Theory – navigating complexity in realist evaluation

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2nd International Conference in Realist Evaluation and Synthesis: Advancing Principles, Strengthening Practice
Theory – navigating complexity in realist evaluation: setting the scene

Helping somebody with the quality of their thinking about the issues that are important to them… involving self, work or career

David Clutterbuck interview

How mentoring works as an intervention and an approach in specialist workforce development
Theory – navigating complexity in realist evaluation

• **Theory of change / programme theory**: to aid initial navigation of complexity

• **Middle range theory**: to contribute to configuration framework building to support analysis (theory-primed)

• **Transferable theory / refined programme theory**: made explicit from findings and recommendations, to inform policy and practice, offered forward for further research
Theory of change — navigating complexity in realist evaluation: the challenge of purpose

The Bid (2008)
- circumstances: regional gaps (NSF, £, geography) + opportunities (specialists)
- inputs: 30 practitioners seconded, matching more experienced with less experienced + new £ + 2 years
- activity: mentoring (+ action research evaluation)
- outputs: 10 new posts + group of participants with community working skills, behaviours and confidence + knowledge and skills cascaded to other staff + future recruitment requirements specified + reports
- outcomes: workforce capacity and capability built + services improved

Theory of change
identifying the programme theory as a process: associating means and ends, with assumptions of causality
The Bid’s theory of change: regional gaps and opportunities can be addressed through inputs of staff, funding and time, mediated through mentoring (activity). This will build capacity, capability and improve services.

No evidence or theory of how mentoring works. No longer term impacts appropriate to the intervention.

From this limited theory of change / programme theory, decision to set out a configuration framework drawing on middle range theory, literature and expert opinion relevant to mentoring, to trial and inform findings, recommendations and transferable theory / revised programme theory.
Middle range theory – navigating complexity in realist evaluation: the challenge of analysis

The Framework
CMO
- **Contexts**: enabling and inhibiting
- **Mechanisms**: resources in the intervention and responses
- **Outcomes**: proximal and distal

Levels
- individual
- interpersonal
- institutional
- infrastructural

Making an ‘informed’ choice of MRT

Configuration framework building
- theory-primed (MRT)
- literature-populated
- expert-informed
- participant-configured (trialled)
Middle range theory – navigating complexity in realist evaluation: the challenge of analysis

Learning, development and change: Bandura – Social Learning Theory / Social Cognitive Theory
how people learn, develop and change their behaviour in a social context
• insight, self-efficacy, agency

Operational and strategic change: May – Normalisation Process Theory
how people implement and embed complex interventions as day-to-day activities in complex environments
• agentic collaboration

Partnership: Lasker et al – Partnership Synergy
how people collaborate in complexity for change and outcomes
• agentic collaboration
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<th>Contexts</th>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>Inhibiting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Prosocial, adaptable, congruent</td>
<td>(Reflex), reasoning, reflection and reflexivity</td>
<td>Learning and change / outcomes RRT-B Development and change / outcomes RRT-B</td>
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<td>qualities and behaviours</td>
<td>Meaning-making, Decision-action</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Belief, commitment to and investment in the mentoring process, its relationships and conversations, Dyad e.g. trust, support and challenge, mutuality, voluntarism, safe space, time out Developmental networks</td>
<td>Shared (reflex), reasoning, reflection and reflexivity, Shared meaning-making, making in ambiguity and complexity</td>
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<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Mentoring culture and scheme design, Management support</td>
<td>Matching Episodes, Conversations developing a shared language</td>
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<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Mentoring culture and scheme design, Strategic policy: sector and economy</td>
<td>Agentic collaboration RRT-M, RRT-L, and using a range of strategies and tools in an equalising, developmental relationship</td>
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Explanatory model

Double loop+: foundational loop and proximal outcomes > applied loops and distal outcomes

Provisional theories
Transferable theory — navigating complexity in realist evaluation: the challenge of transferability

Explicit within reporting: the emerging theory within findings and associated recommendations (intervention and methodology).

Publication and dissemination:
- MSc, PhD (messy debates), academic / practitioner research and writing (good practice)
- articles, texts
- conference presentations and debate
- RAMESES as a repository
- other target audiences: strategic stakeholders

Transferable theory

The refined programme theory or theories, presented to highlight relevance for practice
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