A Realist Synthesis of 2017 Program Evaluations

Jo Hall

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What the client wanted

'Learnings' from 37 evaluations completed in 2017 in the areas of:

- Policy influence
- Promoting gender equality

Realist Synthesis

- What works for whom in what circumstances in what respects and *how*?

- Context-mechanism-outcome configurations

- Transfactuality: portability of mechanisms

Realist Synthesis

But, in practice…

- Failure to focus on explanation
- Separate lists of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes
- Failure to subject theories to empirical testing

Also
- Confusion about mechanisms

Coding *explanatory text*

Text in the evaluation report (or interview transcript) that *explains the effect – either positive or negative – that something (an aspect of the context or implementation) is having on a particular intermediary or final outcome*

Using substantive theory

- Knowledge brokering
- Coalition building
- Community organising

Middle Range Theory

An ideal theory of the middle range is clear, precise, and simple. It does not bore the reader by attempting to describe the causal process in all its detail; instead it seeks to highlight the heart of the story by isolating a few explanatory factors that explain important but delimited aspects of the outcomes to be explained.

(Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010: 61)

Ray Pawson

Policy Influence

Knowledge brokering as a mid-range theory

Mechanisms include:
- Knowledge management
- Linkage and exchange
- Capacity building

Promoting Gender Equality

Community organising and coalition building as two middle-range theories

Building critical mass was the key insight

Results: Policy Influence

1. The most successful policy influence came from policy problems that were locally identified and owned
2. Understanding of the current political and institutional context and program flexibility are success factors
3. Policy influence needs to have something to offer that is relevant, appropriate and affordable for the context
4. Having a deliberate strategy for policy influence is more effective than serendipity
5. Good relationships are critical to support policy influence

Results: Promoting Gender Equality

1. Articulating a clear and realistic strategy to transforming gender norms based on sound gender analysis is critical
2. Add women and stir is not enough
3. Local ownership and leadership are crucial to success
4. Community mobilisation and supporting networks and coalitions are effective strategies
5. An influential critical mass is needed to sway norms and behaviours that support gender equality

Limitations

Not enough evidence to really identify contextual linkages

Limitations in the evidence base

Strengths

Explanatory text instead of CMO configurations

Using substantive theory

Middle range theory and explanation

Clarity on mechanisms