

Developing Realist Programme Theories



The RAMESES II Project

Pawson has stated that programmes are ‘theories incarnate’ (Pawson, 2006) and that every programme has a theoretical underpinning, whether it is made explicit or not. One of the important activities in doing a realist evaluation is to ‘surface’ (i.e. bring to the surface, or develop) a theory or theories that explain what works, for whom, under what circumstances and how. Those theories are then ‘tested’ (confirmed, refuted or refined) using the best available evidence. A realist evaluation may examine a single programme theory, or a number of programme theories, depending on the goals of the evaluation.

A good brainstorming exercise to help in surfacing realist programme theories is to ask the question: ‘What is it about programme X that makes it work?’ This can be followed by other questions that help surface the other aspects of a realist programme theory: “In what circumstances will it work like that?” “Will it work like that for everyone?”.

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How is programme theory constructed?

There are many ways of going about identifying programme theory. These include reviewing documentation for the programme, interviewing people involved with the programme or experts in the content area, adopting theory from existing literature, and adding the evaluators’ hunches (‘informed guesswork’).

Regardless of how the programme theories are developed, it is crucial that the theories reflect the realist understanding of causation. That means that the theory should not be limited to statements about whether or not the programme will lead to outcomes, but how and why it will do so, and for what kinds of settings and populations.

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There is often a significant difference between programme theory, which is specific to the particular programme, and formal theories in different disciplines (for example game theory in economics, constructivist learning theory in education, attachment theory in psychology and human development).

Formal theories drawn solely from the literature can end up being too abstract or distant from the intervention to be a perfect fit. More often than not it will be necessary to formulate customised theories that can then be backed up by formal theories in the literature.

What if the programme already comes with a theory?

If the programme has an established theory, it will need to be checked to see whether it can stand as a realist programme theory. In order for it to be a realist theory, it has to say something about contexts and mechanisms in relation to outcomes. Often, pre-existing programme theory comes in the form of a logic model, demonstrating inputs and outputs but not explaining how or why they work. In other cases, only a formal theory is provided (e.g. theory of diffusion of innovation, normalization process theory, or the behaviour change wheel). These are theories that

explain a general pathway, or a finite set of elements that previous research suggests are likely to be relevant, but they are not adapted to the particular programme, and they may not explain 'how and in what contexts'.

Realists need to make a claim about 'what is causing what to happen? For whom and how?'. Generative causation gets at the 'how and why' question.

Realist programme theories need to be surfaced or developed if they are not already explicit.

How do realist programme theories incorporate political and economic elements?

Some interventions aim to change political and economic systems (think democratisation processes in developing countries, or changes to the powers of unions and employers in industrial relations systems). In these cases, the programme theory deals directly with political and economic issues.

In other cases, programme theories may be influenced by political or economic agendas. In other words, policies and programmes may be developed under the pressure of demonstrating that something is being done about an issue. For example, funds are allocated due to political pressures and not necessarily because there is proper evidence of need or evidence that the funded strategy is likely to be effective. Similarly, policy decisions can be the result of financial pressures – the need to cut costs and streamline budgets.

These agendas may inform theorising about the context, but programmes still have an intrinsic logic to them that is different from larger political or economic interests. The programme theory should reflect this intrinsic logic. For example, a policy to allow nurse-led prescribing of

medication may have been implemented as a low-risk cost cutting measure by reducing the number of visits required to the doctor. The programme theory should not be limited to statements such as: 'If you allow nurses prescribe, this will lead to economic benefit to the health system.' Instead it should ask 'what is it about nurse-led prescribing that works (or not?) and why?' This opens up a host of ideas and possibilities about the impact of nurse-led prescribing on the healthcare system, but also to impacts on nurse work experiences and work load, nurse-patient relations, nurse-doctor relations and so on. While it won't be possible to test all aspects of the theory in one evaluation, a wider examination of these elements of the programme will contribute to wider learning – and may in fact change the answer about the economic benefits to the health system by taking other issues into account.

What if the programme theory can't be established at the outset of the evaluation?

Pawson and Tilley (1997) emphasize that it is important to construct initial or candidate programme theories at the outset of the evaluation. This facilitates the development of data collection processes, realist interviews and context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) analyses. However, there are circumstances where this isn't feasible. Genuinely innovative programmes may be rare, but they do exist. There are also programmes which have run for a long time but without being theorised. In these cases, it is possible to undertake a 'theory building' evaluation. In this type of realist evaluation, the evaluation may start with a very general theory, not yet developed into a realist format. A realist theory is developed using the evidence collected during the evaluation and becomes part of the product of the evaluation.

We have discovered the programme theory black box. Now comes the hard part. We have to get into it.



References

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