Introduction to realist evaluation & synthesis

Mark Pearson & Becky Hardwick (UEMS)

9th May 2013
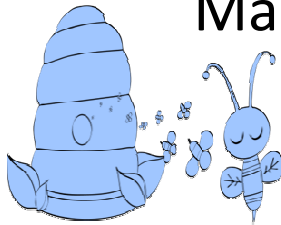
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Workshop plan

12:00 Aims & introductions

12:10 Core aspects of a realist approach

12:30 How would I use a realist approach? (groupwork)

1:15   Wrapping-up/ 'The Realist Hive'

1:20   Food!

Workshop aims

- Understand:
  - what a programme theory is (and how to use one)
  - what a mechanism is
  - how a realist approach could be used in your research

What are realist approaches?

1. Change is generative - 'what causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we observe it happening'.

2. Therefore knowledge accumulates not through the regular success of events, but rather through building and testing theories on what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why?

3. Distinct understanding of causation: the generative mechanism.

4. Long and complex lineage. Realist Evaluation and Realist Synthesis hold a particular interpretation of 'realism'.

5. Sits between facts speak for themselves (empiricist), and all knowledge is socially constructed (constructivist) thinking.

6. Today is about the practical application of this philosophy of science.

Why use a realist approach?

- To *explain change* in complex systems, using:
  1. *diverse forms of evidence* - in a way that is...
  2. *context-specific* - and which...
  3. produces *knowledge usable by decision-makers*

- Understanding *generative mechanisms* is at the core

How to use Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations

Context (C)

Mechanism (M)

Outcome Pattern (O)
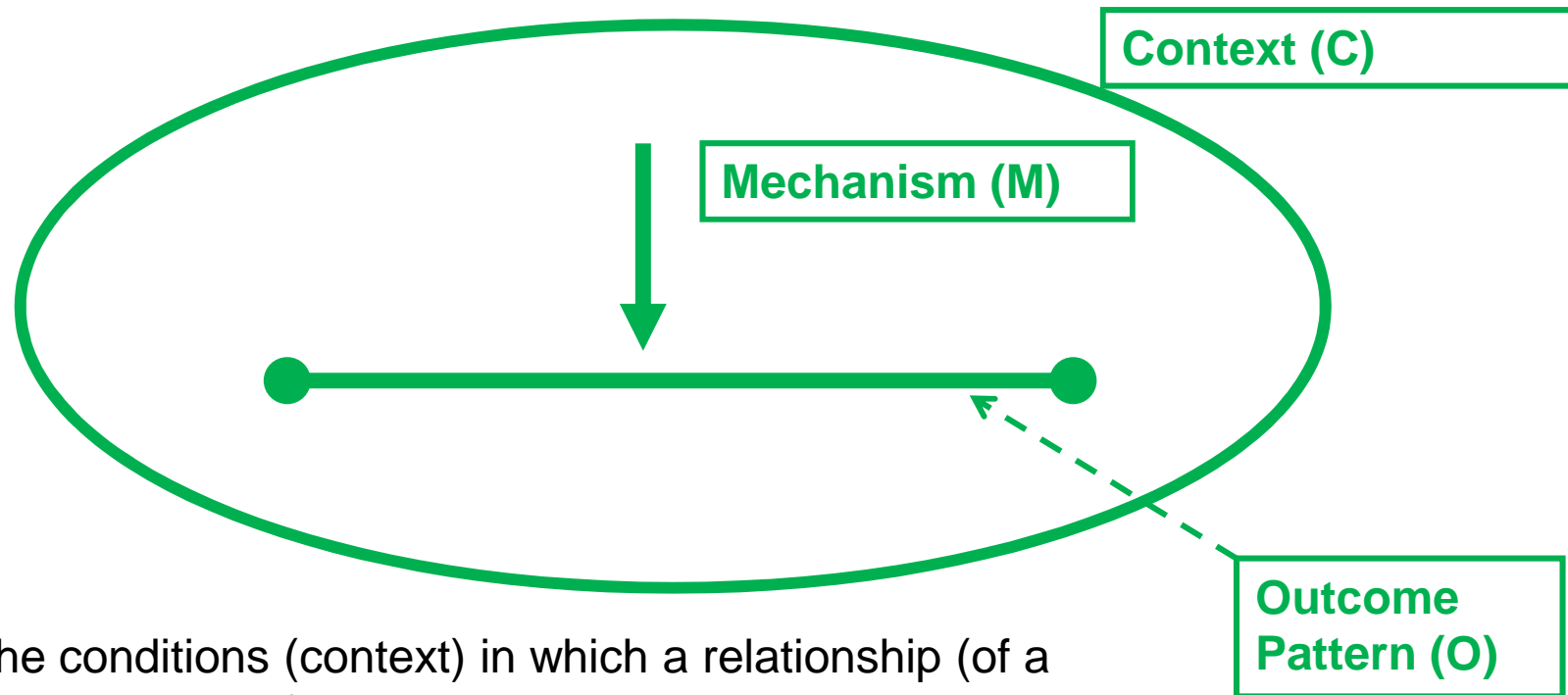
The conditions (context) in which a relationship (of a certain strength) between phenomena holds and the reasons why this relationship holds (the mechanism)

Programme theory
(i.e. writing down CMOs)

○ A model that links outcomes to programme activities and the underlying theoretical assumptions

○ **Phase 1:** *How does a contraceptive counselling programme 'work'? Different ideas:*

1. *If* women are unaware of how to obtain/use contraception, *then* counselling works by increasing women's **knowledge**

2. *If* discussion of sexuality is **culturally** unacceptable, *then* counselling works by making women's sexuality and rights a **legitimate** topic for discussion and action

3. *If* women are subordinate in sexual relationships, *then* counselling works by **enabling** women to reflect on social inequalities and **assert** their own decisions

○ **Phase 2:** *How can these programme theories be tested?*

Your turn...

- **In pairs:**

  1. Find a programme theory, i.e. 'How does it work?' (*Phase 1*) in 'Cops with mops' (5m)

  2. Try and write this theory down (5m)

  3. Feedback to the group (5m)

- **In different pairs:**

  1. Briefly describe a policy problem that interests you (2m)

  2. How have people tried to solve this problem? (5m)

  3. Why did people try to solve it in this way? (5m)

  4. Try and write the programme theory down (5m)

  5. Feedback to the group (5m)

Wrapping up

- Workshop evaluation forms

- 'Realist hive' blog http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/realisthive/tag/realist-hive/
- Reading list - follow the blog link

- Reading group: June 13th and July 18th

- Keep talking...
  - Mark.Pearson@exeter.ac.uk
  - R.J.L.Hardwick@exeter.ac.uk

A realist philosophy of science in practical terms

- Programmes are active, not passive (recipients have to choose to respond/participate)
- Programmes have long implementation chains and multiple stakeholders
- Programmes are embedded in complex social systems
- Programmes are implemented against the background of other interventions/service changes
- Programmes borrow and adapt from other programmes; they are rarely implemented exactly as originally envisaged
- Programmes have typically evolved from previous interventions
- Programmes change the conditions that made them work in the first place
- **Box 1 The nature of complex programmes (Pawson 2006)**