Demi-Regs and the Character of Realist Evaluation

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Session Objectives:

- To understand the origins and definition of the demi-regularity concept;

- To understand how the concept of demi-regularity relates to realist evaluation;

- To illustrate the use of demi-regularity in realist analysis.
Realist Evaluation is...

...a theory-driven approach to evaluation and synthesis;

...used to assess complex evidence the implementation of policy, programmes, services and interventions;

...concerned with understanding context in relation to underlying mechanisms of action.
# Realist Evaluation:

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<th>Addresses the questions: “what works, for whom, under what circumstances and how?” (as opposed to ‘does it work’?)</th>
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<td><strong>Theorizes</strong> programmes, policies, interventions and services</td>
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<td>Asserts that it is not interventions that create change, rather, <strong>people</strong> create change (Pawson and Tilley 1997)</td>
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<td>Defines “mechanism” as how people <strong>respond</strong> to <strong>resources</strong>;</td>
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<td>Distinguishes <strong>programme strategy</strong> from mechanisms. (They are related, but not the same thing)</td>
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The Context-Mechanism-Outcome Configuration

**Context**
Elements in the backdrop environment of a program that have an impact on outcomes (e.g., demographics, legislation, cultural norms)

**Mechanism**
Resources offered through a program and the way people respond to those resources (e.g., information, advice, trust, engagement, motivation)

**Outcomes**
Intended or unintended effects based on context–mechanism interactions (e.g., changed outlook, service uptake, decision making, resiliency, health outcomes, self-efficacy, social connections)


Iceberg Metaphor Explaining “Ontological Depth”

Demi-Regs: Semi-predictable patterns


“Demi-regularity means semi-predictable patterns ... The term was coined by Lawson (1997), who argued that human choice or agency manifests in a semi-predictable manner - “semi” because variations in patterns of behavior can be attributed partly to contextual differences from one setting to another.”
Understanding “Demi-Regularity”

Search for enduring universals

Positivism

Realism

Constructivism

Search for idiosyncratic particulars

Search for demi-regs

Lawson’s interest was with long-term social and economic change. He was concerned to distance realism from the idea that there are ‘laws’ of social evolution and from the alternative that there is nothing but patternless fluctuation.

This perspective sits comfortably with the realist notion of program effectiveness. What should not be anticipated is the discovery of intervention panaceas, nor will outcomes be completely haphazard. There will be some patterning.

We should be able to discern broad lessons on for whom, in what circumstances and in what respects an intervention is more likely to succeed and these ‘demi-regs’ are the basis for decision support in the policy making process.”
A demi-regularity, or *demi-reg* for short, is precisely a partial event regularity which *prima facie* indicates the occasional, but less than universal, actualization of a mechanism or tendency, over a definite region of time-space (p. 204).

The patterning observed will not be strict if countervailing factors sometimes dominate or frequently co-determine the outcomes in a variable manner. But where demi-regs are observed there is evidence of relatively enduring and identifiable tendencies at play (p. 204).
Outlier: “a data point that differs significantly from other observations”

From a realist perspective, the concept of an outlier looses relevance when the underpinning mechanism for a so-called ‘outlier’ is uncovered.

Although patterns exist, everything in the social world is underpinned by mechanisms that are triggered in contexts, whether or not a given observation is a common occurrence or a rarefied incident.

Therefore, through an ontologically deep understanding of events, demi-regs replace the concept of outliers as a way to explain patterns and variation.
Demi-Regs: three important facets

**Patterns + Fluctuations:**
Engaging with demi-regs is to assume that there will be patterns along with fluctuations to those patterns in social reality. Fluctuations are not simply ‘outliers’.

**Relative, Partial Endurance:**
Demi-regs assume that in the manifested world, events have relative, partial endurance. Apart from the laws of meta-physics, everything that manifests is shaped by the conditions of manifestation. Events do endure, but even that endurance is temporary and partial.

**Ontologically Deep Outcome Patterns:**
Whereas regularities pertain to observable, measurable events alone, demi-regs pertain to such events but incorporate the underpinning mechanisms and contexts of their activation.
Using Demi-Regs in Pawson and Tilley’s Realist Evaluation:

- multiple CMO configurations in a pattern

  Demi-Regularity

“Typically, [xyz happens], but not always”
Demi-Reg Example:

In the context of mental health service provision:

Typically, when clinicians engage in a partnership approach with the families of people who experience poor mental health outcomes (e.g., clinical depression, anxiety, PTSD), such shared decision-making leads to improved recovery due to the enhanced social support structure.

Context: Mental health issues are complex, and exacerbated by misunderstanding, taboo, and isolation
Mechanism: By involving families in shared decision-making (resource), people in the social support structure can realize how to better support their family member in crisis (response)
Outcome: Improvements in co-ordination of care, improvements in mental health indicators; strengthened family relationships, preventing relapse.
In Conclusion

Demiregs are semi-predictable outcome patterns;

Demi-regs have relative, partial endurance;

Finally, using demi-regs in a realist evaluation is not essential, however understanding the concept may help to strengthen the analytical process using CMO configurations.

Time for questions...