Realist Evaluation & Realist Synthesis

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Presentation I

Basic Ideas of Realist Evaluation
Key principles of realist evaluation

The nature of programmes:
- Programmes are ‘embedded’
- Programmes are ‘active’.
- Programmes are ‘theories’

Principal research tasks:
- Hypothesise the key mechanisms (M)
- Hypothesise the key contexts (C)
- Explain the outcome pattern (O)
Programmes are ‘embedded’. They are always inserted into pre-existing social situations.

Educational initiatives operate at different levels:
- Ideas
- Individuals
- Institution
- Infrastructure
Programmes are theories

A ‘role model’ programme theory
also known as
‘Dishy-David-Beckham-theory’

‘Interviewer: But do you think the fact that these good-looking blokes are footballers has any effect on girls' attitude to playing football?

Girl: No, I think it has more effect on them watching football, well not the football - the guys (general laughter and agreement)’. 
Programmes are ‘active’
They are ‘active’ in the sense that their intended effects work through the reasoning and volition of their subjects.

Even ‘mechanical’ interventions like the free distribution of smoke alarms depend on the subject’s ideas. Alarms sometimes work but also end up:

• not installed (can’t be bothered)
• removed (always going off)
• battery flat (too fiddly to change)
• battery ‘walks’ (to Walkman or TV remote)
Realist Evaluation: Mechanisms, Contexts and Outcomes

Don’t ask ‘what works?’
Rather, investigate: ‘what works for whom in what circumstances?’

The same programme mechanism will have different outcomes in different contexts
A Practitioner Theory

“The men who are more likely to be changed are best described as ‘mediocre’. You shouldn’t look for high-flyers. They’re likely to come from a deprived background with a poor and maybe non-existent school record. They will be mediocre criminals too. They’ll have gone on from petty crime, street crime to drugs or armed robbery or something. Then when they come onto the program, they’re mediocre or worse. They just survive the first semester but gradually they build up getting C’s and B’s. So by the end, they’ve actually come a long, long way. And that’s what changes ‘em. It’s not so much a case of ‘rehabilitation’ as ‘habilitation’.”
Hypothesise key generative mechanisms

The process of how subjects interpret and act upon the intervention stratagem is known as the programme ‘mechanism’

Programme - prisoner education (PE)

(M₁) PE might provide qualifications to allow ex-inmates to compete for jobs

(M₂) PE might boost confidence and provide social skills to reduce aggressive outbursts in ex-cons

(M₃) PE might increase cognitive skills and allow ex-prisoners to reason through their difficulties

(M₄) PE might increase presentational and reasoning skills enabling them to become clever criminals

(M₅) PE might provide shelter from violent prison culture for more vulnerable prisoners

M₆, M₇, M₈, etc. etc.
Hypothesise the key contexts

‘Contexts’ are the set of surrounding conditions that favour or hinder the programme mechanisms

Prisoner Education - for ‘whom’ and in ‘what circumstances’

(C₁) Prior experience - poverty, drugs, violence etc.
(C₂) Prior education
(C₃) Prior criminal activities
(C₄) Prison culture
(C₅) Neighbourhood and locality culture
(C₆) Economic structure
C₇, C₈, C₉ etc. etc.
Explain the outcome pattern
Programme outcomes are always complex. M & C theories are tested by examining outcomes for different sub-groups of subjects

Who benefited most?

*Improved rehabilitation by age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>17-21</th>
<th>22-25</th>
<th>26-30</th>
<th>31-35</th>
<th>36over</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3rd</td>
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</table>

*Improved rehabilitation by prior education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Grade 10</th>
<th>Grade 11</th>
<th>Grade 12</th>
<th>Post-Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>4th</td>
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</tbody>
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Presentation 2

Basic Ideas of Realist Synthesis
Contrasting views of ‘systematic reviews’

Meta-analysis perspective
- Programmes have effects
- Evaluation measures effect sizes
- Systematic review seeks mean effect

The realist understanding
- Programmes are theories
- Evaluation is theory-testing
- Systematic review is theory-synthesis
Example I: Naming & Shaming
Examples of Public Disclosure Initiatives

- Megan’s Law & sex offender registration
- Outing prostitute’s Johns
- School league tables
- Inspection and special measures for ‘failing schools’
- Hospital and surgeon report cards
- Pub-watch bans and exclusions
- Local press adverts for poll tax non-payment and council rent arrears
- Beach cleanliness standards and kite marking
Realist Synthesis: Naming & Shaming
Examples of Public Disclosure Initiatives

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Public notification – basic theory

i) **Identification:** in which the performance or behaviour in question is observed and then classified, measured, rated, ranked, verified, etc.

ii) **Naming:** in which information on, and the identity of, the failing or deviant party is disclosed, publicized, disseminated, notified, published, broadcast, registered etc.

iii) **Public sanction:** in which the broader community acts on the disclosure in order to shame, reprimand, reproach, censure, control, influence, supervise the named party.

iv) **Recipient response:** in which behavioural change follows the sanction, with the subjects being shamed, regretful, penitent, contrite, restrained, re-integrated etc.
BUT WHO IS SHAMED?

- Poll-tax protesters named in the local newspapers
- Sex offenders under community notification
- Under-performing schools identified in league tables
- Motor manufacturers named in the Car Theft Index
Poll-tax protesters named in the local newspapers

Poll tax non-payment – there were a great many sanctions imposed: fines, wage arrest, court appearances etc. Protesters thus ignored or even celebrated disclosure of their names in the local press. Policy abandoned.
Sex offenders under community notification

*Notified Sex Offenders* are resentful or scared by public attention. One key result is non-compliance with registration and displacement to other localities. *Re-offence rates remain static.*
Under-performing schools identified in league tables

- **Schools** respond to league table positions **tactically** - increasing resources to marginal candidates (middle grades) and excluding/ not entering hopeless ones (lowest grades). **Grades improve.**
Motor manufacturers named in the Car Theft Index

Car manufacturers – are embarrassed by adverse publicity and loss of reputation (and downturn in sales) - respond with genuine improvements in vehicle security. Car crime goes down.
Is there a theory to accommodate these differences in outcome?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude toward membership</th>
<th>Eligible for membership</th>
<th>Ineligible for membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspire to belong</td>
<td>Candidate for membership</td>
<td>Marginal Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent to affiliation</td>
<td>Potential member</td>
<td>Detached non-member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated not to belong</td>
<td>Autonomous non-member</td>
<td>Antagonistic non-member</td>
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Merton’s Typology of aspirations to group membership of eligibles and non-eligibles
The theory under further refinement

For N&S to ‘work’ the following configuration should be in place:

• the named party should be an ‘aspirational insider’
• the shaming mechanism should be dovetailed with other mechanism (market sanctions)
• the disclosure should carry intense (but controllable) media interest
• the disclosed data should unambiguous both in allocating blame and in suggested remedial action
• the disclosing authority should have had exemplary watchdog credentials, which are operated benignly
Example II. Megan’s Law - Programme Theory

STEP ONE
Problem Identification
Identify high-risk released sex offenders and create valid and reliable registers

STEP TWO
Public disclosure
Issue bulletins, press releases, call meeting to identify released offenders to their community

STEP THREE
Sanction Instigation
Community joins with police and probation to increase surveillance of suspicious behaviour

STEP FOUR
Offender response
Community actions shame offenders and decrease opportunity of further offence
Evidence fragment one: could the law have made a difference? - a ‘retrospective simulation’

136 serious sex offences

36 previous offence

100 no previous offence

12 stranger predatory offences

24 known to victim

6 could potentially respond to community notification

6 offender from out of state

Petrosino & Petrosino
Evidence fragment two: did the law effect recidivism? A matched trial

- Pre-intervention sample → sex recidivism 22%
- Post-intervention sample → sex recidivism 19%
- Pre-intervention sample → arrest slow
- Post-intervention sample → arrest significantly quicker

Schram & Milloy
Evidence fragment three: how did practitioners respond? Office talk

“The Law is an unfunded mandate”

“Special Bulletin Notification added more work to already over-worked agents”

“There is more pressure to baby sit with SBN cases simply because they are SBN cases”

Zevitz and Farkas
**Key findings synthesised**

*Study 1*: Following the introduction of the law, detection increase more sharply than deterrence.

*Study 2*: The chances of community surveillance of stranger predatory offences remain low and offender may lie low.

*Study 3*: Practitioner attention becomes increasingly focused on SBN cases because of community harassment.
And Finally

What it feels like to do realist synthesis …

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION