



Explaining governance with depth: Critical realism and the morphogenetic turn in public administration research

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Abstract

Public Administration (PA) research remains divided between positivist approaches that privilege regularities and interpretive approaches that prioritize meaning, often at the expense of causal depth. This paper argues that Critical Realism (CR) offers a viable alternative by integrating explanation and interpretation within a stratified ontology. Building on Bhaskar's philosophy and Archer's Morphogenetic Approach (MA), the paper develops a programmatic explanatory framework for PA research that explains how structures, cultures, and agency interact over time in open systems. It shows how retrodution, analytical dualism, and morphogenetic sequencing can be operationalized to analyze reform trajectories, accountability regimes, street-level discretion, informal governance, and public value creation. The paper contributes by consolidating CR–MA across these domains and clarifying how qualitative and mixed-method research can move from empirical observations to generative mechanisms while remaining attentive to context, interpretation, and power. In doing so, it advances an explanatory turn in PA research capable of accounting for variation, change, and legitimacy in complex governance contexts.

Keywords

Critical realism, morphogenetic, causal mechanisms, qualitative explanation, informal governance

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Points for practitioners

- Public managers should not assume that formal reforms, rules or accountability systems automatically produce intended outcomes. Governance outcomes often depend on deeper structural, cultural and informal mechanisms that shape how actors interpret and enact formal arrangements.
- Critical Realism and the Morphogenetic Approach can help practitioners diagnose why similar reforms succeed in some settings but remain symbolic, resisted or weakly implemented in others. The framework encourages attention to pre-existing institutional conditions, actor reflexivity, and how outcomes unfold over time.
- Informal governance should not be treated only as a deviation from formal rules. In some contexts, informal networks may compensate for weak bureaucracy, while in others they may reproduce exclusion, patronage or institutional fragility. Practitioners should examine when informality supports adaptation and when it entrenches dysfunction.
- Accountability, discretion and public value are not produced by rules alone. They emerge through interactions among formal mandates, professional norms, resource constraints, political authority, citizens and other stakeholders. Effective reform therefore requires understanding both formal structures and the lived practices through which governance is carried out.
- For policy design and implementation, the key practical question is not simply “what works?”, but “what mechanisms make this work, for whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences?” This can support more context-sensitive, reflective and adaptive public administration.

Introduction

Public Administration (PA) has long grappled with an epistemological tension between objectivism and relativism, most visibly expressed in the divide between positivist and interpretive approaches. Positivism has historically functioned as the field’s “default philosophy,” shaping standards of rigor in leading PA research (Ashworth et al., 2019; Whetsell and Shields, 2015). It privileges quantification, causal regularities, and the aspiration to emulate natural-scientific models of explanation (Elías, 2024). Interpretive and constructivist scholarship, by contrast, emphasizes the contextual, meaning-making, and value-laden character of administrative life (Elías, 2020, 2022, 2024; Farmer, 2014; Lejano and Leong, 2012; Miller and Fox, 2007). These traditions have enriched PA in different ways, but they also reflect a persistent divide between explanation understood as regularity and understanding grounded in interpretation.

The limitations of this divide are increasingly apparent. Objectivist approaches may reduce complex social processes to measurable variables, while interpretive approaches may struggle to explain how meanings are conditioned by deeper institutional and structural forces. As a result, PA scholarship has become adept either at identifying empirical regularities or recovering lived meanings, but less able to explain how structures,

cultures, and actions combine to produce divergent outcomes in open institutional systems where causation is layered, contingent, and historically situated. Recent reviews reinforce this concern. Pérez-Durán's (2024) review of twenty-five years of accountability research shows that the literature has expanded significantly but remains fragmented across theoretical traditions, methods, and accountability types. This fragmentation points to a broader problem: PA has rich empirical and interpretive accounts of governance, but still requires stronger explanatory frameworks for reconstructing the mechanisms through which accountability, reform, discretion, and public value are produced in practice.

Critical Realism (CR) offers one response to this challenge. Rooted in the work of Bhaskar and developed by scholars such as Archer, Sayer, and Collier, CR proposes a stratified ontology in which observable events are generated by underlying structures, relations, and mechanisms. These mechanisms exist independently of any single observation but are knowable through fallible, theory-informed inquiry. By combining ontological realism with epistemological reflexivity, CR avoids both positivist reductionism and constructivist relativism. It enables researchers to ask not only what happened or what actors understood, but what structural, cultural, and agential conditions made particular administrative outcomes possible.

Interest in CR within PA is growing. Ongaro and Yang (2025) argue that CR should be recognized as one of the field's foundational philosophies capable of advancing public value governance. Ongaro (2024) further connects public value with Neo-Weberian state traditions, showing how administrative authority, legal order, and institutional culture shape the conditions of governance. Yang (2022a) develops a critical-realist ontology of PA by distinguishing structures as social relations from institutions as rules and norms, while Yang (2022b) applies CR to embedded agency and institutional change in the Sanming healthcare reform. Newman (2023) similarly demonstrates how CR can illuminate structural contradictions and policy reform trajectories in the case of Universal Credit. These works are important because they show that CR in PA has already moved beyond philosophical advocacy in important respects and has begun to inform substantive and methodological analysis.

Accordingly, this paper does not claim to be the first to operationalize CR in PA. Its contribution is more specific. Building on these recent contributions, this paper consolidates, systematizes, and extends CR–MA into a programmatic explanatory framework for PA research across reform, accountability, street-level discretion, and public value. Archer's Morphogenetic Approach (MA) is particularly valuable because it translates CR's stratified ontology into a temporal framework for analyzing how structure, culture, and agency interact over time. Through analytical dualism, retroduction, and morphogenetic sequencing, MA enables researchers to examine how pre-existing structural and cultural conditions shape action, how actors reflexively mediate these conditions, and how outcomes either reproduce or transform the conditions from which they emerged.

This consolidation matters because PA is centrally concerned with phenomena that cannot be explained adequately by either regularity-based or meaning-based approaches alone. Reform trajectories differ across jurisdictions even when formal policy designs are similar. Accountability arrangements may generate trust, resistance, or ritual compliance

depending on deeper legitimacy and power relations. Street-level discretion emerges from the interaction of formal mandates, professional cultures, resource constraints, and reflexive judgement. Public value is not simply declared by public authorities but produced through contested interactions among institutions, administrators, citizens, and other actors. These phenomena require explanatory approaches that can connect institutions, meanings, power, and agency without collapsing one into the other.

The paper therefore advances PA theory in four ways. First, it reframes PA's epistemological foundations by positioning CR as a means of moving beyond the opposition between positivist explanation and interpretive understanding. Second, building on recent CR applications in PA, it specifies how MA can structure empirical inquiry into causal mechanisms in open institutional systems. Third, it reconceptualizes reform, accountability, discretion, and public value as emergent outcomes of interactions among structures, cultures, and reflexive agency unfolding over time. Fourth, it provides a foundation for explanatory qualitative and mixed-method research by clarifying how researchers can move from empirical observations to generative mechanisms while remaining attentive to context, interpretation, and power.

The argument is not that CR–MA should replace existing approaches in PA. Rather, CR–MA provides an explanatory architecture within which institutional, interpretive, critical, and mixed-method approaches can be more coherently related. This is important because CR's relevance remains contested. Critics caution that CR may become overly abstract, conflate philosophy of science with substantive theory, or insufficiently confront structural domination (Andrew and Baker, 2020; Hammersley, 2009; Zhang, 2023). These criticisms are significant, especially for a field concerned with legitimacy, accountability, and public power. The paper responds by treating CR not as a self-sufficient theory of governance, but as an explanatory infrastructure that must be operationalized through substantive theory, empirical warrant, and attention to power relations.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates CR within PA's broader philosophical landscape by comparing positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism, and critical realism. Section 3 develops CR's methodological logic, including stratified ontology, open-system causation, retroduction, and debates about explanatory adequacy. Section 4 operationalizes CR through Archer's Morphogenetic Approach and illustrates its use through a CR reinterpretation of Indonesian budgeting reform. Section 5 develops a research agenda showing how CR–MA can generate specific explanatory questions across reform, accountability, discretion, and public value, while also addressing informal governance as a cross-cutting problem. Section 6 concludes by outlining the epistemological payoff of CR–MA for the future of PA research.

Philosophical approaches in public administration

PA has always been philosophically contested. As both social science and applied field, it has oscillated between emulating natural science and foregrounding interpretation and values. The Waldo–Simon debate remains emblematic: Simon sought a value-free science of administrative facts, whereas Waldo insisted that PA is inherently normative and political (Elías, 2024). This confrontation prefigured the enduring tension between

objectivist and relativist epistemologies. Recent analyses identify three dominant orientations—positivism, interpretivism/constructivism, and pragmatism (Ongaro and Yang, 2025)—which define the terrain against which CR now positions itself.

Positivism

Positivism has long dominated PA and is frequently described as its default philosophy (Whetsell and Shields, 2015). Rooted in Comtean and logical positivist traditions, it treats valid knowledge as arising from systematic observation and measurement. Within PA, it underpins research on performance management, accountability, budgeting, and representative bureaucracy, exemplified by quantitative studies such as Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006).

Its appeal lies in scientific legitimacy: replicability, predictive accuracy, and methodological precision define rigor. Even qualitative research often mirrors positivist criteria (Ashworth et al., 2019). Positivism enables cumulative knowledge and policy impact. Yet critics highlight its reductionism: complex processes become variables; correlation substitutes for causation; context is flattened (Stivers, 2008). It struggles with governance's normative and interpretive dimensions, reflecting an objectivist ambition to detach knowledge from values—an aspiration difficult to sustain in a politically embedded field.

Interpretivism and the interpretive turn

Interpretivist and constructivist approaches view administrative life as socially constructed and meaning-laden. Knowledge is inseparable from interpretation. Since the 1980s, scholars such as Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2010) have framed governance as constituted by narratives and traditions. Administrative behavior is explained through actors' beliefs rather than universal laws.

This turn reconnected scholarship with practice. Box (2015), Farmer (2014), and Miller and Fox (2007) foreground post-traditional and postmodern perspectives; Lejano and Leong (2012) and Elías (2024) emphasize lived experience; Stivers (2008) anchors PA in normative reflection. Together, these strands restored attention to identity and discourse (Ospina et al., 2018). However, interpretivism often resists theorizing causal mechanisms beyond specific cases. By privileging understanding over explanation, it struggles to account for persistence and structural power. Kuhn's (1996) paradigm incommensurability captures the resulting divide between interpretive and positivist camps.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism offers a mediating stance grounded in problem-solving. Drawing on Peirce, Dewey, and Mead, it treats inquiry as purposeful action: knowledge is validated by its practical consequences (Bernstein, 2010; Joas, 1996). In PA, Shields (1996, 2008) promotes democratic action research, while Ansell and Boin (2019) conceptualize governance as collective problem-solving under uncertainty. Collaboration research (Ansell and Gash, 2008) and resilience studies reflect this adaptive orientation.

Pragmatism bridges research and practice but may privilege utility over structural explanation. By focusing on “what works,” it can under-theorize deep institutional forces or power dynamics (Wagenaar, 2014), risking absorption into managerialism.

The case for critical realism

Together, these traditions illuminate PA yet leave gaps: positivism offers explanation without meaning; interpretivism offers meaning without causal depth; pragmatism emphasizes practice but may lack ontological grounding. CR addresses these shortcomings through a stratified ontology of the real, actual, and empirical (Bhaskar, 1978). Underlying mechanisms generate observable events, whether or not they are directly observed. Knowledge remains fallible and historically mediated (Sayer, 2000), yet explanation and interpretation are complementary.

Scholars increasingly recognize CR as a distinct orientation (Ashworth et al., 2019; Ongaro and Yang, 2025). It helps explain why reforms travel yet embed differently (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017), why co-production succeeds unevenly (Brandsen et al., 2018), and how discretion mediates accountability (Buffat et al., 2016). Critics caution against philosophical overreach (Zhang, 2023), underscoring the need for methodological translation. CR’s challenge—and promise—is to demonstrate how stratified ontology informs empirical inquiry, particularly qualitative research that reconstructs generative mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 1992).

CR thus enables PA to move beyond describing what works or interpreting what it means toward explaining why governance outcomes arise and endure in open systems. Rather than replacing existing methods, it grounds methodological pluralism in ontological coherence, reorienting inquiry toward uncovering the mechanisms through which reforms, accountability regimes, and value frameworks evolve. Table 1 summarizes the philosophical differences that underpin the paper’s argument. The purpose of the comparison is not to rank these traditions, but to clarify what CR contributes to PA: an ontology of depth, an epistemology of fallible explanation, and a conception of causation based on generative mechanisms rather than regularities alone. This comparison prepares the ground for the subsequent discussion of how CR can be operationalized through morphogenetic analysis.

The next section develops how these philosophical commitments translate into methodological strategies for explanatory research in PA.

Critical realism basic tenets

Public Administration requires a methodological logic capable of explaining governance in open systems. Critical Realism (CR) provides such a logic by redefining ontology, causation, and inquiry in ways that move beyond both positivist reductionism and interpretive relativism. These redefinitions have direct implications for the centrality of qualitative research in PA.

Table 1. Philosophical orientations in public administration: ontology, epistemology, causality, methods, and implications.

Philosophical stance	Ontological position	Epistemological stance	View of causality	Typical methodological orientation	Implications for public administration research
Positivism / Empirical Realism	Reality is singular, objective, measurable.	Objectivist; knowledge from observation and measurement; validity via replication.	Causality as constant conjunction between variables.	Quantitative surveys, statistical modelling, experiments.	Seeks generalizable patterns in reforms, performance, or accountability but overlooks meanings and deep structures.
Interpretivism / Constructivism	Reality socially constructed through meanings and interaction.	Subjectivist; understanding through actors' perspectives.	Causality as interpretive sense-making; emphasis on agency.	Qualitative case studies, ethnography, discourse analysis.	Illuminates administrative meaning-making and identity but struggles to explain enduring institutional mechanisms or power.
Pragmatism	Reality contingent and plural; truth judged by usefulness.	Knowledge as problem-solving; outcome-focused.	Causality contingent and situational.	Mixed methods, collaborative action research, policy experiments.	Offers flexible, solution-oriented governance approaches but under-theorizes structural persistence.
Critical Realism	Reality stratified (real-actual-empirical); structures and mechanisms exist independently of perception.	Fallibilist realism; knowledge theory-laden and historically mediated.	Causality as generative mechanisms in open systems.	Abductive/retroductive qualitative inquiry, process tracing, morphogenetic analysis.	Explains <i>why</i> and <i>how</i> PA phenomena occur—e.g., how accountability regimes shape legitimacy or reforms interact with political culture—integrating explanation (structure) with understanding (agency).

Stratified ontology and explanatory depth

CR emerged through Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* (1978) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (2014) as a response to two reductions: positivism's confinement of reality to observable events and constructivism's equation of reality with discourse. While positivism accepts a mind-independent world, it restricts the "real" to measurable phenomena and explains through covariance between variables (Rorty, 2009). This empirical realism has shaped much PA research on performance and accountability (Ashworth et al., 2019), but by equating reality with observation it commits what Bhaskar termed the epistemic fallacy. The result is a "flat ontology" (Danermark et al., 2002) that overlooks deeper mechanisms.

CR instead proposes a stratified reality comprising three domains:

- The real: underlying structures and generative mechanisms;
- The actual: events produced when mechanisms are activated;
- The empirical: experiences and observations of those events.

Administrative regularities—reform diffusion, budgeting cycles, accountability rituals—are thus surface manifestations of deeper institutional and cultural mechanisms. Newman (2023), for example, shows how contradictory structural assumptions in the UK's Universal Credit reforms generated "situational logics" shaping implementation prior to visible outcomes. Explanation therefore requires moving beneath events to reconstruct generative mechanisms.

Structure, agency, and morphogenetic conditioning

CR combines ontological realism with a relational account of structure and agency. Bhaskar distinguished intransitive objects, such as institutions, laws, resources, and social relations existing independently of knowledge, from transitive objects, or historically situated interpretations of those realities. Knowledge is socially produced, but it refers to realities not reducible to discourse (Sayer, 2000). For PA, this means that administrative outcomes cannot be explained only by reference to observed behavior, formal rules, or actors' meanings. They must also be related to deeper structures that enable, constrain, and condition action.

Yang's (2022a) CR model of bureaucracy clarifies this point. Moving beyond Weber's top-down account of bureaucratic rationality and Kafka's bottom-up account of bureaucratic experience, Yang locates bureaucracy within CR's three-domain ontology: structures and mechanisms in the real, events in the actual, and lived administrative experiences in the empirical. His key insight is that bureaucratic structures are not merely visible rules or routines but enduring social relations that condition what actors can do, even when those relations are not fully perceived. This distinction helps separate institutions as rules, norms, and routines from structures as the deeper social relations of authority, dependency, and constraint that make those institutions consequential. Yet these structures operate as tendencies rather than deterministic forces because they may be

activated, counteracted, or mediated by other structures. Yang's critique of Giddens' structuration theory is therefore relevant: if structure and agency are collapsed into one process, it becomes difficult to analyze how pre-existing conditions shape action and how actors may subsequently reproduce or transform those conditions.

Archer's (1995) MA operationalizes this insight through analytical dualism. Structure, culture, and agency are analytically distinct but causally interdependent strata unfolding over time. Structures and cultures pre-exist action and condition it; agents respond reflexively, reproducing or transforming those conditions. This avoids both structural determinism and discursive reductionism. In PA, bureaucratic hierarchies, fiscal systems, professional norms, political traditions, and accountability regimes shape administrative action while still leaving room for interpretation, contestation, and adaptation. Administrative outcomes therefore emerge from structured reflexivity rather than mechanical causation: actors act within inherited conditions, but their actions may reproduce, modify, or transform those conditions over time.

Causation in open systems, retroduction, and qualitative inquiry

CR reconceptualizes causation. Positivism treats causation as constant conjunction—if Y follows X, infer $X \rightarrow Y$ —a model suited to closed systems but inadequate for open social contexts (Ashworth et al., 2019). CR locates causation in generative mechanisms: enduring powers of structures and agents that produce outcomes contingently (Bhaskar, 2014; Sayer, 2000).

This explains why identical reforms yield divergent results. Participatory budgeting may build trust in some municipalities yet fail in others (Ansell and Gash, 2008). NPM reforms diffuse globally but embed unevenly due to professional cultures and institutional legacies (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). Ritonga and Buanaputra (2024) show how COVID-19 re-budgeting activated fiscal mechanisms differently across Indonesian regions. Outcomes depend on how mechanisms combine within specific structural and cultural contexts.

Methodologically, this requires retroduction—reasoning from observed events to the mechanisms that must exist for them to occur (Sayer, 1992). Rather than stopping at correlation, retroduction asks what institutional powers, norms, or reflexive processes make the observed pattern possible. Explanation becomes ontological reconstruction.

Once causation is understood as mechanism activation in open systems, qualitative inquiry becomes epistemically necessary. Mechanisms are not directly observable; they operate through meanings, institutional logics, and reflexive deliberation. These cannot be reduced to variable measurement without sacrificing explanatory depth.

Abduction—the theoretical re-description of empirical phenomena—complements retroduction (Danermark et al., 2002). Through interviews, ethnography, and case analysis, researchers move from actors' accounts (empirical), to reconstructed processes (actual), and infer underlying mechanisms (real). A study of performance management might begin with reported compliance, trace institutional norms shaping practice, and infer mechanisms such as professional identity or audit culture. Abductive redescription can reinterpret "citizen engagement" or "accountability" as mechanisms through which legitimacy is reproduced or contested (Elías, 2022; Ongaro and Yang, 2025).

Qualitative research is therefore not merely illustrative; it is uniquely suited to uncovering how structure, culture, and agency interact over time. Quantitative analysis may identify patterns, but qualitative inquiry reconstructs the causal architecture beneath them (Modell, 2017). CR thus re-centers qualitative explanation as indispensable for understanding governance in open systems.

Explanatory adequacy and ongoing debates

CR does not reduce validity to statistical regularity; it evaluates explanations by their capacity to identify mechanisms capable of producing observed events under specified structural and cultural conditions (Sayer, 2000). Generalization is therefore analytical rather than purely statistical; mechanisms may operate transfactually, recurring when enabling conditions align, but remaining latent or counteracted when other mechanisms intervene. This is particularly important for PA research, where reforms, accountability regimes, discretionary practices, and public value arrangements rarely produce uniform outcomes across institutional settings.

CR–MA should also be distinguished from neighboring mechanism-centered approaches. Although Realist Evaluation shares critical-realist roots, it typically operationalizes mechanisms at a middle range through context–mechanism–outcome configurations (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Westhorp, 2014). This is valuable for policy and program evaluation, but CR–MA provides a deeper temporal and ontological account of how contexts themselves are formed through structural, cultural, and agential relations. Process tracing similarly strengthens causal explanation by reconstructing within-case causal sequences and unpacking the mechanisms linking causes and outcomes (Beach, 2016; Collier, 2011; Trampusch and Palier, 2016). However, it is primarily a method of causal inference rather than an ontology of social explanation. CR–MA complements these approaches by explaining how mechanisms are conditioned by prior structures and cultures, mediated through reflexive agency, and elaborated through morphogenetic cycles.

Critics caution against abstraction (Hammersley, 2009) or conflation of philosophy and substantive theory (Zhang, 2023). Distinguishing the real from the empirical can also be methodologically demanding because mechanisms are inferred rather than directly observed (Baxter and Chua, 2020). Concerns about structural domination (Andrew and Baker, 2020) further underscore the need to examine power, dependency, exclusion, and resource control rather than treating structures neutrally. This is especially important for PA research because administrative structures do not merely enable coordination; they may also stabilize unequal authority relations, restrict voice, and reproduce forms of exclusion that are experienced as legitimate or unavoidable within existing governance arrangements. Properly operationalized, therefore, CR is not metaphysical abstraction but a fallibilist methodological framework that grounds qualitative, mechanism-centered explanation in substantive theory, empirical warrant, and reflexive attention to alternative mechanisms.

Operationalizing CR for PA: The morphogenetic approach

CR offers a “third way” between positivist regularities and interpretivist meaning. Yet Bhaskar’s philosophy provides ontology and epistemology, not a ready-made

methodology (Sayer, 2000). For PA scholars, the task is to translate CR's stratified ontology into research strategies capable of explaining why administrative structures persist or change. Archer's (1995) Morphogenetic Approach (MA) provides that bridge by tracing how structure, culture, and agency interact over time through cycles of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration. It connects CR's philosophical commitments to empirical inquiry.

Structural analysis

Structural analysis is the entry point of MA. CR shifts attention from observable events to the generative mechanisms that make them possible (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2002). In PA, this means moving from institutional performance indicators to the structural relations that constitute governance. Archer distinguishes internal and necessary relations—without which a social object cannot exist—from external and contingent ones that may vary without altering identity.

Figure 1 clarifies why structural analysis in CR–MA cannot be reduced to identifying formal organizations, rules, or institutional charts. Structures are relational: they refer to the patterned relations of authority, dependency, domination, exchange, obligation, or resource control that position actors differently and condition their capacity to act. In PA, this means that a ministry, audit body, local government, or frontline agency should not be analyzed only as a formal institution, but as a relational configuration that enables some courses of action while constraining others.

For example, a district's legal authority presupposes a constitutional framework (internal), whereas donor transfers are contingent. Mapping such relations reveals causal powers, including dependence on central budgets or civil-service hierarchies. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) show that reforms diffuse widely yet embed differently because legal and constitutional legacies condition translation. Christensen and Lægveid (2017) similarly demonstrate how structural fragmentation generates distinctive accountability challenges. Power asymmetries—between donors and recipients, executives and legislatures, auditors and managers—are generative, producing compliance, symbolic accountability, or resistance. Structural analysis, therefore, asks what must be true about these relations for observed behavior to occur, using documentary analysis, institutional mapping, and process tracing to explain not only what organizations do but why they can do it.

Culture

If structures form governance's material architecture, culture provides its ideational infrastructure. Archer (1995) conceptualizes culture as a system of propositions—beliefs and values—that interact logically once articulated. In PA, these include ideas of efficiency, neutrality, accountability, participation, and sustainability.

Competing propositions—such as whether performance measurement improves efficiency or fosters gaming (Moynihan, 2008)—shape administrative debates and define what actors deem rational or legitimate. When embedded in law or professional codes, such ideas acquire emergent properties: the ethos of public-service motivation (Perry and Wise, 1990) persists despite managerial reforms. Global “good governance”

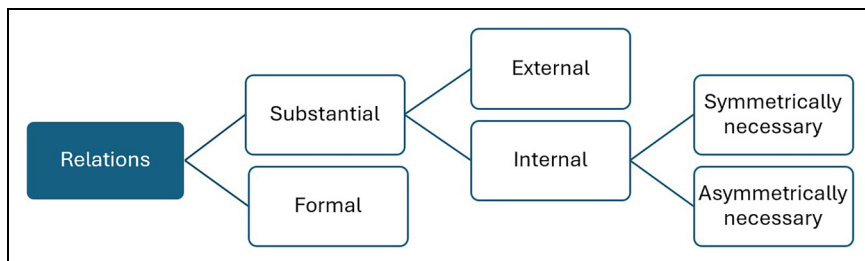


Figure 1. Different types of social relations.

Source: Adapted from Danermark et al. (2002: 46).

discourses circulate similarly, providing resources that actors adopt or resist (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

Cultural analysis traces how propositions enter policy arenas, how contradictions generate debate, and how actors mobilize them to justify reform. Bevir and Rhodes (2006) show that modernization reinterpreted Westminster doctrines without displacing them, producing hybrid forms such as performance-based transparency portals. Discourses thus function as mechanisms linking meaning to structural power and institutional continuity.

Agency analysis

Structures and cultures condition but do not determine action. Agents reflexively mediate these conditions. Archer (2007) distinguishes positions (roles) from persons (who occupy multiple roles), emphasizing internal conversations through which individuals weigh instrumental, normative, and expressive concerns.

A health manager balancing performance targets and patient care illustrates how discretion mediates structure and culture. CR extends Lipsky's (2010) street-level analysis by grounding discretion in reflexive reasoning shaped by institutional constraints and cultural norms.

Agency analysis relies on qualitative methods—interviews, ethnography, reflective accounts—to reconstruct reflexive deliberations (Ospina et al., 2018). Retroduction then infers mechanisms explaining patterned choices. In local accountability reforms, officials may internalize “citizen partnership” or treat it as compliance. A retroductive explanation might identify professional reflexivity shaped by participatory norms as the mechanism activated in open contexts but suppressed in hierarchical ones. Agents thus reproduce or transform structures through interpretation.

Social action and morphogenetic cycles

Figure 2 translates CR–MA's relational ontology into a temporal explanatory sequence. The morphogenetic cycle shows how pre-existing structural and cultural conditions at T_1 condition, but do not determine, social interaction during T_2 – T_3 . During this phase,

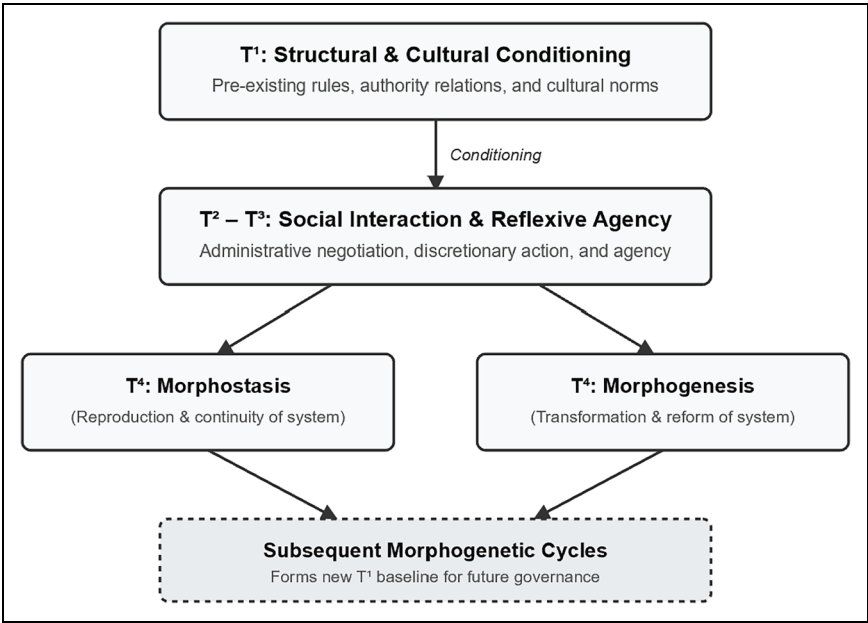


Figure 2. Social action and the morphogenetic cycle (Adapted from Archer, 1995).

agents engage these conditions reflexively, producing outcomes at T_4 that may either reproduce existing arrangements through morphostasis or generate structural and cultural elaboration through morphogenesis. These outcomes then form the structural and cultural conditions for subsequent cycles (Archer, 1995). The figure is therefore not merely descriptive; it provides the temporal logic through which CR–MA explains administrative continuity and change.

In fiscal-transparency reforms, disclosure laws constitute T_1 ; officials interpret and implement them during T_2 – T_3 ; resulting routines either deepen or dilute transparency at T_4 . Reform is thus path-dependent yet open. Legitimacy formation follows a similar logic: as Suchman (1995) and Black (2008) show, pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions emerge through interaction between structural arenas, cultural narratives, and practice. Over time, their alignment or misalignment explains why legitimacy consolidates or erodes.

Methodologically, morphogenetic research combines historical process tracing with qualitative comparison across temporal phases, using records and interviews to reconstruct conditioning, interaction, and elaboration. Retroduction asks what structural and cultural conditions must have existed for observed transformation to occur.

Worked illustration: Indonesian budgeting reform

To illustrate how CR can be operationalized in PA research, this section revisits the budgeting case analyzed by Buanaputra and Uddin (2024). The original study was

theoretically framed through Weberian traditionalism, showing how kingship, personal loyalty, obedience, fictive kinship, and master–servant relations shaped budgetary politics in Indonesia’s Southern Local Government (SLG). The purpose here is not to retrospectively claim that the original study was designed as a critical-realist inquiry. Rather, the case is used as a CR reinterpretation to demonstrate how Archer’s MA can reconstruct the interaction of structure, culture, and agency and identify the generative mechanisms underlying observed administrative practices.

The empirical starting point is a set of practices that appear inconsistent with formal institutional expectations. In the SLG case, formal decentralization and budgeting rules prescribed legally structured negotiations between executive and legislative actors. Legislators formally possessed authority to discuss, recommend, amend, approve, or reject the proposed budget. Yet the case shows that actual budgetary decision-making was shaped by practices that exceeded this formal architecture: the executive’s stronger position in budget negotiations, strategic use of indicators and technical arguments, threats concerning the consequences of budget deadlock, compromises over social aid and endowment funds, and informal “half-room meetings” used to secure agreement outside ordinary deliberative arenas. These practices reveal a gap between the formal appearance of rule-governed budgeting and the actual mechanisms through which budgetary agreement was produced. This gap provides the analytical entry point for CR–MA.

The retroductive question is therefore: what must be true for these practices to occur repeatedly despite formal budgeting rules? The inference is not that informal practices simply replace formal institutions. Rather, formal rules operate within a deeper configuration of traditional authority, cultural obligation, electoral incentive, and strategic agency. The original study’s documentary, interview, and observational evidence suggests that actors did not merely follow procedural requirements; they interpreted and negotiated those requirements in relation to the King’s authority, expectations of loyalty, and the political risks attached to challenging executive preferences. The recurrent reluctance of legislators to confront the governor/King directly warrants the inference that traditional authority remained an active generative mechanism rather than a symbolic legacy. Similarly, the use of technical arguments, deadlock threats, compromise, and half-room meetings indicates strategic reflexivity: actors were not passively determined by inherited structures but actively adjusted their conduct to manage competing legal, political, cultural, and electoral demands.

The morphogenetic sequence makes this explanatory logic explicit. Empirically, T_1 refers to the structural and cultural conditions that predated the observed budget negotiations: formal authority assigned through Indonesian local-government regulations, SLG’s special administrative status, and the enduring kingship system through which the King simultaneously occupied gubernatorial authority and symbolic leadership. These conditions created a dual institutional order. Formally, budgeting was governed by legal procedures; culturally and politically, it was embedded in relations of loyalty, deference, and hierarchical obligation. T_2 – T_3 refers to the budget negotiation period itself, during which actors reflexively engaged these inherited conditions. Legislators pursued electoral incentives, particularly through demands for social aid and endowment funds linked to constituency interests, while also avoiding direct confrontation with the King. Executive

actors, positioned as the King's bureaucratic representatives and "fictive kin," used technical argument, compromise, threats of budget deadlock, and informal bargaining to protect the governor/King's concern with keeping the budget normatively acceptable and avoiding central government intervention. T₄ refers to the resulting institutional and practical outcomes: hierarchical authority persisted, but budgeting practices were mediated through recurring informal negotiation, compromise, and accommodation. These informal arrangements also had implications for participation and voice. Half-room meetings concentrated final bargaining among senior executive actors and a small number of influential legislative faction leaders, with the resulting agreements subsequently conveyed to other legislators as the prevailing party position. In this way, the informal settlement narrowed the scope for further deliberation while simultaneously accommodating legislators' constituency-linked demands and the executive's interest in securing a timely, legally compliant budget and avoiding central-government intervention. Analytically, the reinterpretation proceeds by coding recurring empirical observations as events, grouping them according to their temporal location in the budget process, and then asking which structural, cultural, and agential mechanisms must be present for those events to recur across formal budget negotiations. Illustratively, the CR-MA reinterpretation can be summarized as follows (Table 2):

Considering alternative mechanisms further clarifies the value of the CR-MA interpretation. One possible explanation is information asymmetry: executives possessed greater technical knowledge and control over budgetary details. Another is weak legislative institutionalization. A third is the ordinary politics of distributive budgeting, in which legislators pursue constituency benefits and executives seek fiscal control. These explanations illuminate important aspects of the case, but they remain incomplete unless situated within the deeper authority structure of SLG. Technical expertise alone does not explain why legislators were reluctant to confront the governor/King directly. Constituency politics alone does not explain why social aid and endowment fund negotiations were mediated through informal mechanisms such as half-room meetings. Institutional weakness alone does not explain why executive authority was culturally reinforced through loyalty, obedience, and concern for the King's status. CR-MA therefore provides a stronger explanation because it connects these practices to the interaction of formal institutions, traditional authority, cultural legitimacy, and reflexive agency.

The analytical value of this reinterpretation is twofold. First, it extends the original Weberian account by showing not only that traditional authority shaped budgeting, but how that authority operated as a generative mechanism across morphogenetic phases. Second, it demonstrates how CR-MA can distinguish formal empirical events from deeper informal mechanisms, a distinction particularly important in majority-world¹ and hybrid administrative contexts where formal institutions coexist with informal governance networks. Rather than treating informality as an anomaly or deviation, CR-MA shows how informal practices may reproduce authority, compensate for institutional tensions, and generate incremental adaptation.

Beyond this case, the illustration demonstrates a transferable analytical logic for PA research. Researchers can begin with empirical events that appear inconsistent with formal institutional expectations, identify contradictions between rules and practices, infer

Table 2. Summary of the worked illustration.

Empirical observation in the case	Retroductive inference	Morphogenetic location	Analytical warrant
Formal budgetary authority was assigned to both executive and legislature, but the executive occupied a stronger position in budget negotiations	Formal rules were conditioned by deeper traditional authority	T_1	The King/governor occupied both legal-administrative and symbolic authority, weakening the legislature's balancing role
Legislators raised poverty, inequality, social aid, and endowment fund issues, while executives used indicators and technical arguments to defend their position	Budget debate reflected strategic interaction between electoral incentives and executive control	T_2-T_3	Actors used formal policy issues to pursue political and institutional interests
Threats of budget deadlock, compromise, and half-room meetings helped secure agreement	Informal mechanisms mediated conflict unresolved by formal procedures	T_2-T_3	Agreement was produced through informal bargaining involving powerful actors rather than formal deliberation alone
Legislators avoided directly confronting the King/governor and instead targeted executive actors	Traditional authority operated through cultural deference and reputational risk	T_2-T_3	Challenging the governor/King was perceived as politically and culturally costly
Hierarchical authority persisted while informal bargaining operated as a recurring practice	The outcome was partial adaptation within broader morphostasis	T_4	Core authority relations remained intact, but budgeting practices adapted through informal mechanisms

plausible generative mechanisms, bound the analysis temporally through T_1 – T_4 phases, and evaluate alternative explanations. The substantive mechanisms will vary across settings, but the retroductive movement from observation to mechanism can be applied to reform trajectories, accountability regimes, street-level discretion, public value formation, and collaborative governance. In this sense, CR–MA provides a methodological bridge between interpretive inquiry and causal explanation in open institutional systems, enabling qualitative researchers to move beyond description toward reconstructing the causal architecture through which governance arrangements are reproduced, adapted, or transformed.

Future directions for public administration research

CR–MA provides PA with a framework for asking explanatory questions about governance in open systems. The future agenda is not merely to redescribe familiar PA domains in critical-realist terms, but to identify the mechanisms through which similar institutional arrangements generate divergent outcomes across contexts. This section focuses on four areas—reform, accountability, discretion, and public value—while treating informal governance as a cross-cutting problem that reveals the limits of formal institutional explanations.

A first research agenda concerns reform trajectories. PA scholarship has documented the diffusion of performance management, digitalization, co-production, and decentralization, yet similar reforms often become embedded in some settings while remaining ceremonial or fragile in others (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). CR–MA sharpens this debate by asking: why do similar reforms become institutionally embedded in some jurisdictions but remain symbolic or weakly coupled in others? Expected mechanisms include institutional path dependence, professional socialization, resource dependence, political sponsorship, reputational incentives, and reform fatigue. A morphogenetic explanation would examine how reform designs encounter inherited structures and cultures, how actors translate or resist them, and whether the resulting outcome is institutionalization, decoupling, or superficial compliance.

A second agenda concerns accountability and legitimacy. Accountability research has expanded substantially but remains fragmented across theoretical traditions, methods, and accountability types (Pérez-Durán, 2024). CR–MA enables a more precise question: under what conditions do similar accountability arrangements generate learning and trust, and under what conditions do they produce resistance, blame avoidance, or ritual compliance? Expected mechanisms include relational accountability, procedural legitimacy, reputational threat, coercive oversight, blame avoidance, and symbolic compliance. This perspective treats accountability as a stratified process: oversight rules create formal conditions, cultural norms shape what actors regard as legitimate, and administrators' reflexive responses mediate whether accountability stabilizes or erodes legitimacy over time (Benish, 2020; Black, 2008; Bovens, 2007; Elías, 2020, 2022, 2024).

A third agenda concerns street-level bureaucracy and discretion. Since Lipsky (2010), PA scholarship has shown that frontline officials exercise discretion under ambiguous rules, scarce resources, and competing demands. CR–MA advances this literature by asking: how do frontline actors reconcile formal mandates, professional norms,

technological systems, austerity pressures, and equity commitments when making discretionary judgements? Expected mechanisms include professional reflexivity, coping, risk avoidance, moral commitment, categorization, and adaptive rule-use. A morphogenetic analysis would trace how structural pressures such as performance targets, digital monitoring, and legal mandates condition frontline work; how professional cultures shape actors' reasoning; and how repeated discretionary practices reproduce or alter service regimes (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012).

Informal governance cuts across these domains. In majority-world and hybrid administrative contexts, formal reforms, accountability systems, or bureaucratic procedures may coexist with informal networks that compensate for, bypass, or undermine formal institutions. CR–MA is especially useful here because it distinguishes formal institutional arrangements from deeper informal mechanisms. A key research question is: when do informal networks compensate for dysfunctional bureaucracy, and when do they entrench institutional weakness? Expected mechanisms include institutional decoupling, informal brokerage, patronage, workaround practices, symbolic compliance, and compensatory informality (Buanaputra and Uddin, 2024; Hendra et al., 2026). Rather than treating informality as residual deviation, CR–MA analyses it as a generative mechanism that may produce both administrative resilience and institutional fragility.

A fourth agenda concerns public value and collective governance. Rather than treating public value solely as a normative aspiration, CR–MA conceptualizes it as an emergent outcome of interactions among institutional design, cultural expectations, political authority, and citizen agency (Bryson et al., 2014; Moore, 1995). The relevant question is: how is public value negotiated, stabilized, or contested in multi-actor governance networks? This matters because public value is rarely produced within a single hierarchy. It emerges through interactions among public agencies, citizens, NGOs, private actors, professionals, and communities (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Brandsen et al., 2018), each positioned differently within structural relations and carrying different cultural propositions. Expected mechanisms include trust-building, coalition formation, professional boundary work, value conflict, mutual recognition, and relational authority. Ongaro's (2024) connection between public value and Neo-Weberian state traditions is therefore important because it situates value creation within legal, professional, and administrative conditions; CR–MA extends this by explaining how those conditions operate as generative mechanisms during collaborative interaction.

The future contribution of CR–MA to PA lies in this disciplined explanatory orientation. It does not replace institutionalism, interpretivism, public value theory, or street-level bureaucracy research. Rather, it provides an ontological and methodological architecture for connecting them. By asking how structures, cultures, and agents interact over time, CR–MA enables PA scholars to explain why governance arrangements endure, fail, adapt, or become capable of renewal.

Conclusion: Toward a critical-realist public administration

This paper has argued that PA needs an explanatory orientation capable of moving beyond surface events, formal institutional descriptions, and actor-centered meanings

alone. Its central claim is that CR–MA offers such an orientation by reconnecting ontology, explanation, and methodology. A stratified ontology allows PA scholars to treat administrative outcomes as generated by mechanisms operating within open systems, while the MA provides a temporal framework for analyzing how structures, cultures, and agency condition one another over time.

The paper's contribution is to consolidate CR–MA as a programmatic explanatory framework for analyzing governance phenomena across reform, accountability, discretion, informality, and public value. Its value lies in enabling PA scholars to ask a different kind of question: what structural and cultural conditions make particular administrative outcomes possible, how do actors reflexively mediate those conditions, and how do their interactions reproduce, adapt, or transform the arrangements from which they began?

This matters because many of PA's core problems are problems of emergence and variation. Similar reforms do not travel in identical ways. Accountability regimes may generate learning, resistance, or ritual compliance. Frontline discretion may become a source of responsiveness or exclusion. Informal networks may compensate for weak bureaucracy while also entrenching institutional fragility. Public value may be created, contested, or destabilized through multi-actor interaction. CR–MA provides a way to explain these differences without reducing them either to formal institutions or to subjective interpretations.

Methodologically, the framework strengthens qualitative and mixed-method inquiry by giving causal explanation a clear ontological basis. It does not prescribe a single method. Instead, it requires researchers to identify the empirical events to be explained, infer plausible mechanisms, examine the conditions under which they operate, consider alternative explanations, and trace how outcomes unfold over time. This is a disciplined but fallibilist form of explanation: empirically grounded, theoretically informed, and attentive to power, meaning, and contingency.

The broader payoff is a more integrative PA. CR–MA does not replace institutional, interpretive, critical, or public value approaches. It provides an explanatory architecture within which their insights can be connected. By foregrounding mechanisms in open systems, PA can better explain how governance arrangements endure, fail, adapt, and become capable of renewal. This is the promise of a critical-realist Public Administration: not a new orthodoxy, but a deeper account of how collective life is governed.

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1. Majority World refers to countries where most of the world's population resides, while Minority World refers to countries more commonly considered "developed," where a relatively small proportion of the world's population lives (Buanaputra and Uddin, 2024; Uddin, 2025).

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