

Pawson, R. (2013).
The science of evaluation: A realist manifesto.
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Reviewed by Doug Dollinger

The world of evaluation is, we might say, a hurly-burly, herky-jerky, higgledy-piggledy world, awash in chaotic uncertainties and defiant imponderables. Even our hardest facts can become soft; moreover, our numbers, like all numbers, never really speak for themselves. And there is always the vexing question of which facts matter, and the problem of selecting a methodology free of what we might call civil strife. In the end it is just as Hamlet said to Horatio: Reality always outruns the measure of even our most elaborate techniques, methods, and theories. Facts in the social sciences have a life of their own. If we think of science as a domain in which theoretical principles and experimental methods support general agreement on how the world works, we may ask whether and in which sense evaluation can represent a science.

This is not a trivial question. Ray Pawson's book is entitled *The Science of Evaluation* for a reason. Behind the specific recommendations he makes for handling the problem of complexity—arguably the chief challenge for theory and method in the social sciences, let alone evaluation—Pawson is deeply concerned with showing how evaluation can be made scientific, not by aping the natural sciences or by concocting sciences of complexity, but rather by expounding a distinctive approach to arriving at a sound, if partial and conditional, knowledge of social reality. This is where the subtitle, *A Realist Manifesto*, comes in: His approach is a realist one. I will come back to this.

The core of Pawson's book is the issue of complexity. His third chapter offers a comprehensive checklist—the word is Pawson's—that describes the different dimensions of complexity in evaluation. He reduces it to the acronym VICTORE: volitions, implementation, contexts, time, outcomes, rivalry, and emergence. Take Implementation, for instance. The implementation of a program comes in long and often intricate chains of different events, activities, and decisions, all of which must be mapped out by the evaluator. Evaluating outcomes, to take a second example, requires multiple measures, as a single measure seldom unambiguously defines success. This checklist should be reviewed, Pawson urges, before the evaluator sets to work, because the space he or she is about to enter is the space of complexity. One can perhaps quibble with elements of this checklist—it is, after all, a checklist—but I found it useful in large part. I worry about the word *checklist*,

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because I have found it encourages mechanical application of terms rather than thoughtful reflection on categories, but that may reflect nothing more than how evaluation tends to be done in public administration.

Chapter 4 focuses on the different approaches to complexity in social science and the field of evaluation in particular. Pawson does a creditable job of leading the reader through these different approaches: the augmented trials, systems, critical realist, and pragmatist perspectives. Moreover, his criticisms of these approaches are direct and powerful, being grounded, it seems to me, in reflective practice. We never get lost in the theoretical debate here, no small feat given the difficulty of the issues. As is evident in the first two chapters of the book, Pawson is conversant with the contending philosophies of science, lending his discussion a depth lacking in most general discussions of social science.

Pawson outlines the realist response to complexity in his fifth chapter under the banner of “informed guesswork.” People are often surprised to hear “guesswork” used in reference to science; scientists, typically, are not. The question is not whether but how we need to guess. Pawson provides another acronym to mark the organizing principles of a realist approach to evaluation science, TARMATO (theory, abstraction, reusable conceptual platforms, model building, adjudication, trust, and organized skepticism). I will take up the first one, theory, here: Programs and interventions are always embedded in theories stating why what we are proposing will work and how. Programs are unique; program theories are not. The latter are, as Pawson describes them, “recurring policy ideas meeting recurring practical problems” (p. 88). Taking program theories as our starting point, then, allows us to avoid starting from scratch every time we approach a program, because theories are, as Pawson points out, what different programs have in common. Without a measure of generality at the outset, the science of evaluation cannot get off the ground. The physical sciences come to mind: If every experiment were simply a self-enclosed piece of investigation, experiment would have no bearing on the enterprise we call science. Experiments possess general significance because they are informed by theory.

Part 3 of Pawson’s book, encompassing Chapters 6, 7, and 8, apply these organizing principles to a broad range of programs and interventions. Pawson also takes up the enormously complex question of behavioural change, the chief objective of most programs in social or organizational contexts. His intent throughout is to show how a realist approach can manage complexity without downplaying or discarding it. The ability to manage such complexity, however, is not what makes the approach realist. The approach is realist because it postulates causal powers in the world—the world independent of our theory, the real one—that can be understood through continuous theoretical and experimental study, if only partially and conditionally.

Being what Pawson calls a “gnarled practitioner,” I shall conclude with the personal observation that much of what passes for evaluation within organizational contexts—meaning the evaluation of internal programs aimed at behavioural change, a leadership development program, say—is innocent of the

theoretical, methodological, and interpretive care that characterizes the realist approach Pawson outlines, advocates, and buttresses with argument. Taking his book to heart will make us better evaluators because it will subject our own practice of evaluation to a form of critical and disciplined questioning. In the end, Pawson's realism in *The Science of Evaluation* offers us a foundation for both scientific confidence and scientific humility.