and invaluable part of realist multi-method approaches (see Danermark et al. 2002; Smith 2010: 289–99).

of thought which are derived by the political and managerial practice of the nation-state, and introducing other alternative categories which are more capable of grasping the workings of real causal powers in society (see Glick Schiller 2007; Wimmer 2007). Second, there have been calls for the development of migration theory within the critical realist meta-theoretical principles in order to account for the role of structure and agency in migration-related processes more adequately (see Bakewell 2010). Third, a series of generic theoretical frameworks on migratory phenomena have recently been proposed, notably the 'social transformation' framework (see Castles 2007), the 'social change approach' (see Portes 2008) and the 'political economy of migration processes' framework (see Collinson 2009). What all these theoretical frameworks and approaches have in common is their ability to serve as general guiding theories for empirical research. Moreover, they all link agential action with structural and cultural contexts, micro- with meso- and macro levels, adopt a multi-level reasoning and take social complexity into serious account.

I think that the dialectical process of developing general theoretical approaches on migration characterized by ontological adequacy in realist terms, bridging them with topic-specific theories and investigating social reality for the identification of real causal mechanisms at work is a 'recipe for success' in acquiring valid knowledge regarding migratory phenomena. I hope to have contributed with some insights to the indication of the role of realist qualitative methods in this 'recipe'.

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