

## **Realist Evaluation, Grants Program Funding Rounds and Organisational Change**

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### **Abstract**

To the best of our knowledge a Realist Evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 2004) has not previously been used to evaluate the effect of a grants funding program.

In 2012, the Health Promotion Branch (HPB) of the ACT Government Health Directorate commissioned a Realist Evaluation of the Health Promotion Sponsorship Funding Round of their Health Promotion Grants Program. The Round is designed to support organisations to:

- 'increase the awareness of a particular health issue through the delivery of a Health Directorate priority health message
- develop an environment supportive of healthy behaviours within the organisation
- promote active participation within activities and programs by people of all social and economic circumstances, cultures, and abilities.' (2010-11 Funding Guidelines).

The evaluation was designed to determine what aspects of the Round worked to achieve the health promotion outcomes above, for which types of organisations, and under what circumstances. It was also designed to provide guidance on improving the delivery of the Round by the HPB.

This presentation will look at the learning gained about Realist Evaluation in this context. It will briefly review Realist Evaluation theory and methodology. It will then discuss the value of Realist Evaluation for a grants program and conclude by outlining the processes of the evaluation.

### **Introduction**

The HPB of the ACT Government Health Directorate administers the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program (ACTHPGP) which aims to support projects and sponsorships that:

- promote and facilitate healthy lifestyles
- create policies and environments that enable people in the ACT community to enjoy healthier living.

To achieve these aims, the ACTHPGP offers four funding rounds each year, one of which is the Health Promotion Sponsorship Funding Round.

In February 2012, the HPB commissioned Meg Richens of Simply Strategic and Dr Gill Westthorp and Nathan Overbeeke of Community Matters to undertake a

realist evaluation of the 2010-11 Health Promotion Sponsorship Funding Round. Through this Round, \$360,000 had been disbursed to 25 sporting, recreational, cultural and arts organisations in the ACT.

Neither the HPB nor the evaluation team were aware of Realist Evaluation (RE) previously being used to evaluate a grants program funding round; a brief scan of literature did not locate any other instances of RE being used for this purpose.

This presentation outlines the key learnings of the evaluation, gives a brief overview of RE and describes the benefits and shortcomings of RE in this project. We conclude with a brief look at the processes of this specific evaluation.

## **Key learnings**

The most significant benefits of this evaluation were making the program theories explicit and identifying the different contexts in which the Round operates more or less effectively.

As most programs do, the Round had implicit, historical program theories which were understood differently by various HPB staff members and the applicants. While staff members clearly understood *what* they were doing, there was a less consistent understanding of *why* the Round operated the way it did or had the effects it did. Defining and refining the program theories for the Round and making them explicit has led to a more consistent understanding among staff. This may contribute to an improved understanding among applicants, a more consistent implementation of HPB expectations and potentially, therefore, more efficient achievement of the Round's goals. It also became obvious during the theory extracting stage that allocating time to defining and making program theory explicit on an ongoing basis is likely to be a useful process for any grants funding round, particularly where a theory based approach to evaluation is to be used.

The second learning related to benefits achieved by defining the essential elements of context which appeared to be influencing the achievement of the goals of the funding round. Three contexts in which the 2010-11 Health Promotion Sponsorship Funding Round operated differently were defined as follows:

- Organisations which were already largely operating as health promoting organisations. They had high levels of understanding of health issues and needs for their participants; good understanding of health promotion principles; and established policies and practices which support healthy behaviours. These organisations used community development approaches as a matter of course and funded activities extended their existing practices. Some of these organisations also reported changes in participant health behaviours over time.
- Relatively large, relatively mature, usually sporting organisations, often with relatively low understanding of or investment in health promotion. These organisations used sponsorship funding most similarly to commercial sponsorship. The organisations tended to focus on branding, rather than on integration of multiple strategies.
- Smaller, less mature community organisations built around a particular activity or interest. These organisations tended to pick a health message that fitted easily with their activity. For this group, funding does enable the organisation to develop

some policies or change some specific practices, but it is also likely that these organisations are 'preaching to the converted'. These organisations are unlikely to have the capacity or motivation to become 'comprehensive' health promoting organisations.

Contextual elements that impacted organisations' capacity to change towards becoming health promoting included organisation size, management and staffing. Change was difficult for some large organisations where policy directions were prescribed by national bodies or where the sponsorship activity was not of sufficient size to influence the organisation as a whole. On the other hand, change was equally difficult for some small organisations because of insufficient resources. Organisations with management supportive of organisational change were more likely to achieve in this area. Drafting and implementation of health promotion policies was more feasible in organisations with paid staff; in other organisations, the impost of this requirement on volunteers appeared to be too great.

The evaluation also highlighted the implications of proposed revisions to the program theory for program operations. These implications focused on working proactively with organisations in the contexts identified above, including increasing contact, information provision and training and based, in each case, on the distinct needs of the different types of organisations that receive funding.

This suggestion to work proactively and in different ways with the different types of organisations is a response to the identification of essential elements of context, and should not be confused with mechanisms.

### **Overview of Realist Evaluation**

Many evaluation approaches assume that programs themselves are the active ingredient or trigger that causes change. Conversely, in a Realist Evaluation framework (Pawson and Tilley, 2004; Westhorp, 2011), people choose to respond in different ways to resources and opportunities provided by programs, and patterns of outcomes are generated. The way people respond (their reasoning) coupled with the resources provided are the trigger that causes change. In realist terms, the trigger is called the mechanism; the occurred change is the outcome. The final ingredient in this realist mix is context. Even when the mechanism is present, the intended outcome will not be achieved in some contexts. Context determines whether mechanisms actuate. Context refers to attributes of the environment, program and participants that are essential to igniting the mechanism or that will pose a barrier to the intended mechanism sparking. Elements of context may include population groups, organisational setting, culture, values, beliefs, geographic and community setting, legislation, religion, politics, era, and characteristics of staff.

Realist evaluation investigates *how* the outcome happened and asks *for whom* things work and in *what* circumstances and *what* respects. The 'how' is the mechanism; the 'for whom' and the 'what circumstances' are the context. The 'in what respects' question relates to the nature of the outcomes. The premise is that interactions between the context and the mechanism determine the outcome. This realist epistemology is expressed as a Context + Mechanism = Outcome configuration (CMOC).

The foundational step in realist evaluation methodology is establishing the program theory. Program theory formally describes the program's concept and rationale. Making program theory explicit is essential for this evaluation approach because 'when one evaluates realistically one always returns to the core theories about how a programme is supposed to work and then interrogates [them] (Pawson and Tilley, 2004:2)'. This will allow the evaluator to assess if the 'basic plan [is] sound, plausible durable, practical and, above all, valid (ibid)'.

The evaluator begins by eliciting information about how the program works from program staff and relevant documents. Tentative CMOCs are then developed and information from different stakeholders collected. Common to all evaluation approaches, different stakeholders will have different information because of their different roles in the program. Working hypotheses are developed using the gathered information. Realist program theory expects that different outcome patterns will be generated for different program contexts; data analysis tests those theories (Westhorp, 2011).

### **Why a Realist Evaluation approach?**

A realist approach was appropriate for this evaluation for two reasons. Firstly, both previous process evaluation data and anecdotal feedback from sponsored organisations had delivered incongruent findings. Secondly, the HPB had a genuine interest in learning about the Round; RE is not suitable when there is no interest in learning per se. The HPB staff had stated that they wanted to understand how and why some organisations 'did it very well' and why others didn't seem to understand the intent of the Round, even where the same objectives and similar strategies were used.

### **Benefits and Limitations of using RE to evaluate a grants program funding round**

Perhaps the greatest benefit of using RE in this context was that it allowed for a much deeper analysis of why and how the program achieved its goals. This analysis contributed to a better understanding of the contexts in which the funding round operates. Understanding these contexts will enable the HPB to develop targeted approaches within the Round. For example, one context was described in the evaluation as having:

"...a pre-existing focus on working with a vulnerable population; a pre-existing commitment to using community development approaches; some staffing, which provides organisational capacity and infrastructure to implement integrated approaches; relative stability in personnel, and a degree of organisational maturity (Simply Strategic 2012: 29)."

All of these elements could be considered for further development in the other two contexts, thus creating additional situations in which the goals of the Round are more likely to be achieved.

Another benefit, noted above as one of the key learnings from this evaluation, was the identification and refinement of program theory. While this process is not specific

to RE it can be attributed to the use of a theory-based form of evaluation and was definitely a benefit gained from using such an approach in this context.

As evaluation practitioners, our sense is that there is still limited understanding of RE in general and an ongoing debate about the relative value of theory-based versus non-theory based forms of evaluation. Using RE in new areas, therefore, brings with it a fundamental need for education about RE methods at the same time as conducting the evaluation. In this case, the ground had been prepared to some extent. HPB staff had an existing interest in RE and had undertaken some introductory RE training, although they had not had an opportunity to implement it in practice. Indeed, one of the HPB's intentions of using this evaluation approach was to become more RE-adept and to assess whether RE provides relevant and useful information for evaluation within the ACTHPGP.

One further noteworthy learning related to the length of the written report. Like most decision makers, time-poor government senior staff need concise reports that quickly and clearly present the implications of the research. It can be challenging to balance this requirement with adequate expression of the complexity of analysis and findings inherent in a RE approach.

### **Scope and Limitations of the evaluation**

The purpose of this evaluation was to investigate:

- the appropriateness of the Round for different types of organisations
- how the Round was implemented by the HPB
- whether or how context affects implementation

and to:

- recommend ways the HPB might improve aspects of the operations of the Round
- indicate how and why RE might be an appropriate method to use for the ACTHPGP.

It was not designed to assess:

- whether the Round should continue to operate
- behavioural impacts of the sponsorship round on individuals
- message awareness or retention by participants in sponsored organisations' activities.

### **Methods**

A rough program theory was developed and used as the basis for the development of data collection questions. Data was collected through interviews, a focus group and a desk top review of relevant documentation.

Research ethics approval for retrospective data analysis to inform the evaluation was granted under the ACT Health Human Research Ethics Committee Low Risk Sub-Committee process.

### **Factors affecting the quality of the evaluation**

Factors that affected data quality included:

- staff turnover in funded organisations which meant that some interviewees were less well informed about the sponsorship and their organisation than would be optimal
- having only one interview per organisation which limited the breadth of information available; additional forms of data collection would be required to investigate organisational history and the effect of sponsorship funding from a whole-of-organisation perspective.

More significantly, the evaluation was conducted on a post-hoc basis, approximately six months after the completion of the 2010-11 sponsorship period. Not surprisingly, processes for the next round of sponsorship had already been instigated. Staff had made changes to the operations of the Round and those changes were not evaluated as part of this project. This situation highlighted the fact that, in any retrospective evaluation, it would be judicious for the program implementers and the evaluators to jointly ensure that the current state of affairs is known. This is particularly relevant where annual review and quality improvement is undertaken as is the case with the ACTHPGP. Happily, the evaluation has provided evidence to support some of these changes. The inherent risk in a post hoc evaluation undertaken in the context of a cyclical grants program, however, is that the evaluation may have recommended moving in a different direction to changes that had already been made. An alternative would have been to plan and conduct the evaluation concurrently with the Round so that evidence and recommendations could have been available earlier and been more pertinent to the current circumstances.

Finally, the evaluation relied on self-reported data from groups that had a vested interest in a positive outcome from the evaluation. Triangulation of this data by independent observations of sponsored activities and data collected directly from sponsorship participants was out of scope for this evaluation. A degree of data validation was achieved, however, by comparing evaluation reports (submitted before the evaluation was instigated) with interview input.

## Conclusion

The evaluation of the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program 2010-11 Health Promotion Sponsorship Funding Round produced useful outcomes for the HPB in terms of refining the operations of the Round, better understanding of how to achieve its goals in different contexts and identifying the benefits and difficulties of using a realist approach to evaluation of the HPB grants funding rounds. Future evaluations will be able to benefit from the learnings taken from this experience.

## References

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