

# Approaches to Theory Use In Interpretive Case Studies – a Critical Realist Perspective

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*Theory is good but it doesn't prevent things from existing*  
from Craib (1992)

## Abstract

*It is argued that interpretive case studies can be classified as either describing or explaining a particular research phenomena and as such the researcher firstly needs to finalise which approach they are going to adopt. The article then discusses a number of basic approaches to case study research and suggests an alternative context dependent approach that more fully recognises the “reality” of the research situation.*

## Keywords

IS Research Frameworks, Research Methodology, Case Study, Epistemology, Interpretive Perspective, Critical Realism

## DECIDING THE PURPOSE OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Yin (1994, p. 13) defines a case study as:

*an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomena within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.*

The intention of case study research is generally proposed as to gain an “in-depth” understanding of the concerned phenomena in a “real-life” setting.

Stake (1994) describes two types of case study – the intrinsic case study and the instrumental case study. An intrinsic case study is:

*...not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, [the] case itself is of interest...The purpose is not to come to understand some abstract concept or generic phenomena...The researcher temporarily subordinates other curiosities so that the case may reveal its story (p. 237).*

In contrast, the instrumental study attempts to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. “The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else.” (Stake 1994, p. 237).

In support of this categorisation into intrinsic and instrumental case study Darke, Shanks and Broadbent (1998, p. 275) describe case research as designed to provide descriptions of phenomena, to develop theory or to test theory:

*Case study research has often been associated with description and with theory development, where it is used to provide evidence for hypothesis generation and for exploration of areas where existing knowledge is limited.*

Craib (1992) argues for the importance of explanation in comparison to description and notes the increasing emphasis on description. This concentration on description rather than explanation has grown out of “a general scepticism about the possibility of explanations, of a totalising theory, and this in turn has led to theory concerning itself with description” (p. 26).

In contrast Schaller and Tobin (in press) argue the importance of description:

*the telling of stories is the purpose of a case study and the narrative could be the case study's most compelling attribute. Narrative is a method whereby a story is crafted from events and the experiences of the writer, and refers to discourse that attempts to create understanding by telling a story that answers the question “what is going on here?”. In this way narrative can contribute to the creation of understanding and knowledge in a more inviting manner for the intended audience.*

From a postmodern perspective, it can be argued that description is the most we can hope for. A sceptical postmodernist would argue that “all interpretations of phenomena are equally valid, and the world is so complicated that concepts such as prediction and causality are irrelevant. Everything is related to everything else so the search for causes or origins must be discontinued.” (Kilduff and Mehra 1997, p. 456). Adoption of this particular world view in case study research would fundamentally affect later decisions on the role that theory and methodology play in the research process. This therefore suggests that the case researcher needs to address this question early in the research process. If the researcher feels that theoretical frameworks or models **can** play a useful role in research then they would be encouraged to provide explanation rather than solely description.

## **APPROACHES TO THEORY USE IN INTERPRETIVE CASE STUDIES**

“Case research” can be completed in a multitude of different ways; as Cavaye (1996, p. 227-228) argues:

*Case research can be carried out taking a positivist or an interpretive stance, can take a deductive or an inductive approach, can use qualitative and quantitative methods, can investigate one or multiple cases. Case research can be highly structured, positivist, deductive investigation of multiple cases; it can also be an unstructured, interpretive, inductive investigation of one case; lastly, it can be anything in between these two extremes in almost any combination.*

Darke et al (1998) sensibly suggest that the use of the case study in research is useful in newer less well-developed research areas particularly where examination of the context and the dynamics of a situation are important.

However they then go on to argue that the “case study research method” is not particularly useful “where a phenomenon is well understood and mature, where constructs exist already and are well developed, where understandings of how and why the particular phenomenon occurs is not of interest, and where understandings of the contexts of action and the experiences of individuals in a single setting is not relevant” (p. 280). Such a view of case

research does not adequately recognise the multitude of ways that case research can be conducted. It denies the fact that whilst a particular research object or phenomenon may be well understood from within a particular ontological and theoretical perspective, having this knowledge should not deny the importance of alternative perspectives.

As Cavaye (1996) points out it is useful to distinguish between “research approach (or strategy)” and “research method”. Research strategy is defined as “a way of going about one’s research, embodying a particular style and employing different methods”. Research method is defined as “a way to systemise observation, describing ways of collecting evidence and indicating the type of tools and techniques to be used during data collection” (p. 227).

Theory is both a way of seeing and a way of not-seeing. A particular theoretical perspective can blind researchers to other perspectives at its moment of application. A more subtle criticism of theory is that we often take action without the conscious use of theory. As Walsham (1993, p. 6) argues “we are conditioned by theories whether we like it or not, since we are exposed to a multiplicity of theories from our earliest childhood and we are undoubtedly influenced by them”. The surfacing of such conditioning is difficult, however with the adoption of a critical approach to theory use, identification is more likely.

Four distinctive “approaches” or styles for the initial use of theory in interpretive indepth case study can be identified:

- No theory – an example is that of grounded theory which suggests that pre-defined theory has the potential to contaminate research and therefore, the theory should be allowed to “emerge” from the data.
- Single Theory – an example is provided by Alvesson (1996) who suggests that the theory in use be “entrenched in the interpreter’s person and his or her political-ethical position” (Alvesson 1996, p. 15).
- Multiple Theories – Walsham (1993, 1995) suggests theory be used as a “scaffold”, to be discarded when no longer needed. This view suggests that there is no such thing as best theory only different ways of seeing the world.
- Context dependent use of theory – this essentially realist perspective argues that the selection of theory should be based on the “reality” of the research situation – it suggests that there are better theories than others.

## **NO THEORY - GROUNDED THEORY**

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967) suggests that in the initial stages of research a pre-defined theory is not recommended. A case study involving the use of a grounded theory approach requires that the theory “emerge” from the data. The primary aim is to construct theory from the collected field data; in fact as quoted by Walsham (1995 p. 77) they recommend against doing too much literature research prior to commencement as such a strategy may work against the definition of new theory:

*...carefully to cover “all” the literature before commencing research increases the probability of brutally destroying one’s potentialities as a theorist (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 253)*

Grounded theory aims to avoid contaminating theory - the primary aim is to construct theory which is ‘grounded’ in the collected field data. Such an approach tends to minimise the importance of theory and scientific method in directing the research process. As Layder (1993, p.46) argues, this view suggests that theorising simply moves the researcher away from the empirical world and into an alien abstract world. The intention of grounded theory is very

much set within the interpretivist frame whereby the researcher is directed towards a faithful rendition and interpretation of the researcher situation from the participant's perspective without the potential contaminating influence of theory. A grounded theory approach aims for an objective stance on the part of the researcher by suggesting the removal of any epistemological frame for viewing the research situation. Yet, as Roman (1992 p.571) argues, such an approach reveals positivistic assumptions in that it argues that the descriptions given **can** be separated from the researcher's prior assumptions.

Whilst the intention of grounded theory is laudable, its actual application is difficult. The requirement to avoid the use of theoretical frames and prior inferences suggests that the researcher should investigate *everything* related to the situation under study. In even the smallest research setting this is not feasible. The practical difficulty in applying the grounded theory approach is that even if attempts are made to keep the initial approach as unbiased and open as possible the data collected cannot emerge independently of the researcher's personal ideological and theoretical stance - data can never be neutral but will depend on researcher's ontological assumptions and the specific language of the world view from which they reside. For example, in an interview setting, the researcher will pose questions as to the research situation. Such questions can be pre-defined and posed in a non-leading manner (for example – what do you think about [the research situation]?). However, the responses elicited will be filtered by the researcher's own beliefs and the further progress of the interview will be influenced by such beliefs. The later “emergence” of the theory from the data does not specifically recognise the initial bias involved in preliminary data collection.

## **SINGLE THEORY - “AUTHENTIC” THEORY USE**

Alvesson (1996) argues it is important that researchers primarily use theories “with which they are intellectually familiar and for which they feel an emotional preference”(p. 206). This is in marked contrast to the suggestion from Walsham that theory be regarded as a scaffold, to be dismantled and discarded when it has served its purpose. Alvesson's approach can be seen to deny the importance of multiple perspectives and can be seen as the anti-thesis of Walsham's “theory as scaffold” approach which insists on the importance of multiple interpretation. Alvesson (1996) argues there are difficulties in using multiple theories:

*In my view, a qualified understanding [of a social situation] ... calls for concentration and a good deal of work on the theory or theories in use; it is also necessary that the theory or theories be entrenched in the interpreter's person and his or her political-ethical position. There are thus normally limits to the theories – which ones and how many – that a researcher can successfully command, at least in the context of interpretive and discursive studies which call for a deeper feeling for the theoretical framework employed than is required in rational-analytic approaches. (p. 15)*

Alvesson suggests a “deep” knowledge of the theory in use is more preferable than a shallower use of multiple theories.

Alvesson's approach to theory can be seen to be related to questions of personal *authenticity*. Probert (1997, p. 53) quotes Golomb (1995, p. 11) in describing the concept of authenticity as “a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values”. Authentic can be defined as genuine, valid or bona fide and authenticity in research or consultancy suggests a personal commitment to research approaches.

Probert (1997, p. 51) reflects on two dilemmas he faced whilst acting in a consultancy role:

- Should I use a methodology which has embedded values that I do not agree with?
- Should I use a methodology which, in my judgment, is wholly inappropriate to the circumstances pertaining in the organisation?

Such questions can also be applied to theory use in non-consultancy research. For example, questions such as: Can I use critical theory if I fundamentally do not accept the perceived negative implications of the theory and deny the importance of “emancipation”? Can I use a soft systems approach if I do not believe that an Information System is fundamentally a socially constructed artefact? Should I use a methodology that is heavily focussed on power issues, even if I feel that such an approach will not significantly help to explain the unitary situation evident within the organisational situation? These are complicated, perhaps, ethical issues that need to be addressed by individual researchers. A researcher using Alvesson’s approach would be encouraged to use theories to which they have a personal commitment and would allow for a more “authentic” use of theory.

## **MULTIPLE THEORY - THEORY AS “SCAFFOLD”**

Walsham disagrees with the grounded theory approach whereby theory is regarded as a contaminating influence to be removed. Walsham’s view is that informed and critical use of theory is useful. He acknowledges and confronts the biasing effect of theories and argues that the use of theory should be treated as a “scaffold” where the scaffolding is removed once it has served its purpose – “A good framework should not be regarded as a rigid structure, but as a valuable guide to empirical research” (Walsham 1993, p. 71). This helps to avoid the potential danger of the researcher only seeing the theory and being blinded to new ways of thinking. He argues that there is no correct or best theory:

*In the interpretive tradition there are no correct and incorrect theories but there are interesting and less interesting ways to view the world. (Walsham, 1993, p. 6)*

*There is not, and never will be, a best theory. Theory is our chronically inadequate attempt to come to terms with the infinite complexity of the real world. Our quest should be for improved theory, not best theory, and for theory that is relevant to the issues of our time. (Walsham 1993 p. 478)*

Walsham sees that theory use in interpretive studies can be less rigid than in positivist studies, the theoretical literature primarily serving to act as a source for inspiration and to assist in the understanding of complex social situations. Walsham (1995) argues:

*The motivation for the use of theory in the earlier stages of interpretive case studies is to create an initial theoretical framework which takes account of previous knowledge, and which creates a sensible theoretical basis to inform the topics and approach of the early empirical work. (p. 76)*

Walsham (1995) quotes Mingers (1984) who suggests that there are at least four different philosophical positions interpretive researchers can adopt: phenomenology, ethnomethodology, the philosophy of language and hermeneutics. He then suggests:

*A key question for researchers in any tradition, **regardless of philosophical stance**, concerns the role of theory in research (Walsham, 1995, p. 76 – my emphasis).*

Walsham elevates the importance of theory in the research process and relegates the importance of the link between philosophical stance and theory use.

The suggestion that theory be used as a scaffold is a useful metaphor for theory use but it does not help in defining which theories to use – is the scaffold dependent on the building type? is it dependent on the scaffold foundation? is it dependent on the builders preferences? Walsham suggests that different theories provide different, but not necessarily better, perspectives on a situation. Context dependent theory use suggests that there **are** better theories for different situations.

## **CONTEXT-DEPENDENT THEORY USE - A REALIST APPROACH**

### **Realism**

Bunge (1993, p. 229, as quoted in Weber, 1997, p. 174) argues that “Philosophical realism, or objectivism, is the view that the external world exists independently of our sense and experience, ideation, and volition, and that it can be known. The first conjunct is an ontological thesis while the second is an epistemological one. It is possible to assert the former while denying the latter. That is, one may hold that material (natural or social) objects exist externally to us but cannot be known except by their appearances. Or one can hold that the world is intelligible because we construct it ourselves, much as we construct myths and mathematical theories.” This equating of realism with objectivism is unfortunate in that there are versions of realism which recognise the subjectivity or social nature of knowledge acquisition. Such a brand of realism is that proposed by Bhaskar (1978, p. 25):

*[Critical realism] regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena; and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science. These objects are neither phenomena (empiricism) nor human constructs imposed upon the phenomena (idealism), but real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions which allow us access to them.*

This so-called depth realism is in contrast to other shallower forms of realism, such as *actualism* which asserts the reality of things and events but denies the existence of underlying structures which affect the events – cause and effect is determined at the level of events: every time A happens, B happened (Collier, 1994 p. 7). Actualism asserts that we can only know what we observe (this is termed by Bhaskar as the epistemic fallacy). Within this brand of realism events are the primary object of investigation rather than the underlying enduring deep structures and mechanisms proposed within critical realism.

Layder (1993) argues that “a key aspect of the realist project is a concern with causality and the identification of the causal mechanisms in social phenomena” (p. 16). He defines realism as centrally comprising an “attempt to preserve a “scientific” attitude towards social analysis at the same time as recognising the importance of actors’ meanings and in some ways incorporating them in the research” (p. 16). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe their realist approach to qualitative analysis as incorporating an interpretive element:

*We agree with interpretivists who point out that knowledge is a social and historical product and that “facts” come to us laden with theory. We affirm the existence and importance of the subjective, the phenomenological, the meaning-making at the centre of social life. Our aim is to register and “transcend” these processes by building theories to account for a real world that is both bounded and perceptually laden, and to test these theories in our various disciplines. (p. 4)*

They describe their approach to qualitative analysis as being closest to “transcendental realism” (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986) which considers social phenomena as having a real objective existence apart from their internal subjective existence. They argue that there are

“lawful and reasonably stable relationships” to be found amongst social phenomena. Social phenomena, “such as language, decisions, conflicts and hierarchies, exist objectively in the world and exert strong influences over human activities because people construe them in common ways. Things that are believed become real and can be inquired into.” (p. 4).

### **Structure and Agency**

A realist perspective on research would suggest that the researcher cannot divorce philosophical beliefs from the role of theory in research. As Rowland (1995) argues any research study reflects a particular worldview composed of at least three philosophical layers: Ontological beliefs, epistemological assumptions and methodological choices.

*Ontological beliefs are our beliefs regarding reality (or what it is), epistemological assumptions are our assumptions regarding how we come to know about our world (i.e. our sources of knowledge, or how we make sense of reality); and methodological choices are the means we choose in attempting to achieve desired ends. ...Particular ontological beliefs lead us to make particular epistemological assumptions... That is, our explanations of how people come to know about the world depend on what we believe the world to be. Likewise, particular epistemological assumptions lead us to choose certain methodologies over others. We choose to carry out activities that fit with how we assume humans come to know. (Rowland, 1995, p. 278)*

A realist believes in the primacy of ontology. As Archer (1995) argues “the nature of what exists cannot be unrelated to how it is studied...the social ontology endorsed does play a powerful regulatory role vis-à-vis the explanatory methodology for the basic reason that it conceptualises social reality in certain terms, thus identifying what there is to be explained and also ruling out explanations in terms of entities or properties which are deemed non-existent” (p. 16-17). Archer (1995) argues that the reality of social situations can be usefully reflected by consideration of the two fundamental components of social life – structure and agency. She equates a structural perspective with a macro or collectivist perspective and an agency perspective with a micro or individualist perspective.

There has been an enduring argument between collectivists and individualists concerning the relative importance of structure and agency in the social sciences; such argument being largely rejected by postmodernist theory which suggests that “reality is in perpetual flux and transformation and hence unrepresentable through any static conceptual framework or paradigm of thought” (Chia 1996, p. 46 as quoted in Reed 1997, p. 24). Such theory argues against the dualistic thinking involved in the structure/agency debate.

Reed (1997), from a critical realist perspective, suggests that many so-called postmodern approaches “work with 'flat' or 'horizontal' social ontologies in which the processual character of social reality totally occupies the analytical and explanatory space available” (p. 24). He quotes Rosenau (1992, p. 136) in that they occupy a shared epistemological niche in which the study of “the local, the decentred, the marginal and the excluded is superior to examining what is at the centre”. Reed (1997, p. 24) suggests that examples of these single level approaches include ethnomethodology, actor-network theory and Foucauldian-inspired poststructural theory:

*...theoretical approaches that are sympathetic to the postmodernistic turn in social and organisational analysis – particularly in regard to its one-level, process-dominated social ontology and its inherent analytical tendency to collapse agency and structure into localised or micro-level social practices – offer a very different explanatory agenda and dynamic than that proffered by more structurally inclined perspectives.*

In a criticism of ethnomethodology and actor network theory Reed (1997, p. 25) argues that:

*The ontological status and explanatory power of 'structure' - i.e., as a concept referring to relatively enduring institutionalised relationships between social positions and practices located at different levels of analysis that constrain actors' capacities to 'make a difference' - is completely lost in a myopic analytical focus on situated social interaction and the local conversational routines through which it is reproduced.*

In a similar vein Archer (1995) argues that inevitably much of social theory has come to lean towards consideration of either collectivist **or** individualist issues related to social phenomena – or equivalently, emphasised structure *or* agency, rather than structure *and* agency. Structuration theory is a recent attempt to address both agency and structure, however Archer (1995) argues that structuration theory “conflates” structure and agency into each other, thus reducing the ability to examine their interaction over time. In order to be able to examine the important interactions between structure and agency over time Archer (1995) proposes *analytical dualism* - an approach based on two basic propositions:

- (i) *That structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) leading to its reproduction or transformation.*
- (ii) *That structural elaboration necessarily post-dates the action sequences which gave rise to it. (p. 15)*

Human agents either reproduce or transform social structures which are seen to be relatively enduring over time. This incorporation of a longitudinal temporal aspect to the structure/agency dualism is an important part of Archer’s theory – an aspect which she claims is not properly represented in structuration theory.

## **A Contextual Framework**

Accepting the realist argument as to the importance of both structure and agency (or micro and macro, or individual and collective), Figure 1 suggests a framework for selecting a theoretical approach. The model describes organisational situations as being unitary, pluralist or coercive and suggests that a consideration of both structure *and* agency is an important part of organisational research. As discussed above Reed (1997) argues from a critical realist perspective that there is a need to recognise both structure and agency and their interaction:

*In direct contrast to theoretical approaches based on flat or compacted social ontologies, [the article] supports a critical realist position as providing a layered or stratified social ontology on which a more structurally robust and inclusive explanations of organizational phenomena can be constructed. (p. 21)*

In contrast to Reed’s argument Figure 1 suggests that there are times that single level theoretical approaches may be useful. The framework suggests that an individualistic (micro/agency) perspective on organisational situations is most suitable for coercive situations; a collectivist (macro/structure) perspective is most suitable for situations where structural collectivist issues pre-dominate.

An example of the importance of an individualistic perspective is in a downsizing situation - generally an extremely coercive situation, heavily dominated by power relationships driven by individual survival instincts. In such a heavily political environment an individualistic or micro perspective may prove to be of more benefit in explaining the interaction between participants. For example, an individualistic perspective on power may be of more benefit than a collectivist or relational view on power. Berle’s (1969) view on power as being invariably exercised by individuals can prove to be a useful theoretical perspective:



*No collectivity of any kind in and of itself wields power. The ostensible power of a group extends from the fact that the group has been organised and has conferred decision-making power upon certain individuals formally or informally recognised as power holders. However it is attained, the expression of power can only be the decision and act of an individual. (p. 118)*

In the light of current relational perspectives on power this view seems somewhat old fashioned. It is a limiting view on power ignoring the consensual and relational aspect of power – “power is a matter of obedience, and ... nobody possesses power but is given it in the obedience of those who obey” (Mingers, 1995) – yet in a downsizing situation where participants may well lose their positions, obedience is an unlikely event – an individualistic approach can be useful.

Clearly this model is a simplistic representation suggesting that collectivist and structural arguments are completely unsuitable for examining coercive situations such as that involved in downsizing. This is clearly inaccurate as obviously structural issues such as governmental structuring requirements may well prompt and impact such situations. Structural issues still need to be considered but the framework suggests that an individualistic perspective may well be most useful.

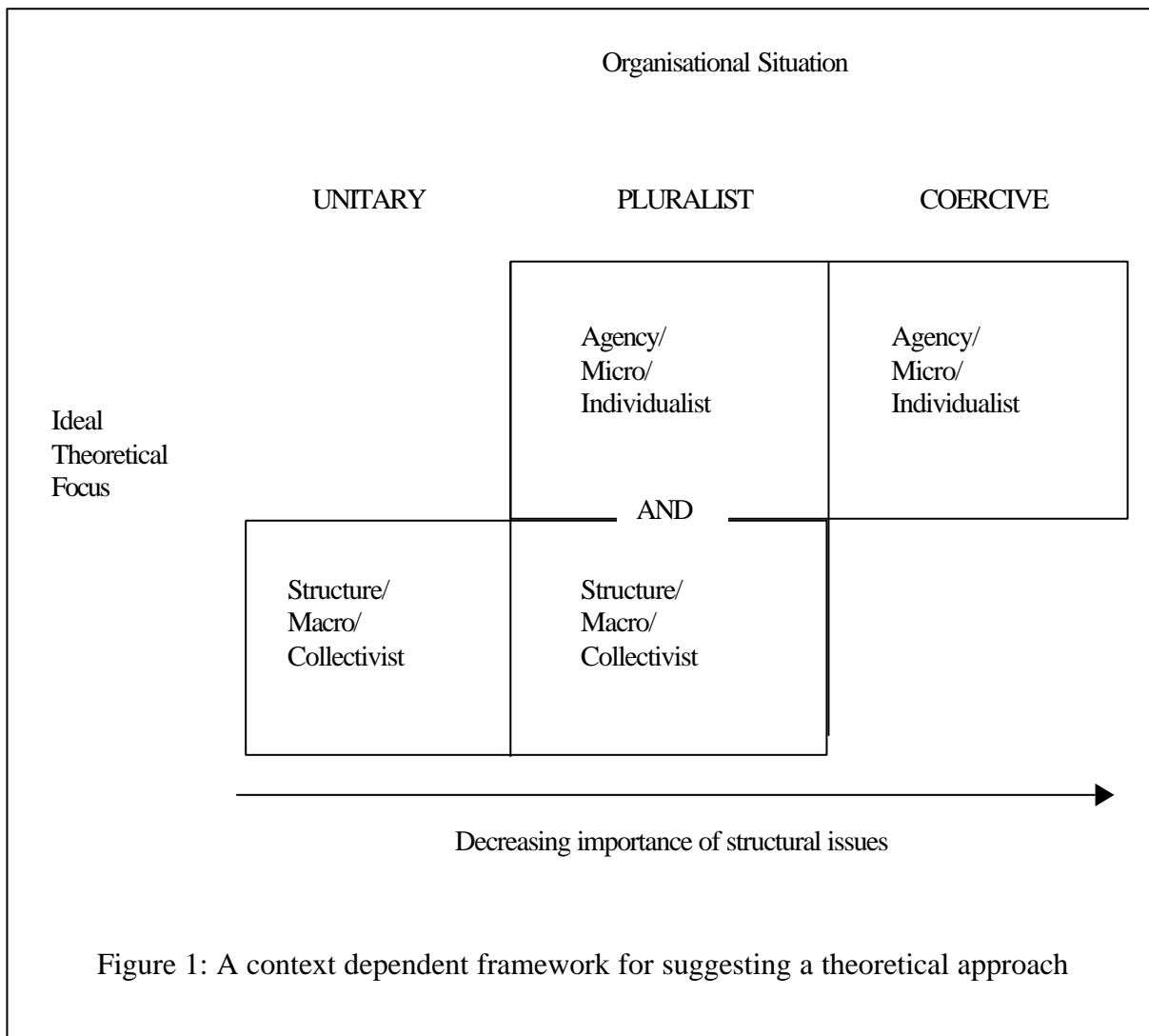


Figure 1 suggests that the reality of the situation should drive theory selection, it suggests that a useful metatheoretical position in most organisational situations is the consideration of both structure and agency.

## CONCLUSION

This article suggests that the investigation of in-depth case studies requires firstly that the researcher addresses whether the research should involve description or explanation. Description suggests the adoption of an idealist philosophy whilst explanation suggests a realist approach. Once the decision to adopt description or explanation is made, the choice of theory then often comes down to the use of a grounded theory approach (no theory), a single theory, or multiple theories. Each of these approaches suggest different underlying assumptions regarding the research process and the research object under investigation. Walsham (1995) and Alvesson (1996) are presented as contrasting examples of such theory use; Alvesson suggesting that the deep knowledge attainable from knowing a single theory intimately is most valuable and Walsham arguing that the opportunity provided by multiple, not necessarily more shallow, perspectives has the most potential for benefit.

Both approaches are from within an interpretive perspective, highlighting the importance of interpretation in research. An alternative approach is to argue that the research situation itself will suggest appropriate theories – a framework suggesting the importance of structure and agency is proposed (Figure 1). This framework basically relies upon a critical realist perspective on research (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986) – a perspective which attempts to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and argues for the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within the social world.

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