



Belgian Network of Researchers in Global Health – Health Policy and Systems (BNR-GH-HPS)

Meeting Minutes

3rd meeting

Date: 18-11-2019

Venue: Campus Rochus, ITM

Time: 11h-13h

Main topic: Conference by Bruno Marchal on *Realist evaluation & research*

Participants:

- Nicolas Antoine-Moussiaux (ULiège)
(through Skype)
 - Aline Labat (ULB) (through Skype)
 - Bruno Marchal (ITM)
 - Elisabeth Paul (ULB) (through Skype)
 - Dimitri Renmans (UA)
 - Davide Ziveri
 - Maria Suau (ITM)
 - Geneviève Michaux (ITM)
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1. Introduction by Dimitri Renmans

- Introduction of the subject and the speaker.

2. Conference by Prof. Bruno Marchal

- Introduction to theory-driven evaluation (in opposition to method-driven evaluation): purpose, history and foundations; explanations of various concepts (theory of change, programme theory).
- Realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley 1997) & realist synthesis: search for middle-range theories (between working hypotheses and unified theories); looks for attribution of results.
- Explanation of the “philosophy” of realist evaluation (Westhop 2014):
 - o There is a reality independent of the observer (including social structure) = realist ontological position
 - o Knowing reality through science is unavoidably relative to the researcher = weak relativist ontological position
 - o All social systems are complex systems ⇔ programmes are open systems, context matters and the boundaries are not obvious; they are dynamic; observed outcomes may be multi-determined, causation may be non-linear
 - o Perspective on causation is grounded on *generative causality*
 - Positivism: causation is successionist: $X \rightarrow Y$ under certain conditions (and many assumptions) (cf. RCTs)

- Realist evaluation: 3 levels to be considered: empirical < actual < real; notion of *agency*: actors can produce change intentionally; actors and programmes are rooted in a layered social reality
- The search for “mechanisms” (i.e. resources and/or social or psychological drivers that influence the reasoning of actors, according to Pawson & Tilley); mechanisms are activated when the context conditions are right; they may play out at different levels (individual, group, society)
- Example of performance-based financing: the mechanism of acting on extrinsic motivation may work only in certain conditions (low-paid and competent staff) and in certain contexts (working conditions, etc.).
- Programmes work differently for different people, and context matters a lot: it impacts on the necessary conditions for the mechanisms to be triggered, on implementation, and on the observed outcomes.
- Analysis through a heuristic: context – mechanism – outcomes (Pawson & Tilley) + 2 modifications: also include the intervention and the actors ⇔ *ICAMO configuration*.
- Realist research in *method-neutral*; effectiveness + causation.
- Further analysis: identification of patterns or demi-regularities, and reproduction.
- Example of a realist study of the mechanism of cardiac rehabilitation.

3. Q&As and discussions

- During the Q&A it was emphasized that a realist evaluation/research should only be done when it is the most relevant approach. Proper realist evaluation is time consuming and at times a process evaluation may suffice when there is limited complexity, or when no differentiated outcomes are to be expected.
- When a realist evaluation is commissioned and the time frame is only one year, it is best to not start a realist evaluation as it will be impossible to do it properly.
- Realist evaluation is particularly instructive for policymakers as it shows them how the intervention works and whether it can be transferred to another context and more importantly which parts can/should be transferred.
- In spite of this importance for policymaking, many international organisations are still not convinced of the realist evaluation methodology and prefer to use randomized control trials (see also the Prize for Esther Duflo et. al). It is therefore difficult to find opportunities to perform a realist evaluation. However, the tide is slowly changing and RE is becoming increasingly popular. Especially, in the UK where the approach was ‘born’.
- Moreover, there is possibly some spill-over from the also increasingly popular Theory of Change approach among big NGOs. This approach is much more pragmatic and has a less clear underlying philosophy of science. This makes it easier to implement but also less useful compared to realist evaluation.