Methods in Evaluation seminars – Metheval
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A realist theory-building praxis in global health

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Introduction

Global health:
quasi-experimental designs, the "golden standard" for impact evaluation

- Randomised controlled trials (variants)
  - MIT Poverty Action lab

- Evidence-based medicine paradigm

A U-turn?
- UK MRC guidance for evaluation of complex interventions (2000, 2008, 2015, 2021)
- DFID 2012
- Crisis: "Will be Covid be the nemesis of evidence-based medecine?" (Greenhalgh, 2020)

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Evaluation of global health programmes

The limits of quasi-experimental designs

"Although **RCTs** have some value in establishing patterns of causation when we are dealing with **simplicity** where there is one cause for one effect,
they are valueless if we are dealing with patterns of **complex causation**.

This has particular significance for the development of an effective programme of evaluation, of **establishing not just what works**, but what works in specific spatial / temporal contexts – **what works when and where**."

(Byrne 2014, p. 43)

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Context matters

- "Last 20 years: great learning in evaluation" (Pawson, 2013)
  - "Health programmes used to be referred to as treatments" (Pawson on youtube, 2013)
  - Quid people's interactions?
  - Quid influence of surroundings (eg. health systems) on programmes ?

- Attention for the influence of context on programme impact and how to ensure external validity
  (May et al. 2016, Daniels, 2018, Huebschmann et al. 2019, Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019, Weise et al. 2020, Rogers et al. 2020, Gilson et al. 2021)

- In sync with **general turn towards causal explanation** and "theorizing" (Swedberg, 2012)

- Current 'flash points': Implementation science, Climate crisis, Artificial intelligence, Decolonizing science
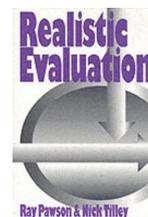
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Realist evaluation entering the fray

Part of theory-driven evaluation inquiry

- Theory of change, theory-driven evaluation, Realistic evaluation
  (Pawson & Tilley 1997)
- Focus on programme theory and mechanisms
- RE is being picked up by UK MRC
  (cfr. 2015 and 2021 guidance)

Rationale

- Global health programmes = social programmes intervening in and working upon complex settings
- People make programmes work
- Programmes succeed insome places, in others they fail

RE's attractiveness

- Recognition of complexity
- Causal explanations based on mechanisms and interaction with context
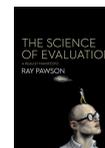- Theory development + testing

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The realist approach to context

Pawson & Tilley

- "*There is no context-free programme*" (Pawson on YouTube, 2013)
  - All programmes are open systems, embedded in other systems

- Realists assign causal power to **mechanisms**, which triggered in specific **contexts** lead to **outcomes**
  (Pawson & Tilley 1997, Pawson on YouTube, 2013)

- Whether a causal power is **activated** depends on **conditions** whose presence and configuration are contingent
- When activated, the **actual effects** of causal mechanisms will again depend upon the conditions in which they work
- Processes of change usually involve several causal mechanisms which may be only **contingently related to one another**
- Depending on conditions, the operation of the same mechanism can produce quite **different results** and, alternatively, different mechanisms may produce the same result (Sayer 1992)

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The realist approach to context

Meaning of **context**

- Does not equal 'locality' or 'place'

- Context is like the rings of an onion:
  - From micro- to macro-level:
    individual-cognitive, relationships,
    organisational culture,
    institutions, cultural systems, social
    structures

- Context is dynamic (temporal dynamics)

Context

provides the **necessary conditions** for the mechanism to be triggered by a programme

but may also shape the **implementation** of the programme

and may have an effect on the observed **outcome**

The realist approach to context

Methodological development

How to recognize and analyze the salient context conditions that have an effect on programme impact and **not drown in the waves**?

Making sense of context
"Mighty agenda for the poor evaluator who's got to understand it"
(Pawson on YouTube, 2013)

- RAMESES guidance
  (Wong et al. 2013 & 2016)

- Work on mechanisms and causal configurational heuristic
  (for instance De Weger et al. 2020)

If context matters, what evidence do we need?

Comparative **evidence**

RE: promise of **cumulative learning** through evaluation of similar programmes in different settings

- **Variation of contexts** to learn which context elements are required for the success of a programme
- Alternative approaches
  - Beach & Pedersen (2016): causal case studies
  - Barlett (2017): comparative case studies

Long-term research

"Effective programmes change the conditions that made them work – they become part of the context"

- Longitudinal research is essential

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If context matters, what evidence do we need?

**Solution: *Contextual richness* or
'*thickness*' as a quality criterion?**
(Dada et al. 2023)

- Response to too little context in realist reviews
- But beware of unwieldy or dense causal explanations (vs parsimony)
- <-> of practical use for policy makers

"Despite the central role of context in realist evaluation, systematic knowledge about how context is conceptualized and applied in realist evaluation is limited."
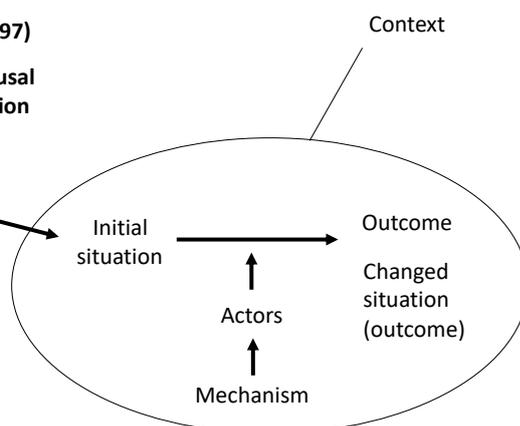
(Nielsen et al. 2022)

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If context matters, what evidence do we need?

Modifying the heuristic

Pawson & Tilley (1997)

ICAMO causal configuration

Context

Intervention

Initial situation → Outcome / Changed situation (outcome)

Actors

Mechanism

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The realist approach to context

Multiplying the questions

- How to **define** context ?
- How to identify its **key elements**?
  - Even for relatively simple programmes, a potential wide range
- How to account for the **temporal dimension**?
  - Pre-intervention, during, post-intervention
- How to make sense of **intersecting layers** (micro-, meso-, macro-level)?
- What about the people's responses (**agency**)?

The risk of **downwards and upwards conflation**
(Archer, 2020)

- Dominance of *micro* over *meso*
  Ex: focus on individual behaviour change, ignoring workplace norms
- Or *vice versa*

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Margaret Archer's work: a way out of the context conundrum?

One of the **most eminent UK sociologists** post-WW II
- Forerunner of realist social theory and philosophy
- Structure and agency should be analyzed separately
  - Argued against Giddens' conflation of the two

Theory of morphogenesis:
Social change is **emergent** and can be causally explained through analyzing the interrelationship between **human agency** and **structure and culture**

- **Practical guidance** in the form of an analytical framework:
  the **Structure-Agency-Culture** framework (SAC) in a book on causal explanation in economics (2020)
- Applied it in 2022 to explain differences between educational systems

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Structure-Agency-Culture (SAC)

"There is no such thing as context-less action"
(Archer, 2020)

Archer's morphogenetic cycle
- Context = *structural* and *cultural* conditions, which have causal powers
- The interaction between structure, culture and human agency triggers causal mechanisms which generate social change (*morphogenesis*) - or not (**return to status quo**)

Structure
Social structures, rule systems, institutions, organisational structure, material resources, …
- E.g. de-democratization; the blended family

Cultural system
Ideas, discourse, values and beliefs, social norms, signifying systems
(how we understand things)
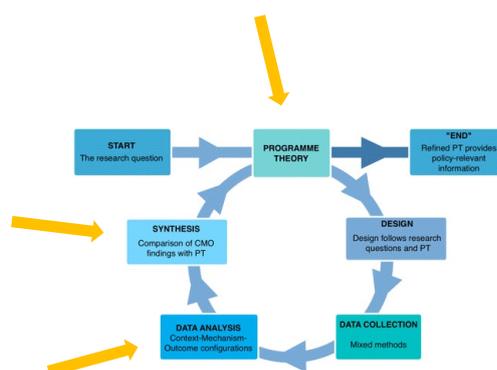- E.g. thinking on gender, decolonization, equity, etc.

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Integrating the SAC frame into realist evaluation/research cycle

SAC framework + realist evaluation = possible way out of the Context pitfall?

The SAC framework allows

- to '**dissect**' context
- to distinguish between context **prior, during and after** intervention
- to investigate the potential for **sustained change**

Can be applied in PT elicitation, analysis and synthesis

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Applying SAC in realist analysis

Empirical application in urban adolescent health project in Mumbai and Delhi (India), Cotonou (Benin) and Kampala (Uganda)
(Van Belle at al. 2023)

1. Identify **the actions with a potential for change** by describing **key practices of the actors**

2. Demarcate the **context of action** (implementation context)

3. Distinguish between the context of action and **the structural and cultural conditions** that predate the current action of agents

4. Describe **which actors initiate change** and how this may affect the practices of actors and their relationships, in turn leading to a **modified context of action**

5. Identify the **causal mechanisms**

6. Explore whether there is potential for sustained social change or **system transformation** (versus reverting back to **status quo**)

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

1. Identify **the actions with a potential for change** by describing **key practices of the actors (A)**

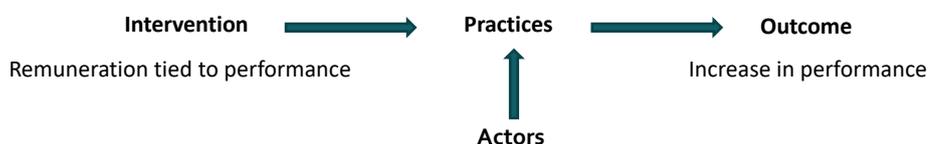| **Intervention** | → | **Outcome** |
| Remuneration tied to performance | | Increase in performance |

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

1. Identify **the actions with a potential for change** by describing **key practices of the actors (A)**

Intervention → **Practices** → **Outcome**

Remuneration tied to performance   Increase in performance

↑

Actors

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

2. Demarcate the **context of action**

Context of action
Team and organisational context: job descriptions, salary scale,
management style, resource availability, etc.

Intervention → **Practices** → **Outcome**

Remuneration tied to performance   Increase in performance

↑

Actors
Current salary, state of motivation,
expectations, needs, ...

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

3. Distinguish between the context of action and **the structural and cultural conditions**

Structural and cultural conditions
Structure (public service), Culture; public service motivation, ...),
general economic situation, ...

Context of action
Team and organisational context: job descriptions, salary scale,
management style, resource availability, etc.

Intervention → **Practices** → **Outcome**

Remuneration tied to performance   Increase in performance

↑

Actors
Current salary, state of motivation,
expectations, needs, ...

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

4. W**hich actors initiate change** and how does this affect the practices of actors and their relationships, in turn leading to a **modified context of action**

Structural and cultural conditions
Structure (public service), Culture; public service motivation, ...),
general economic situation, ...

Context of action

Intervention
Remuneration tied to performance

Practices

Outcome
Increase in performance

Actors initiating change
Project staff
Donors

Actors
Current salary, state of motivation,
expectations, needs, ...

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

5. Identify the **causal mechanisms**

Structural and cultural conditions
Structure (public service), Culture; public service motivation, ...), general economic situation, ...

Context of action

Intervention
Remuneration tied to performance

Practices

Outcome
Increase in performance

Actors initiating change
Project staff
Donors

Actors
Current salary, state of motivation,
expectations, needs, ...

Mechanisms
Extrinsic motivation

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An example: A pay-for-performance scheme

6. Explore whether there is potential for sustained social change or **system transformation** (versus reverting back to **status quo**)

'Normally', we would look at *mechanisms in context*:

- Where does PBF work?
  - When salaries are low

- For whom does PBF work?
  - For people for whom extrinsic motivation factors are important

- How long does it work?
  - As long as it is financially sustained (by donors or when taken over by government)
  - As long as the incentive increases in function of changing expectations of the staff paid under PBF

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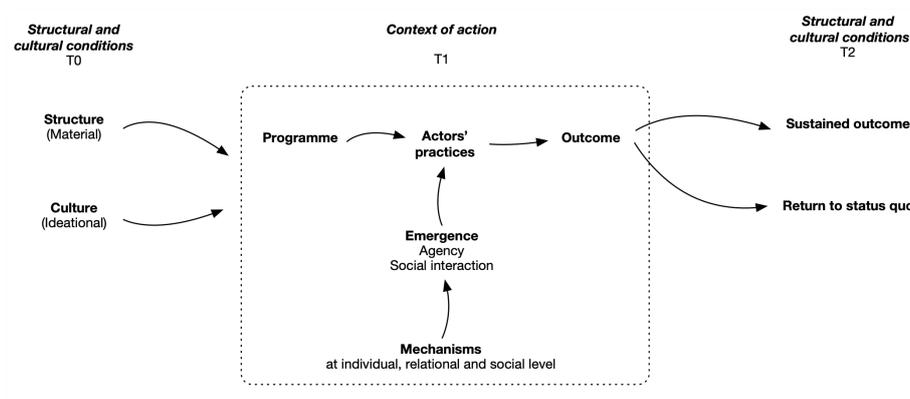**An example: A pay-for-performance scheme**

6. Explore whether there is potential for sustained social change or **system transformation** (versus reverting back to **status quo**)

The SAC frame asks us to think about

- **Long-term outcomes**
  - The effect of a financial motivation factor is time-bound: follow-up of effectiveness beyond the project duration is needed

- Changes in **action context**
  - Crowding out of intrinsic motivation may lead to people leaving the 'new' organisation
  - If gaming leads to fraud, a backlash against the intervention may occur

- **Long-term change**
  - Is the change of organisational culture sustained by institutional culture change?
    - From public service to semi-privatised service

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Applying Archer's SAC to realist evaluation

Structural and cultural conditions T0

Context of action T1

Structural and cultural conditions T2

Structure (Material)

Culture (Ideational)

Programme → Actors' practices → Outcome

Emergence
Agency
Social interaction

Mechanisms
at individual, relational and social level

Sustained outcome

Return to status quo

(Van Belle et al. 2023)

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To conclude

Increasing attention to context in evaluations in global health
- Complexity perspective

RE takes up the challenge of grappling with context

Need for **methodological guidance and development**

Archer's **SAC**, a gateway to more comprehensive realist analysis?

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