

# What is Theory Based Evaluation?

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## *What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

In the past evaluation avoided theory!

- Achievements of success/failure was judged against standards and criteria – achieving objectives the main goal of evaluation
- This changed with a growing interest in using evaluation to guide improvement and change – when evaluation and policy collided
- We needed theory and to say something about what *causes* an observed or desired effect

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## *What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- TBE is method neutral: you can potentially use a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods within TBE – statistical modelling; ethnography; interviews; observation studies
- What characterises TBE is the way causal claims are justified – the overall logic and the overall design of the evaluation

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- TBE claims to open up the 'black-box' – get under the surface of cause and effect – most scientists would agree that you cannot observe causality – you have to make assumptions, have a theory in order to make a causal claim
- Aggregate socio-economic research gathers second order data – what people say when asked or what they do –and then we try to link with a policy or programme
- We don't necessarily know the connection between what people say and what they do; just as we can't always be sure that observed behaviours are influenced by policy. And we do know that not everyone is influenced in the same way

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- Most 'theory-informed' evaluators are philosophically realists – they believe that people have 'agency' and are not passive – they have intentions, they act and they react
- One of the reasons programmes and policies 'fail' is that people – officials, managers, entrepreneurs, families – don't act as policy-makers expect
- The notion of 'human' agency is extensive – it includes institutions, how markets work, how technology spreads – all are socially constructed

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- In order to improve the likelihood of programme success we need to understand the goals and motives of socio-economic 'actors' – but these goals and motives are not the same in every context
- Contexts matter: advocates of TBE expect behaviour to be contingent, to depend on circumstances
- Hence the 'realist' slogan: "what works for whom in what circumstances"
- We sometimes call this 'middle level theory' – findings do not apply everywhere -only in some specified circumstances can we generalise

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

Two ways that TBE is distinctive

- First TBE differs from 'positivist' evaluations – it is not expecting to draw conclusions at a very general level - no universal laws
- Second TBE does not rely on 'variables' (outcome variables, mediating variables, input variables) to establish causal relations it looks to human agency – the choices that people make

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- There are different 'brands' of theory-based, theory-driven and theory-informed evaluations: Theories of Change; Realist Evaluation; Contribution analysis are the better known 'brands'
- But theory has a role for many families of evaluation – by exponents of experiments e.g. RCTs; by those who compare cases-studies – as in QCA; and by political scientists applying Process Tracing
- The difference is how theory helps to attribute causality and explain 'how' and 'why'

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

Where does 'theory' come from?

- From the assumptions of policy makers – e.g. 'programme theory' or 'intervention logic' or 'logic models'
- From the assumptions of multiple stakeholders – the job of the evaluator is to build a consensus
- From knowledge produced through academic research

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- Realist Evaluation (RE) assumes that public programmes ‘spark-off’ mechanisms; that these mechanisms driven by human actions vary because of different priorities and are further shaped by different contexts

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

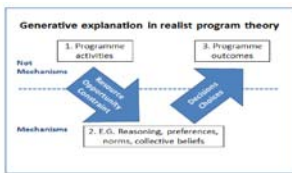


Figure 1: A pictorial representation of mechanisms

- (Source Realist Training Material: Rameses)

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

- Realist Evaluation (RE) tries to ‘build theory’ (moderately generalisable knowledge) by observing regularities in programme-related behaviours
- Theories of Change (TOC) approaches and Process Tracing (PT) try to test theories that have *already* been identified
- Theory building is *inductive*, looking for new patterns; whilst theory testing is *deductive* looking for evidence to confirm or reject pre-existing assumptions

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

There are also differences of focus among TBE approaches: they variously emphasise -

- The *process of change* the steps in a change process – this would be true of Theories of Change; and Process Tracing
- The *moment of change*, the conjunction of factors that explain a particular outcome in a particular context – this would be true of Realist Evaluation
- The *system of change*, unpicking the contribution of multiple ‘causes’ in a complex system – his would be true of Contribution Analysis

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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

A ‘*process of change*’ is often conceived as a causal chain




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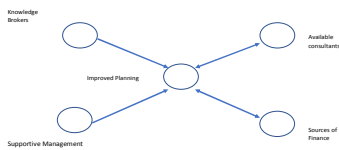
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*What is Theory Based Evaluation?*

A ‘*moment of change*’ is the conjunction of causal influences at a particular moment




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What is Theory Based Evaluation?

A 'system of change,' unpicking of multiple 'causes' in a complex system  
– what is necessary and/or sufficient causally - which would be true of Contribution Analysis

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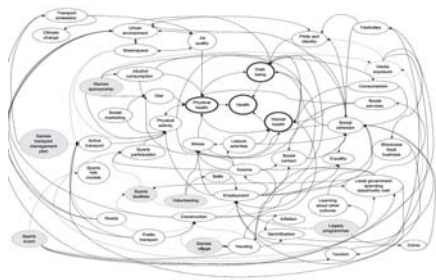
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How the Games are theorized to impact on health.

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What is Theory Based Evaluation?

Conclusions

This session outlined Theory-Based Evaluation as a distinctive design logic useful in evaluations that want to establish a causal link between a programme and its results. The portfolio of approaches - Realist Evaluation, Theories of Change, Contribution Analysis, Process Tracing – differ in their specifics. This is partly 'branding' and partly reflects that there are different ways to make causal inferences.

However the logic of TBE is not confined to pure types. As already noted we need mixed designs in most evaluations of complex programmes.

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