Philosophies and Evaluation Design

The RAMESES II Project

There are many different schools of philosophy, each of which makes different assumptions about the nature of the world (ontology) – including how causation works, the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and what constitutes ‘value’ (axiology). These assumptions have powerful implications for evaluation design, data requirements, analysis and so on.

Here we select just three broad schools of philosophy – positivism, constructivism and realism – and do gross injustice to each by over-summarising them. We discuss both ontology – the philosophy of the nature of reality – and epistemology – the philosophy of knowledge.

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Positivist ontology holds that there is an objective reality, existing independently of human interpretation, and governed by natural laws. Positivist epistemology holds that the observer and the observed are independent of each other, and that we can identify ‘facts’ about reality through a cycle of observation and theory. Only that which can be observed is considered a valid source of knowledge. The role of the positivist evaluator is, therefore, to identify and report observable facts. Post-positivism shares the same assumption about an independent reality, but accepts that the theories, values, experiences and perspectives of the researcher will influence what is observed and how it is interpreted. It relies on triangulation and dispute to come ‘as close as possible’ to objectivity. The logic that underpins randomised control trials is (post)positivist, as is the logic that underpins meta-analytic reviews. (For a readable discussion of the difference between positivism and post-positivism, see www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/positvsm.php )

Constructivism is an epistemology (philosophy of knowledge). It lacks a clear ontology. It asserts that all knowledge is both socially and individually constructed and interpreted: as a logical consequence, we can never be quite sure what reality is like or even whether it exists. Neither (in many forms of constructivism) can we prove what is ‘true’ or ‘not true’: ‘facts’ are just things that are accepted to be true (at least by many in a particular context). Many constructivists are primarily concerned with the meanings and interpretations that human agents give to experiences and use exclusively qualitative methods to investigate them. The role of the constructivist evaluator is therefore to identify and report these meanings.

Realism sits somewhere between the two, closer to post-positivism in ontology; closer to some forms of constructivism in epistemology. What distinguishes realism is its particular understanding of how causation works. The role of the realist evaluator is to explain how and why programmes or policies cause their various outcomes in different sets of circumstances.

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Key assumptions in realist philosophy and their implications for evaluation design.

1. Both the material and the social worlds are ‘real’: anything that can have real effects is itself real. Thus, for example: gender – as distinct from sex – is real, and we know that because it has real effects. That is to say: while sex is biological and gender is socially constructed, both have real effects. Constructions of gender vary across time,
Realist evaluations try to identify the mechanisms that cause programme outcomes, not just an association between ‘the programme’ and ‘the outcome’.

2. **Mind-independent reality.** Both the natural and the social worlds are independent of, and interdependent with, our understandings of them. For realists, natural and social systems (think the banking system, the industrial relations system…) exist and exert their own powers, despite the fact that different humans make different judgements of them. In this sense, they are independent. However, humans can affect natural or social systems, and they are affected by them: in this sense, they are inter-dependent. Therefore, both the powers and liabilities of the systems and the interpretations that people make may be relevant in an evaluation.

3. **All enquiry and all observations are shaped and filtered through the human brain.** There is, therefore, no such thing as ‘final’ truth or knowledge. While we can never reach absolute certainty, realism argues that it is possible to work towards a closer understanding of the nature of reality, because reality itself constrains the interpretations that can reasonably be made of it. We can make observations and conduct tests that help us to judge between competing interpretations. Evaluations can therefore work towards better understanding of whether, how and why programmes work, but can never provide 100% ‘proof’ of any conclusion.

4. **All social systems are open systems.** Their boundaries are porous and flexible: people, ideas, information and resources flow in and out. Different social systems interact and influence each other. Further, the systems will change over time, in complex and interactive ways – regardless of whether a programme or policy is introduced. Perhaps most importantly: any outcome that is observed will be a result of interactions within and across systems – not simply an outcome of the programme or policy.

Evaluations will only ever be able to show that a policy or programme contributed to an outcome.

5. **Realism offers a particular understanding of how causation works.** The basic idea is that things that we experience or can observe are caused by ‘deeper’, usually non-observable processes. (See ‘What is a mechanism?’ in this series). Realist evaluations try to identify the mechanisms that cause programme outcomes, not just an association between ‘the programme’ and ‘the outcome’.

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6. **Realism provides a specific way of thinking about ‘context’**. Whether mechanisms generate outcomes depends on the context. If I am standing on land (context) when I release a tennis ball, gravity (mechanism) will draw it to the ground (outcome). If I happen to be underwater (context), buoyancy (mechanism) will cause the ball to float (outcome).

Realist evaluations identify what it is about the context that determines whether, and which, mechanisms ‘fire’.

7. **Mechanisms, operating in contexts, generate outcomes.** Because different mechanisms operate in different contexts, programmes will generate different outcomes for different groups in different contexts.

Realist evaluations seek to identify and explain how and why different outcome patterns are generated.

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1 Some authors would go further. Bill Trochim has argued that critical realism is a form of post-positivism; and Joseph Maxwell has argued that realists are constructivists.

2 Much of the following material is summarised from Westhorp, G Realist Impact Evaluation
Further reading


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