



A brief introduction to realist research approaches

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Structure of this session

- Objectives
- What are realist research approaches
- When might they be used
- Challenges from using realist research
- Wrapping up comments

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Objectives

By the end of this presentation hopefully you will have an understanding of:

- what realist research approaches are
- complexity and realism
- when these approaches might be useful
- challenges from using realist research approaches

Realist research approaches

- Realist evaluation = primary research
- Realist review / synthesis = secondary research
- Both approaches:
 - have more of an explanatory rather than judgmental focus.
 - based on a realist philosophy of science (ontology)
 - looks for *mechanisms* and *middle-range theories*.
 - iteratively tests and builds these theories.
 - looks to answer the ‘How?’, ‘**Why?**’, ‘For whom?’, ‘To what extent?’ and ‘In what circumstances?’
 - helpful in making sense of interventions and programmes that are complex and have outcomes that are context dependent



1944 - 2014

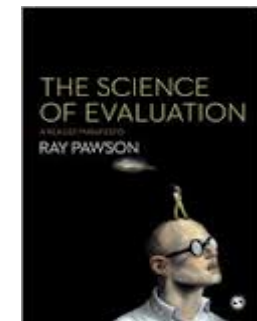
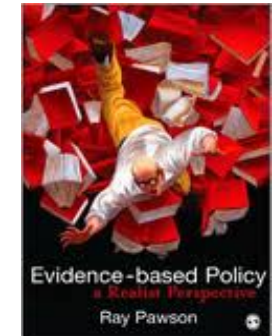
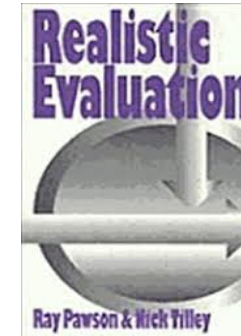


A brief overview of realism



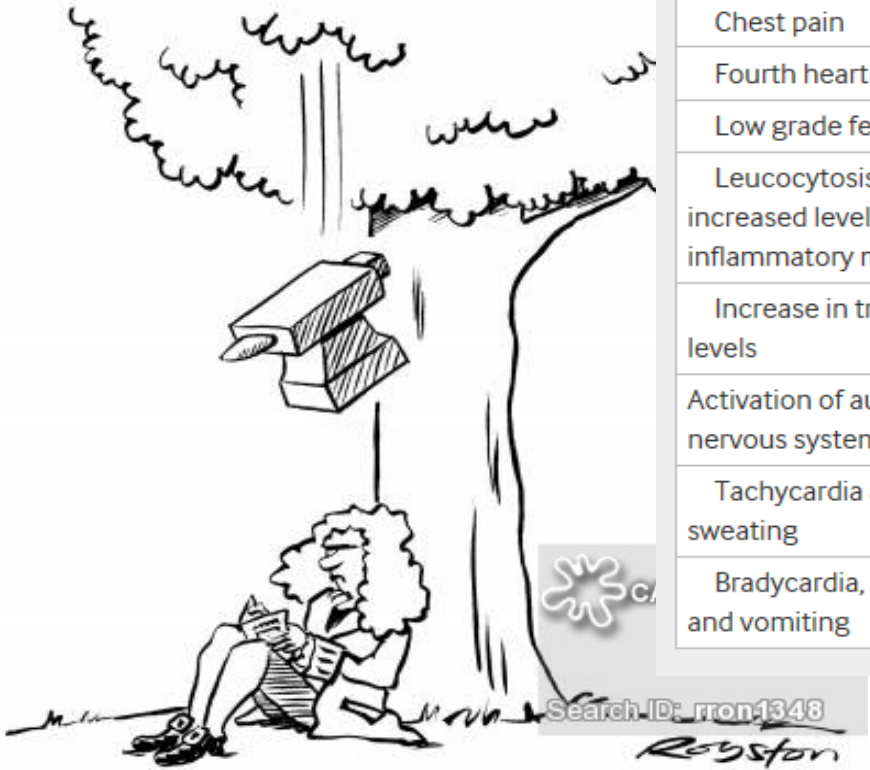
Context + Mechanism = Outcome

- A logic of analysis
- A model of causation (generative)
- A basis for transferable lessons



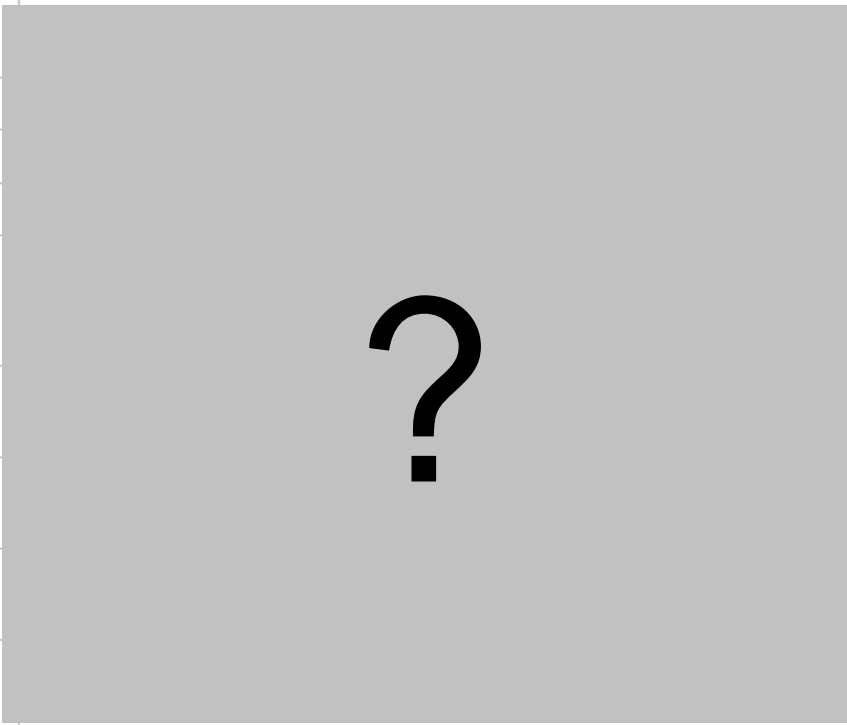
The logic of analysis (C+M=O) is a way of interrogating theory with data **and** a way of using theory to understand patterns in data.

Causation



Newton discovers comedy



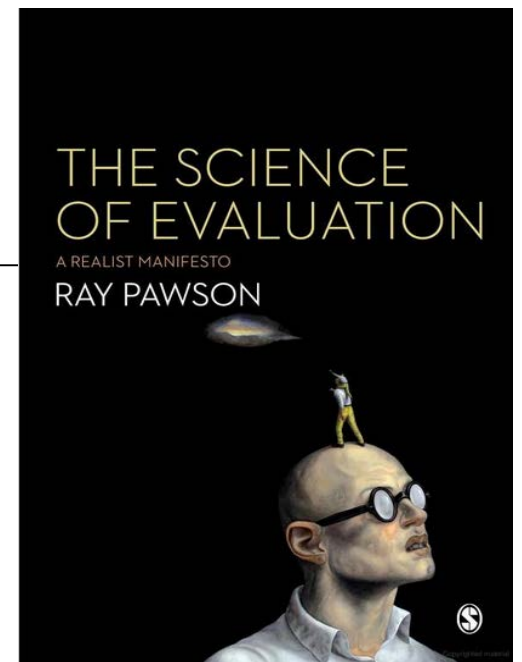
Symptoms and signs	Mechanisms
Severe myocardial ischaemia:	
Chest pain	
Fourth heart sound	
Low grade fever	
Leucocytosis and increased levels of inflammatory markers	
Increase in troponin levels	
Activation of autonomic nervous system:	
Tachycardia and sweating	
Bradycardia, nausea, and vomiting	



Complexity – a realist perspective

- **Volitions**
 - People make choices
- **Implementation**
 - Long implementation chain
- **Context**
 - Pre-existing context – micro to macro
- **Time**
 - Programmes / interventions come from somewhere
- **Outcomes**
 - Desired, undesired and intermediate / proximal
- **Rivalry**
 - Interaction (if any) with existing programmes / interventions
- **Emergence**
 - Things change!!!

The Science of evaluation: A realist perspective. Pawson R, 2013, Sage, London

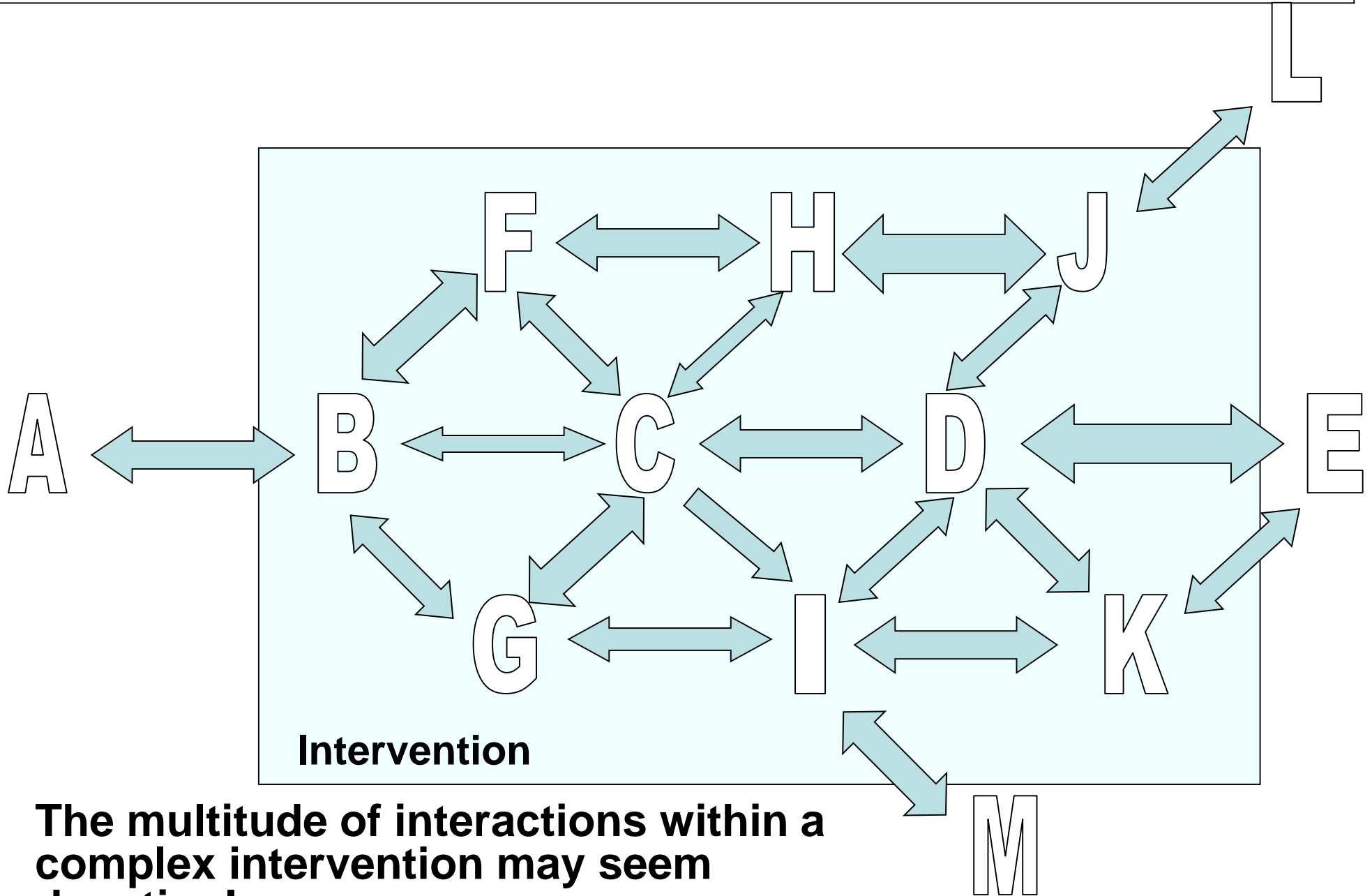


What happens in a complex intervention?

- When participants take part in a complex intervention, they make choices about what actions to undertake and these choices about actions give us our outcomes.
- Participants do not have an infinite range of choices available to them as to what actions they might take.
- The range of choices is limited and determined by the context in which the person is in.
- Various 'mechanisms' lie behind these choices.



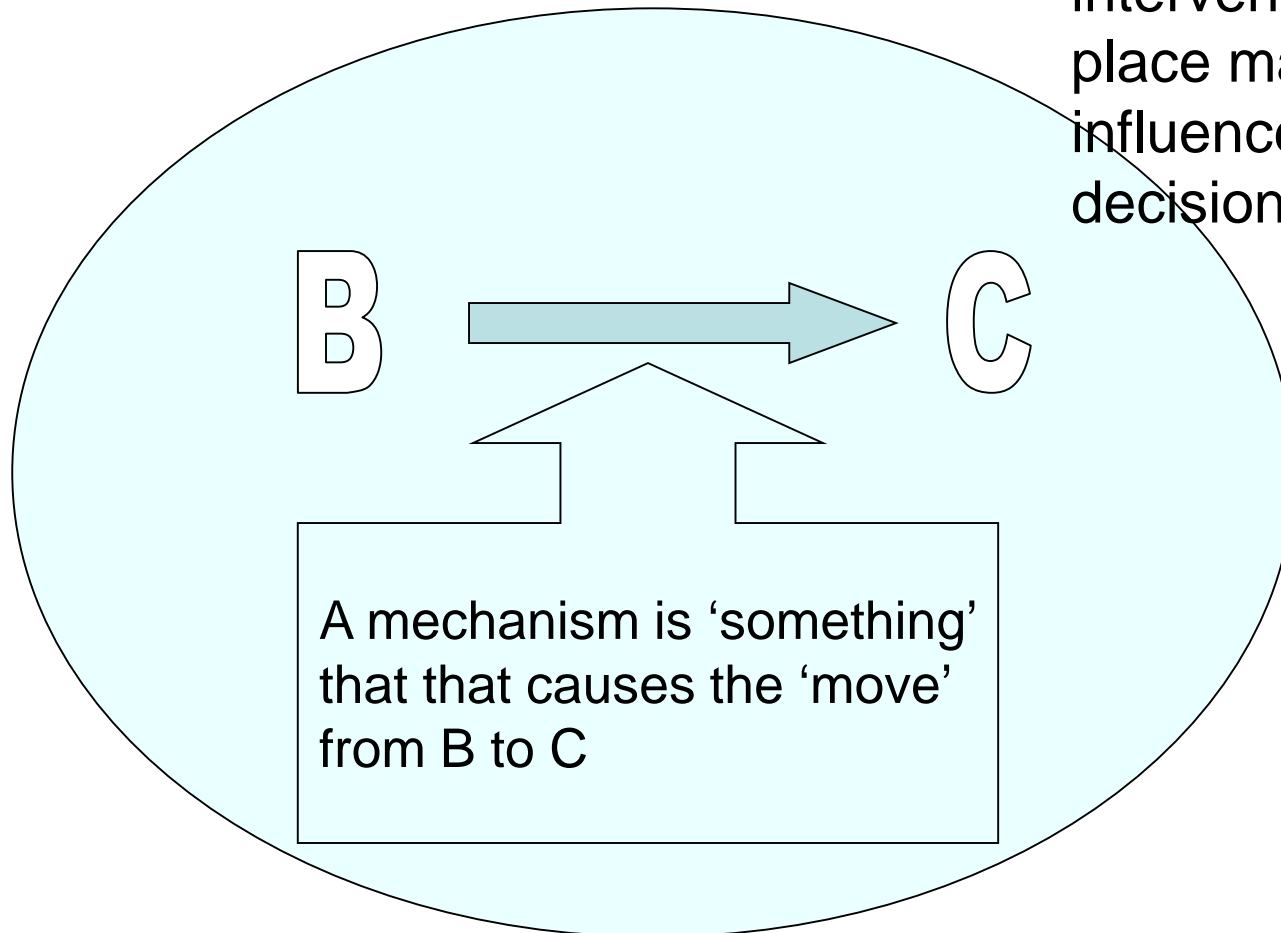
A simplified diagram of a 'complex' intervention



The multitude of interactions within a complex intervention may seem daunting!

One section of the causal chain of a 'complex' intervention

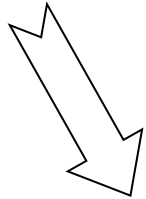
BUT... the context in which this intervention is taking place may limit and/or influence this decision



CMO and middle-range theory

- Hence...

Intervention



Context influences which mechanisms 'fire'.

Context + Mechanism = Outcome

- Mechanisms are one of the building blocks of middle-range theories.
- Middle-range theories explain how and why the context limits and influences mechanisms.

Challenges in undertaking realist research

- Understand realism – especially generative causation
- Understanding what realist evaluation is (and is not) – a “way of thinking”
- No one understands me 😊
- Applying $C+M=O$ – “Considerable work and analytic effort is needed ...”
- Grappling with complexity – the need to set boundaries and consider different ‘levels’ in the system (e.g. “individual, interpersonal and organisational”)
- Getting the ‘right’ kind of data needed
- Managing the data to enable theory development and ‘testing’

Quality and reporting standards and training resources

- **RAMESES I and II Projects**

Realist evaluations and realist reviews have:

- Reporting standards
- Quality standards
- Training materials

- **Look online at:**

- www.ramesesproject.org
- www.jiscmail.ac.uk/RAMESES



Closing summary

- Many interventions or programmes are ‘complex interventions’
- Complexity comes about because of V I C T O R E
- One way to make sense of complex interventions is to account for how outcomes occur – i.e. a model of causation.
In realism the explanation for why knowledge is transferable is based on mechanisms
- Many current research methods often lack a coherent account of how outcomes occur in relation to context and what the warrant is for transferable knowledge
- Realist research approaches help by focussing on the influences of context on mechanisms and dare to look inside the ‘black-box’ of the intervention itself!

Additional resources

Suggested readings:

- Pawson R., Tilley N. **Realistic Evaluation**. London: Sage, 1999
- Pawson R. **Evidence-based Policy. A Realist Perspective**. London: Sage, 2006.
- Pawson R. **The Science of evaluation: A realist manifesto**. London: Sage, 2013
- Emmel N. et al. **Doing Realist Research**. London, Sage, 2018

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