

Can Realist evaluation be applied to evaluation of a £23bn government scheme?

Practitioner and Commissioner reflections

Michael Gentry (BEIS), Denny Gray (CAG Consultants)

Introduction

Aims of our presentation

- Share real world experience of applying realist evaluation
- Highlight difference perspectives of commissioner and practitioner
- Get your thoughts on how to communicate realist findings



- a) Little or no knowledge of realist evaluation
- b) Good knowledge of realist evaluation, but not applied
- c) Applied realist evaluation in practice

Policy Context

A simple (£20bn) financial incentive scheme



Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI)

Delivered in complexity

- 2 sub-schemes
- 7 technologies, split across 16 tariffs
- Numerous heating needs and audience types
- Interaction between consumers, supply chains, feedstocks
- 6 evaluation questions

Evidence needs

Evaluate the RHI scheme

Renewable
energy

Carbon

Market
growth



Collect evidence to support renewable heat deployment

“Low-carbon heating systems will replace the natural gas boilers used in most homes today.”

“Widespread deployment of hydrogen, electrification or bioenergy for stationary industrial heat”

[Committee on Climate Change 2019](#)

Why realist evaluation was a good fit

Realist evaluation asks...

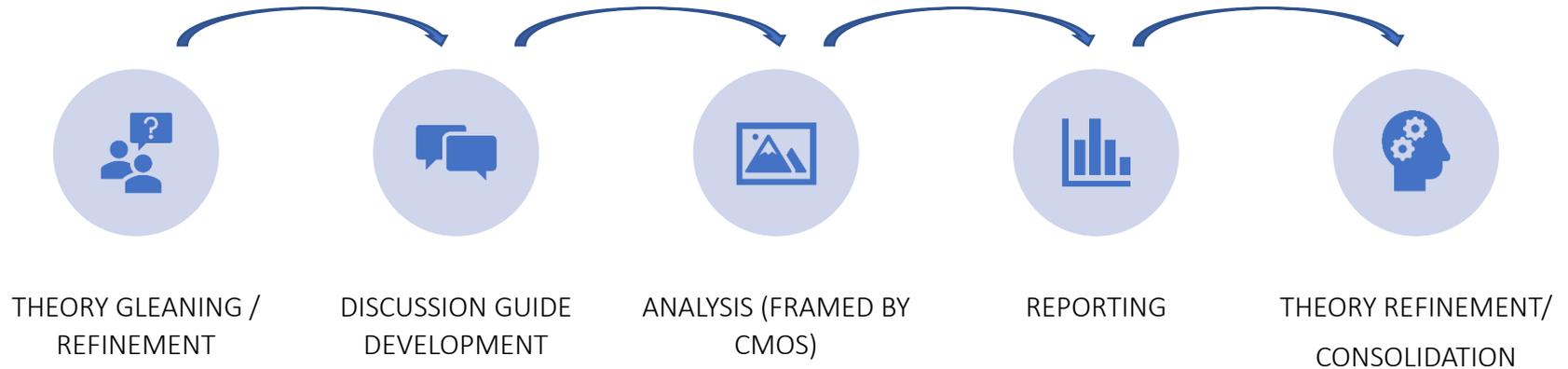
“What works, for whom, in what circumstances...and why”

Pawson and Manzano-Santaella, 2012

Realist causation
assumes...

Context + Mechanism = Outcome

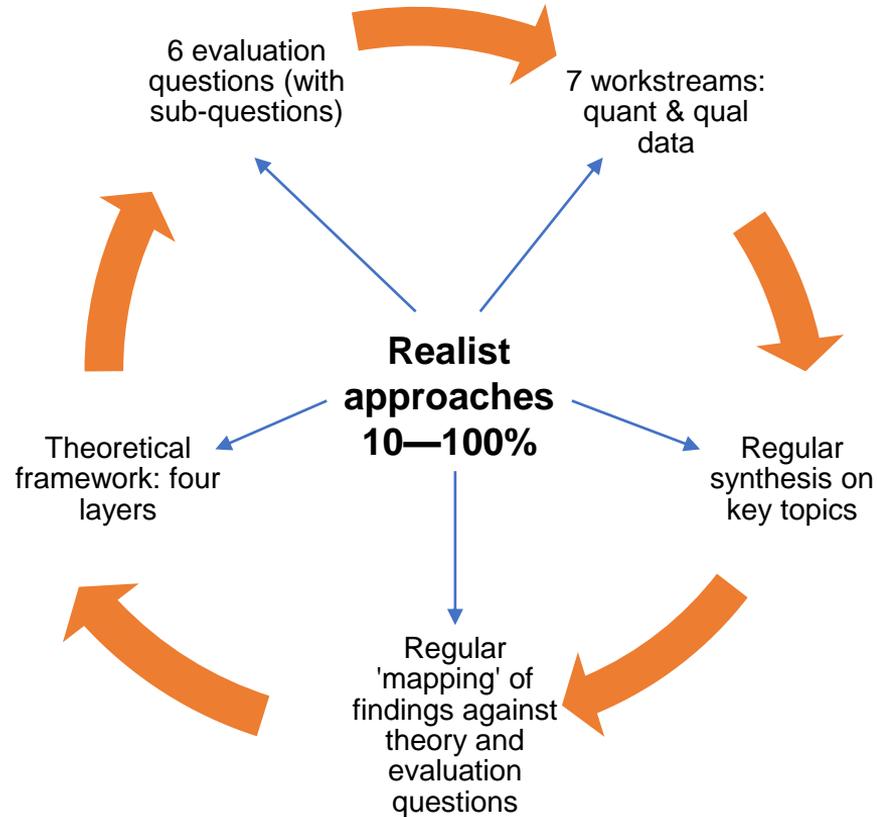
Using realist evaluation for primary research: process



Using realist evaluation for primary research: plus points & challenges

- ✓ Provides robust theoretical underpinning
- ✓ Rigorous approach to understanding reasoning and contexts
- ✓ Valuable framework for conducting analysis
- ? Requires theory development ahead of fieldwork
- ? Need to rethink interviewing design & approach
- ? More time-consuming & resource-intensive
- ? Pitching 'CMOs' at the right level
- ? Communicating realist findings

Using realist evaluation as framework for whole evaluation: process



Using realist evaluation as framework for whole evaluation: plus points & challenges

- ✓ Iterative theory-testing & building
- ✓ Deep understanding of key parts of the RHI
- ✓ Agile, responsive framework
- ✓ Triangulation of findings through multi-workstream approach
- ? Balancing breadth & depth
- ? Making the most of the data
- ? Ensuring connections aren't missed
- ? Communicating realist findings

Communicating realist findings



How have you (or would you) communicated realist findings to a non-technical audience?