The Practice of realist evaluation in two countries

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Abstract

This paper outlines the new, emerging realist paradigm in evaluation research, and applies it to social work practice in two countries. This paradigm has the potential for a ‘white box’ evaluation that not only systematically tracks outcomes, but also the mechanisms that produce the outcomes, the contexts in which these mechanisms are triggered, and the content of the programme. First, realist evaluation investigates what outcomes were achieved, and the extent to which each desired outcome was achieved. Next, the main mechanisms and contexts from the sample of service users are aggregated. The main components of the content of programmes are also tracked across the service users. Finally, inferential statistics are used to identify the key mechanisms and content that were responsible for the outcomes and in what contexts. The statistical methods used include Chi-squares, significance tests, and multiple regression analysis. In this way, it is possible to determine what works, for whom and in what contexts. This new paradigm has been used in the evaluation of a number of social care programmes in England and in Finland, and the paper will outline experiences in the replication of realist evaluation methodologies in the two countries.

Introduction

The main contribution of this paper is to outline a framework for practice evaluation based on the principles of realist evaluation, to demonstrate the utility of it, as well as, the organisational conditions for building up partnership with researchers and practitioners that is necessary for applying our version of realist paradigm. Examples of evaluating practice will be presented from two countries, England and Finland. Practice in human services takes place in an open system that consists of a constellation of inter-connected structures, mechanisms and contexts. Realism aims to address the significant factors involved in practice, through a realist effectiveness cycle which links the development of the models of intervention with the observed changes in the circumstances in which practice takes place. This link between practice and reality is provided through the use of appropriate evaluation research methods. The evaluation strategy is developed to address the questions of what actually works, for whom and in what contexts. At each cycle, a better approximation of reality is obtained, as compared with the previous cycle. In this way, realism addresses the main purposes of evaluation---to determine the merit and worth of human service programmes, and to improve these services in the circumstances of practice. Our experiences underline the importance of
Kazi (1999, 2000) reviews the main contemporary paradigms in evaluation research as applied to the practice of human services. The paradigmatic preferences of the enquirer influence the selection of evaluation questions, the selection of research methods and how they are applied, and the drawing of conclusions from the findings. However, the boundaries between these paradigms are not firm, and it is not possible to establish them into discrete categories. There are also different ways of classifying these paradigms (e.g. Trinder 1996, Shaw 1999). Bearing in mind these limitations, a tentative classification could be made of the main contemporary perspectives that influence the evaluation of social work practice research at the present time, as follows:

1) empirical practice (e.g. Macdonald 1996; Kazi, Mäntysaari & Rostila 1997; Dillenberger 1998; Kazi 1998; Saarnio et al 1998; Thyer 1998; Bloom 1999; Hansson, Cederblad & Höök 2000; Hansson 2001; Kauppila 2001);

2) pragmatism or methodological-pluralism (e.g. Cheetham et al., 1992; Sundman 1993; Fuller and Petch 1995; Blom 1996, 2001; Fuller 1996; Lindqvist 1996; Kazi 1997; Cheetham 1998; Markström 1998; Mäntysaari 1999);

3) interpretivist approaches including critical theory (e.g. as in Everitt and Hardiker 1996; Shaw 1996, 1998); feminist evaluation (Humphries 1999); and social constructionism (Hall 1997; White 1998; Taylor & White 2000). Other examples include Dufäker (2000), and Forsberg (2000);

4) post-positivist approaches such as scientific realism (Pawson and Tilley, 1997a, 1997b; Kazi, 1998, in press; Anastas 2000; Rostila 2000, 2001; Rostila & Kazi 2001; Kazi et al in press).

Each paradigm has its advantages and limitations with regard to practice evaluation; however each of the main paradigms has also made a definite contribution in developing the strategies for practice evaluation research. For example, empirical practice introduced a focus on outcomes, interpretivist approaches have emphasised the process of practice and a focus on people’s in-depth perceptions, and pragmatism emphasises the needs of practice. These paradigms enable the transition from a ‘black box’ evaluation that concentrates on effects to a ‘grey box’ evaluation that also investigates processes (Kazi 2000a, Scriven 1994). However, these paradigms tend to remain at the level of establishing ‘what works’.

For example, from a ‘black box’ stance, Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg and Haynes (1997, p. 2) define evidence-based practice within the human services as “...the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients”. In their promotion of systematic reviews of social and educational policies and practices, the Campbell Collaboration (http://campbell.gse.upenn.edu) suggests that the best evidence is found through randomised field trials or at least through quasi-experimental designs (Boruch, Petrosino. & Chalmers 1999).
Also from a ‘black box’ stance, Gambrill (1999) elaborates evidence-based practice in relation to social work as follows:

_Social workers seek out practice-related research findings regarding important practice decisions and share the results of their search with clients. If they find that there is no evidence that a method they recommend will help a client, they so inform the client and describe their theoretical rationale for their recommendations. Clients are involved as informed participants_ (p. 346).

White (forthcoming) accepts that ‘what works’ is necessary, but argues from a ‘grey box’ standpoint for a ‘research agenda, which properly recognises the complex interactive processes involved in social work interventions, many of which require examination using more interpretive methodological approaches’ (in press). Whilst the empirical practice approach is satisfied with the establishment of a causal connection between an intervention and its effects, the interpretivists argue for a more in-depth account of the processes of the same practice. However, both of these perspectives tend not to begin from an investigation of the causal mechanisms and the contexts that produce the programme outcomes.

Indeed, it could be argued that non-realist researchers tend not to make the best possible use of the data that may be available. For example, the empirical practice researcher would tend to be satisfied with the finding that the intervention group fared better than the control group, and not seek to examine the statistical correlations between the outcomes and the different factors such as components of the intervention or the circumstances of the service users which are usually controlled as extraneous variables (e.g. the post-natal study described in Oakley 1996). On the other hand, the interpretivist researchers may provide an in-depth account of the service users’ perceptions regarding the service, but they may fail to establish patterns that may link particular types of service user circumstances with the level of effectiveness of the services received (e.g. Everitt & Hardiker’s 1996 example of older people). As indicated earlier, these paradigmatic boundaries are not discrete, and therefore there may be enquirers who do investigate the links between service user characteristics and outcomes without declaring the influences of realist evaluation (e.g. Beckett 2001 who has used cluster analysis with those at the lower end and those at the top end of desired outcomes).

**Realist Evaluation for Practice: A Framework**

The contribution of the realist evaluation paradigm is to enable the evaluation of human service programmes to enter a higher stage, the ‘clear box’ type of evaluation that investigates the effectiveness of the programmes within an open system. ‘What works’ becomes only a starting point, and not the gold standard to strive for. One of the ‘realist evaluation bloodlines’ of Pawson & Tilley (2001) is “never expect to know ‘what works’, just keep trying to find out” (p. 323). This is because what may work with some people in certain conditions may not work in different conditions or with different people. Therefore, the main contribution of realist evaluation is not only to identify what
interventions work, but how they work and in what circumstances. The findings from realist evaluation may be used not just to confirm the effectiveness of interventions where they have been found to be effective, but also to develop the programmes of intervention to meet the needs of different people in different circumstances. The gold standard for the realist evaluator is not just ‘what works’, but ‘what works, for whom and in what contexts’, recognising that an explanation at any one time requires further investigation and further explanation, hence the notion of the realist effectiveness cycle (figure 1).

We begin with an analysis of the existing models of intervention used by the practitioners in their work with service users. At the same time, data is collected to determine how far these models reflect reality, e.g. the needs of these children and their families, and this data helps to develop the models of service further to better meet the needs of these service users. The programmes of intervention act as generating mechanisms, aiming to bring about positive changes in the circumstances of the service users. In realist evaluation, we propose to systematically track the following:

1) Changes in outcomes, including changes in the levels of risk---this can be done through a selection of appropriate measures which may be used repeatedly before, during and after the intervention. The outcome data may also include qualitative data from the interaction with the service users. Whatever outcome measures are selected and/or developed, the practitioners will play a central role in this process in consultation with the evaluator. The integration of outcome measures into practice will facilitate the use of single-case designs and group designs to systematically track client progress over time, enabling the findings to be shared with the service users.

Figure 1. The realist effectiveness cycle
Adapted from Pawson and Tilley (1997b)
Source: Kazi (1998, 1999)
2) Changes in the models of intervention, or the content of the programmes implemented. This can be done using qualitative strategies, e.g. in regular focus group meetings with the practitioners, and on a regular basis as part of the supervision and review arrangements within the agency. We will need to ensure that this becomes part of the routine recording systems, and one way of doing this may be to identify the main components of interventions in order to systematically track changes in the content of programmes over time.

3) Changes in the contexts of service users, e.g. levels of social deprivation, and historical circumstances which are less likely to change during the intervention. The contexts can be tracked through data from the initial referral form and the initial interaction with the service users.

4) Changes in the mechanisms, or in the factors in the circumstances of the service users that influence outcomes. Drawing upon what is known to date both from research and practice experience, we need to identify the main enabling and disabling mechanisms in relation to the desired outcomes, and to systematically track changes in these mechanisms over time. This process is usually part of the assessment and review procedures, but we need to record them explicitly in the routine recording systems.

The above are the four main components of the realistic effectiveness cycle. The data from all four will enable regular analyses of what works, for whom and in what contexts, with potential explanations of why the intervention procedures worked or not. The model of intervention, if it is going to be effective in a generative sense, has to change in accordance with changes in the complex weaving system of mechanisms and contexts. Evidence may be collected in a methodological-pluralist approach in which the multiple perspectives are studied at a minimum, using a variety of data gathering techniques. A central purpose of this realist evaluation is to improve the programme both in terms of its content and targeting, to improve the theory, and to improve the assessment, and thereby to improve the mix of data gathering techniques, in a continuous cycle of improvement.

A partnership between evaluation and practice

The starting point is a partnership between realist evaluators and practitioners. Pawson & Tilley (1997b) regard this relationship as a ‘teacher-learner relationship’ with practitioners and others to test and explain the ‘context-mechanism-outcome configurations’ (p. 217). However, a partnership is advocated here as both the academic evaluator and the practitioners are both learners and teachers at the same time. This partnership is based on a commitment to evaluate practice, and to identify ways in which both internal and external evaluation can be combined together and inform each other. Thus realist practice evaluation starts from and returns to an assessment of mechanisms, contexts and outcomes that is shared by both academic evaluator and practitioners, at least in the sense that they orient to its future evolving within realist effectiveness cycle (see previous figure). For example, this partnership is then needed for the identification of appropriate outcome measures in relation to the programmes of intervention that are to be evaluated. These outcome measures could be selected from published standardised
measures (e.g. from Corcoran & Fischer 2000); created with practitioners; and/or indicate general outcomes of the programmes, e.g. whether the programmes were completed, recidivism rates, completion of assessments, and others used in the studies described in Kazi (in press). Where some outcome indicators are already in place, a retrospective analysis may be undertaken to establish the extent to which outcomes have been achieved to date, and where possible, to begin to identify the characteristics of service users and the circumstances in which the outcomes are more or less likely to be achieved.

Next, we need to investigate the circumstances of service users in more depth, to enable a deeper investigation of how the outcomes are produced. One of the main contributions of the realist evaluation paradigm is the concept of embeddedness. Causal powers do not reside in the events or the behaviours of particular objects, variables or individuals, but in the social relations and organisational structures which constitute the open system. One action leads to another because of the actions’ accepted place in the whole. Realist evaluation strategies seek to explain how the programme’s causal mechanisms interact with the other causal mechanisms in the circumstances of the service users, and the conditions or contexts in which they were triggered (figure 2). At this stage, we need to undertake intensive research with each service user to identify the mechanisms that may enable the outcomes to be achieved, as well as the mechanisms that may be disabling, and the contexts or circumstances in which they may be triggered.

Figure 2. The interaction of causal mechanisms in realist evaluation

![Diagram of Causal Mechanisms + Contexts = Outcomes]

Robson (2000, 2002) indicates that practitioners can rely on their knowledge and experience as well as research findings to help identify the key mechanisms. Both strategies were used in the Shield Project study (Kazi and Ward 2001) as well as focus group meetings of practitioners to identify the mechanisms and contexts in the circumstances of individual cases. Another strategy, used in the Lifeline project (Spurling, Kazi & Rogan 2000), is that of systematic repeated interviews of service users, using template analysis approaches to enable them to identify the mechanisms and
contexts relevant for the outcomes agreed with them. All of these strategies enable the intensive research with each case, as suggested by Sayers (2000). Qualitative data analysis such as template analysis (Crabtree & Miller 1999) and matrices (Miles & Huberman 1994) can be used to identify patterns or demi-regularities across the cases, to help select some common mechanisms and contexts for quantitative analysis.

The systematic tracking of outcomes, mechanisms, contexts and programme content variables can be implemented in a realist effectiveness cycle with the use of SPSS databases (Argyrous 2000, Foster 2001) in addition to the qualitative strategies. In the studies described in Kazi (in press), the SPSS databases were developed as part of the partnership between the academic evaluator and the practitioners, and regular analysis and feedback was provided to enable the realist effectiveness cycle to operate in a meaningful way. The regular feedback helped practitioners to improve their programmes of intervention and also helped to better target them to meet the needs of service users in the changing circumstances. The agency’s recording systems were adapted to enable a regular update of the databases. The database was not static, but responded to the permeability of the open system (see Pawson & Tilley 1997b, rule 6, p.218) as new mechanisms were added as and when they were discovered. For each mechanism identified, the practitioners were asked to record whether they were enabling or disabling, and to track changes in the form of whether they improved, remained the same or became worse. The contexts recorded included known prior history as well as circumstances which take longer to change, e.g. levels of social deprivation, housing, employment, and the separation of families.

With regard to quantitative analysis as suggested by Lawson (1998) to identify demi-regularities as well as mechanism-context-outcome configurations, the use of inferential statistics in the described studies included significance tests, measures of association, odds ratios, calculations of risk, and multiple regression analysis. Whereas in a ‘black box’ study the aim would be to determine an intervention’s impact, in realist evaluation inferential statistics are used with the aim of identifying mechanism-context-outcome configurations. The aim is to identify demi-regularities, to investigate the characteristics, factors, mechanisms that lead to more successful or less successful outcomes, and to identify the conditions under which the causal mechanisms would be triggered to produce the outcomes. For example, in the Leeds Youth Offending Team Study (Kazi, Smith & Clarke 2002) it was found that group work was less successful than individual work, but the potential causal mechanisms were the nature of the offence and the legal status. In the study of family centres (Kazi, Manby & Buckley 2001), it was found that non-white parents fared worse in parent-based outcomes, but also that this was not true of child-based outcomes. In the NSPCC Shield Project (Kazi, Ward & Hudson 2002), it was found that the engagement of the child, the relationship between parents, and the multi-disciplinary relationships were amongst the key causal mechanisms, but that the programme’s generative mechanism was able to successfully interact with the causal mechanisms almost entirely in conditions of prior traumatization such as a history of sexual abuse victimisation or a history of neglect. All of these findings were achieved with the help of a realist evaluation perspective, and particularly through the investigation of potential causal mechanisms.
The realist investigator is never satisfied with an explanation of what works, but strives for deeper explanations. The goal is to understand how the phenomena under study react or change in the presence or absence of other antecedent or concurrent phenomena in an open system. These theories are empirically assessed, and when found to be empirically adequate, themselves explained in turn, in the cognitive unfolding of explanatory knowledge (Lawson 1998). That is why a realist effectiveness cycle is used, with a systematic tracking of outcomes, mechanisms and contexts, in a prospective evaluation.

**Realist evaluation of Monet project in Finland**

In Finland, there has been much interest in the new realist evaluation paradigm (Toivonen 1998). In fact, this paradigm was introduced in Finnish social work in the early 1990s (Mäntysaari 1991), but as yet the example from Finland in the foregoing is the only one from Finnish practice. More recently, great hopes have been attached to the realist perspective in evaluation (Holmila 1999; Rostila & Torniainen 1999; Rostila 2000; Kaarlejärvi 2000; Rostila & Kazi 2001; Suikkanen 2001; Rostila 2001), but also some scepticism along the lines that it adds nothing new (e.g. Ahonen 2001).

The evaluation research of Monet project was an effort to apply realist evaluation as a part of ‘realist effectiveness cycle’ in order to develop the project as a model of intervention (Kazi 1998). The Monet project was an European Union Employment project, organising rehabilitative activities for the long-term unemployed in order to arrest exclusion in Tampere, Finland. The Monet project was started at the beginning of 1998 and concluded at the end of 2000. It was administered by three non-governmental organisations: Mutual Support Network, The Meeting Place of International Women, and The Settlement Neighbourhood Association, in close contact with local authorities. The target groups of the project were the long term unemployed, the long term unemployed immigrants, people with poor or non-existent professional skills, unskilled youth under 25, people with special learning need and homemakers returning to the labour market.

The aim of the research was to examine “what in the project worked, for whom and in what context”, in order to develop a local model of ‘social rehabilitation’ based essentially on third sector workshops mentioned below. In the research data was gathered (1) about mechanisms - enabling and disabling mechanisms - factors influencing the attainment of the aims of the project, (2) contexts - local labour markets, the participant’s circumstances, the characteristics and background of the participant, (3) the utilisation or working of the project’s mechanism by the participant, (4) outcomes of the project.

In the five units of the project an opportunity to work and participate was offered for a period of 6-10 months for 65 participants. The units, led by 1-2 so called peer supervisors, were:

1. The Hervanta Recycling Centre: recycling activities, moving and transportation services
2. The Meeting Place of International Women: Ethnic food services as well as supervision and information services for migrant women
3. The Handicrafts Workshop Kätevä: Sewing and weaving, reuse of textiles
4. The Monet Car: Car maintenance and repair activities
5. The Cafe of Tekemisen Paikka: an activity centre for unemployed, a cafe and meeting point and recycling unit

The participants were also entitled to the services of a labour mediator, as well as, a social worker, who were available to the participant on a regular basis, as well as, to other services, which were tailored after participant's personal needs, such as courses on life management skills, knowledge about working life, civics, information technology, as well as, Finnish language for migrants.

The methods of data gathering were:
1. Practitioners’ interviews in the beginning of the project (in December - 97 and January -98), about the mechanisms of the project, including the interviews of the project director, the project co-ordinator, and representatives of various local authorities
2. Participants’ interviews, usually one or two weeks after the beginning of the project, about their family relations, vocational and other education, possible previous jobs, incomes, social networks, hobbies, plans for future and participants’ perspectives on what the project could provide for him- or herself, as well as, a Psychological General Well-Being (PGWB) index (Dupuy 1984:170-8, Lohiniemi et al, submitted)
3. Participants’ interviews after the project, including participants’ perspectives on the project’s mechanisms, and the above mentioned measure of participants’ Psychological General Well-Being
4. Internal documents and practitioners’ observations such as individual record-keeping about participants' setting objectives and attendance
5. Outcome data on employment and participants' educational activities after the project from the registers of local labour force offices

The data was analysed with the help of SPSS-program.

Interpreting the results of the project

During the 2.5 years of its operation, the Monet Project has a total of 65 participants, of whom women accounted for two thirds and immigrants about 40% (26). Six months after the project, half of the participants (50%) were on a path that was conducive to integration into working life. As a contextual factor, it was certainly important that the general level of unemployment in the larger region had fallen from nearly 20% to 10%, but in the neighbourhood, from where the project recruited most of its participants, the unemployment rate was still 19%. Anyway, why had one half of the participants managed better than the others? Had it anything to do with the project? In the analysis an explanation for the outcomes was sought by examining who (context and enabling
The project leaders’ perspectives on the assumed generative mechanisms of project were investigated firstly, using qualitative interviews, providing an important starting point and focus for the quantitative data-analysis. According to the project leaders, the most important effective mechanism in the project were the following: membership in a group; getting one’s voice heard; clarity of the rules; role model provided by the peer instructors (‘street-credibility’); functionality; learning by doing; activities tailor-made for participants; the project constituted a state of long-lasting motivation and development of plans; the project energised and invigorated; it offered a breakaway from previous life; the project spurred on all the time; the project was economically profitable for the participants and it reinforced participants’ skills and self-esteem.

On average, the participants regarded social contacts and membership in the group provided by the project as important, along with regular day routine, possibility to utilise one’s skills and to acquire work experience. On the other hand participants thought that the project had not played a major role in planning their lives, and was not generally to have increased information about training and applying for jobs, nor was the project perceived as financially very profitable. There were also many interesting differences between participant groups in experiencing the mechanisms. In general, immigrants and women had a higher opinion about the working of the mechanisms of the project. Immigrants emphasised the importance of the project in providing a place for new activities and experiences of coping and managing various tasks, knowledge about job-seeking, jobs and education. They felt also that the project had helped them in making plans for future. Women were more satisfied than men with the project in terms of being heard, finding new activities and making their plans for future.

Further analysis about the connections between outcomes and participants’ characteristics revealed interesting hints of the favourable contexts for triggering the project’s generative mechanisms. On average, especially immigrants seemed to benefit more often of the project, in terms of being on a path that was conducive to integration into working life. The difference in terms of the outcome was statistically significant. An interesting observation was also the fact that, on average, better outcomes were achieved with ‘open minded’ participants, meaning those who, in the interviews in the beginning of the project, openly mentioned some of their difficulties in their past life. This observation too had statistical significance. Also women and participants with previous vocational training seemed to succeed a bit better than males or people without vocational training but these differences were not statistically significant. These observations seemed to be in line with the way participant groups had experienced the contents of the project.

Data about psychological general well-being, measured by PGWB questionnaire, was examined in order to find out if the assumed generative mechanisms “the project energised and invigorated” and also “the project reinforced participants’ self-esteem” had been triggered. Because of language-problems this analysis was done only for those
whose native language was Finnish. On average, positive changes in psychological well-being were, however, not found.

Taken together the results increased a confidence that the project was functioning rather well for immigrants and to some extent also for female participant, as well as those so called 'open minded' participants, who probably were better disposed for co-operative relationships in the project question about the functioning of the project. On the other hand, it seems that native Finnish male participants constitute a major challenge for developing the project’s model of the intervention.

The evaluation of Monet project should be appreciated as a first step in developing realist practice evaluation in Finland. Definite challenges for the future realist practice evaluation should be, however, noted, such as gathering more detailed and precise knowledge about contexts, mechanisms, outcomes and interventions at client level (single case) and the analysis of this client level knowledge on group-level, applying the methodology developed in England. However, the project ended 2000, and even though an other project with reasonably similar aims was established, the evolving partnership between academic evaluator and practitioners could not be maintained and further steps to deepen realist practice evaluation could not be taken. In our opinion this experience reflects a need for a context that is favourable enough for establishing a proper partnership in terms of prospective evaluation - where the extent to which the model of practice is analogous with reality can be tested. This kind of partnership was apparently out of reach in this particular Finnish context of a project organisation with a rather vague organisational structure and ambiguous future.

**Conclusion**

A central reason for starting from the realist perspective, is its focus on explanations (Kazi, Blom, Morén, Perdal & Rostila forthcoming). The question is not just that the programme works, but what it is about the programme that makes it work, and why it works with some people and not with others, as demonstrated in the studies in Kazi (in press). In the evaluation of practice, the realist approach is integrated into the practice of human services, including the development of recording systems, practices and evaluation of effectiveness. Based on existing knowledge and data accumulation on outcomes, mechanisms and contexts, the programmes are developed as models targeted to achieve the desired outcomes. A multi-method research strategy is applied to test the extent to which these models are analogous with reality, and the data collection and analysis directly contribute to further development of the models as well as their future targeting within a realist effectiveness cycle. In this way, the content of the programmes, their interaction with pre-existing mechanisms and contexts, and their effectiveness in achieving outcomes, are addressed.

Ideally, however, the realist effectiveness cycle model, presented by Kazi, seems to require as its important organisational prerequisite a rather deep-rooted research-practice-
partnership, where commitment to the on-going data-gathering and analysis along the realist lines is established. In this enterprise both the academic evaluator and the practitioners are both learners and teachers at the same time in order to identify ways in which both internal and external evaluation can be combined together and inform each other. The apparent absence of this kind of organisational context of prospective accumulation of knowledge within the practice itself in Monet project, underlines our observation. This anchoring of realist evaluation into practice cannot be motivated without a more or less firm orientation to prospective accumulation of knowledge within the practice setting itself. It also raises further, not quite optimistic, questions about the possible fit between our type of realist evaluation and the context of extremely postmodern, project-based networking forms of organising human services.

References


