

# Realist Interviewing and Realist Qualitative Analysis

IIQM Webinar  
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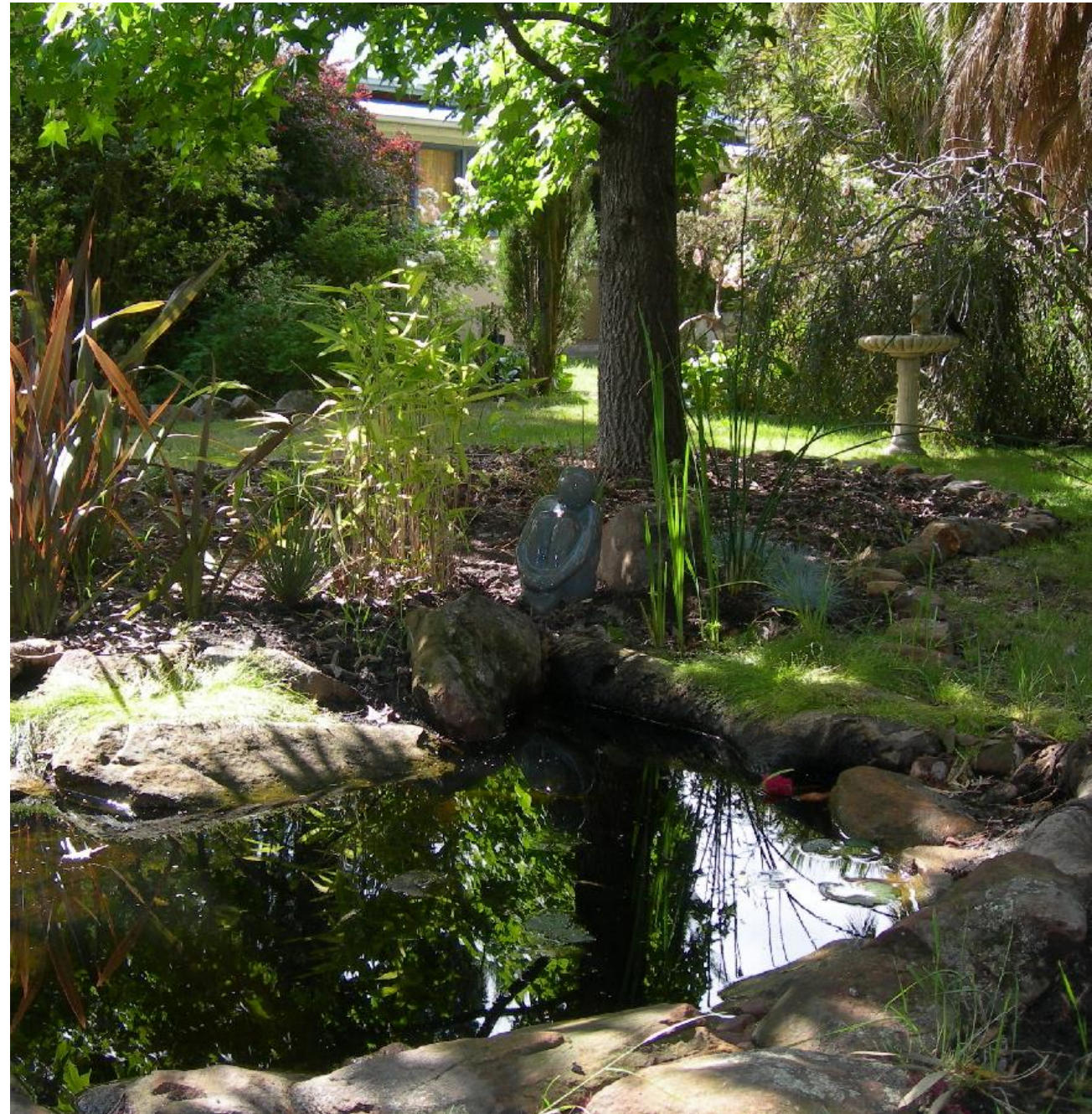
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# Abstract

Realist research and evaluation is grounded in a particular philosophy of science. That has particular implications for how we understand the role of qualitative data; how interviews are conducted; and how qualitative data is analyzed.

This webinar will explain why realists are not just interested in respondents' experiences or sense-making; how realist interview samples and interviews themselves are structured; and why thematic analysis is not enough to provide a realist analysis.

# Three key ideas in realism



## Reality according to realists

There is a real world, independent of our interpretations of it.

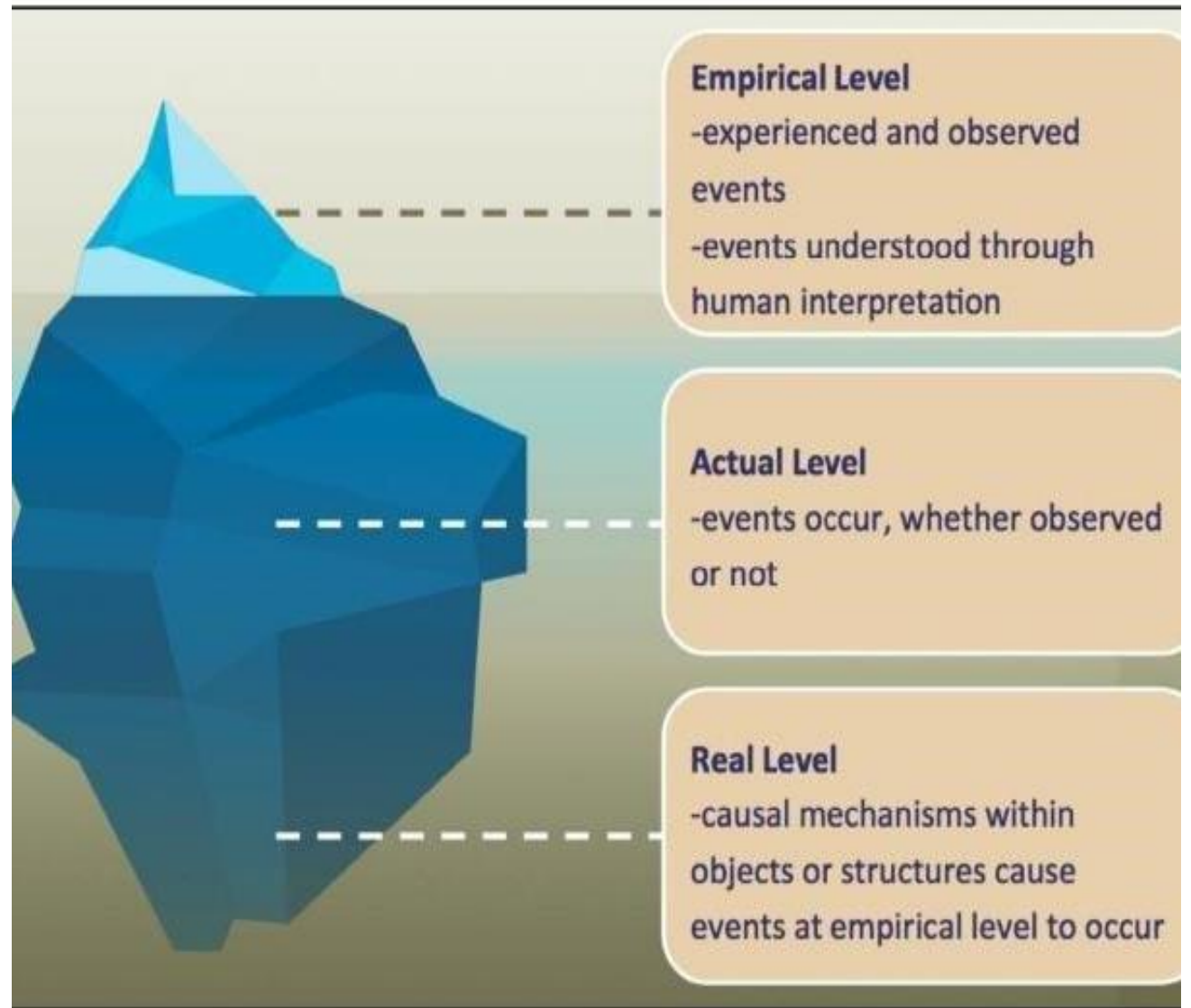
Both the material and the social worlds are real.

Both the material and the social worlds comprise complex, open, nested systems.

There are causal processes at all levels of all systems, from the cellular to the interstellar.

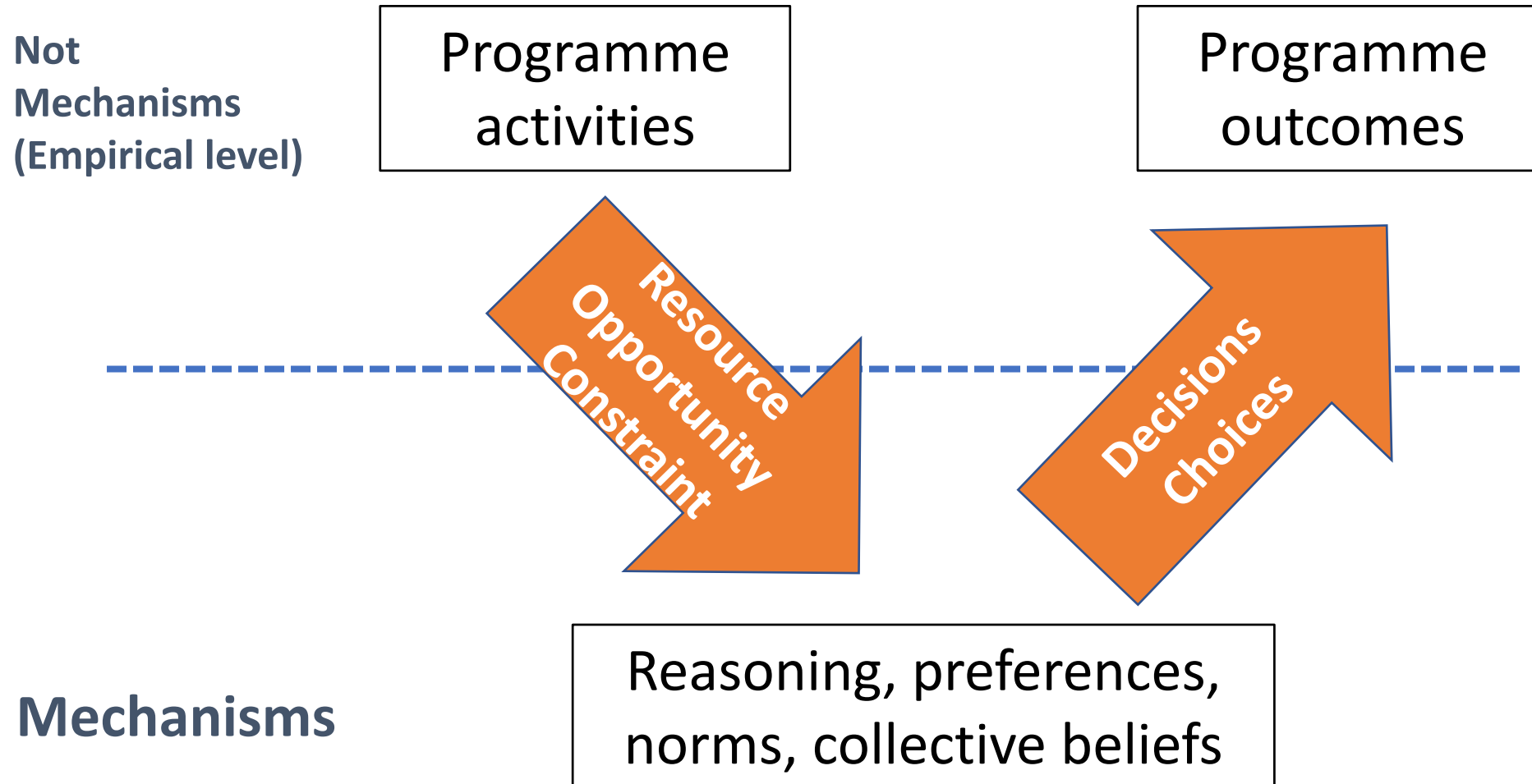
Causal forces/processes are real, but invisible, 'underlying'.

There are many causes of any event and any event may have many consequences.

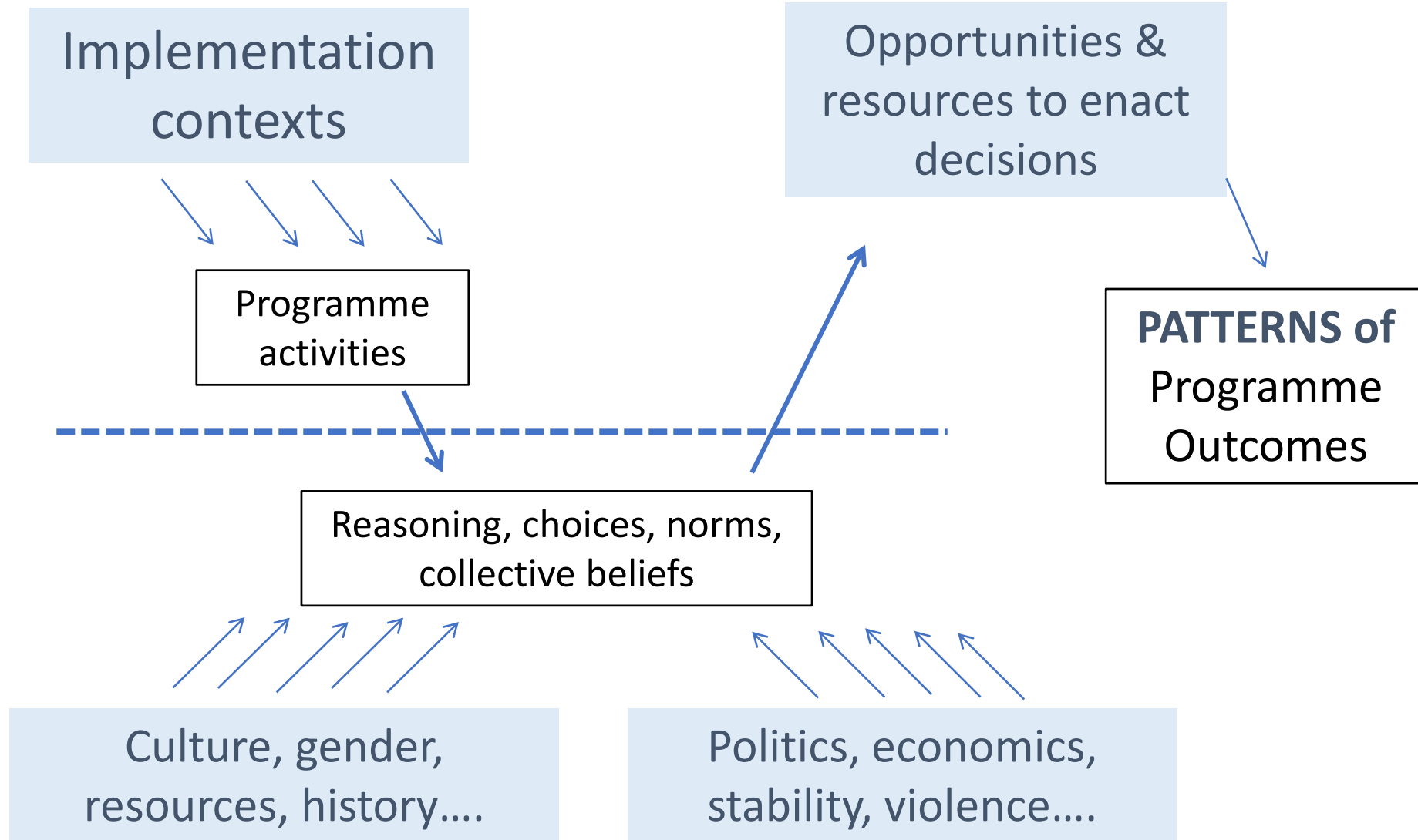


Iceberg metaphor on Realist ontology (Fletcher, A., 2017, p. 183)

# How programs cause outcomes



# CONTEXT and mechanism



# Realist epistemology I

## Constructivist epistemology

- *All knowledge is socially and individually constructed*
- *All input and experience is interpreted through previous knowledge & experience*
- There is no way to choose between competing versions of reality
- We cannot therefore know what reality is really like
- The researcher's role is to understand and faithfully report the meaning subjects attribute to experiences

## Realist epistemology

- *All knowledge is socially and individually constructed*
- *All input and experience is interpreted through previous knowledge & experience*
- Reality is independent of our knowledge of it, so we can test our knowledge against it and gradually improve our knowledge
- The researcher's role is to understand how outcomes were generated and why they differ: the meanings subjects attribute are relevant in so far as they tell us about aspects of our theory

# Epistemology II: Underlying causes in 'reasoning'

## Examples:

- **Attachment style:** formed during infancy, shapes beliefs about self, others, trustworthiness, relationships. Affects multiple behaviours and life outcomes.
- **Scarcity:** when we experience something we value as being 'scarce', it both dominates our thinking and affects quality of decision-making. (Shafir and Mullainathan, 2013).
- **Cultural cognition:** "refers to the tendency of individuals to conform their beliefs about disputed matters of fact (e.g., whether global warming is a serious threat; whether the death penalty deters murder; whether gun control makes society safer or less safe) to values that define their cultural identities."
  - biased assimilation: affirming beliefs
  - the credibility heuristic: in-groups
- For realists – these operate as contexts which fire their own mechanisms which affect the brain's 'products'. They can therefore help us to understand sub-groups and contexts.
- Depending on what we're investigating – we may draw on these formal theories and prior research to help build our explanations of patterns of outcomes



# A realist position on the status of talk

- The cognitive/psychological realm is 'real'
- Human 'reasons' and reasoning can form a basis for actions in the world
- Participant talk *may* reflect 'real' attitudes, beliefs and reasons, which in turn may underpin action
  - i.e. demonstrate program mechanisms

## **BUT**

- What shapes reasoning may be unconscious

## **AND**

- The social world is real and structures the ways people talk
- Talk serves multiple social purposes
- Talk *may* reflect a respondents' purposes in the particular interaction (eg to present themselves or the program in a positive light)

## **SO...**

# Implications for realist qualitative analysis

## Realist assumption

- Causation operates at all levels of all systems all the time
- Humans are not conscious of all aspects of their 'reasoning'
- Communication is shaped by social context and purpose

## Implication for analysis

- Human subjects only know a part of the story
- Even when respondents try to tell 'the truth', there is more going.
- Respondent 'claims' serve many purposes, some helpful and some unhelpful to our analysis

**Analysts must make multiple judgements about the explanatory value of what has been said, and this may or may not relate to the 'meaning' that the respondent attributed to an experience.**

# Realist interviewing



# Realist program theory & [qualitative] data

Realist program theory	Qualitative data and analysis
<p>Initial rough theory</p> <p><i>How is this supposed to work?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Theory of action</i></li><li>• <i>Theory of change</i></li><li>• <i>CMO</i></li></ul>	<p>Program authors</p> <p>Program commissioners</p> <p>Program managers and staff</p> <p>Program documentation</p> <p>Previous research &amp; evidence (Q&amp;Q)</p>
<p>Evidence collection</p> <p><i>How is this actually working, for whom, in what circumstances...?</i></p>	<p>Program managers and staff</p> <p>Program participants</p> <p>Other stakeholders</p> <p>Administrative records</p> <p>Photographs (etc)</p>
<p>Data analysis</p> <p><i>What does the evidence tell us?</i></p>	<p>Abductive / retroductive (best possible <b><i>explanation</i></b> of incomplete evidence; includes intuition/hypotheses)</p>
<p>Theory refinement</p> <p><i>How, for whom, in what contexts...</i></p>	<p>Against initial rough theory</p> <p>Against formal / substantive theory</p>

# Sample structure

- The sample is constructed to test the theory – purposive sampling
  - Not ‘representative’ or ‘generalizable’ in the usual senses of the term: so not a random sample
- If theory is well-enough developed, select for contexts/population groups identified in the theory
- If theory is not well developed, select maximum diversity sample (with diversity described in relation to ‘gut hunches’ about what might matter).
- Allow for iteration wherever possible

# Teacher – learner interviews

- The topic of the interview is the program theory
  - Start with ‘open’ questions on the topics
  - OK to prompt with examples after that
  - The idea is to find out “how and why it works like this, here/for this person”
- Different people know about different things
  - Ask them about what they know about
- Identify and explore differences – for different groups, in different contexts
  - No judgements, curiosity and exploration

# Teacher – learner interviews II

- Only the people themselves can tell you about their ‘reasoning’
- People don’t always understand their own ‘reasoning’
- What lies behind or supports their reasoning?
  - Norms, values, goals, priorities
- What affects their reasoning / choices?
  - Aspects of context
- Iterate
  - Within your interview sample
  - Back to previous respondents if possible

# Analysis





# Reasoning in realist analysis

- **Induction:** builds theory from observations
- **Deduction:** starts from theory, tests with observations
- **Retroduction:** going 'behind' or 'beneath' the observations to find what caused them: cycles between induction + deduction + hunches to build theories and then test them.
- Analysis is an ongoing process of building, testing and refining theory
- It begins as the research begins and continues throughout

# Analytic decisions

<b>Standard title</b>	<b>Standard</b>
<i>Data analysis</i>	<i>Describe in detail how data were analysed. This section should identify the constructs that were identified, the process of analysis, how the program theory was further developed...and where relevant how analysis changed as the evaluation unfolded.</i>
<b>Data extraction</b>	What data will you extract / code? Why? How will you record that?
<b>Data analysis</b>	What exactly is your process for analysis?
<b>Data synthesis</b>	How will you synthesise findings within and across data sets?

# Analytic tasks

- Explain outcomes by identifying the mechanisms which create the change:
  - ***mechanisms cannot be identified without reference to outcome.***
- Identify contexts which influence whether, which & for whom mechanisms 'fire':
  - ***the significant aspects of context cannot be identified without reference to mechanism.***
- Identify outcome(s)
- Identify mechanism(s)
- Identify elements of context
- *Align against program theory (CMO) & identify interactions between them*

# The realist analytic strategy

- Intra-program, inter-group comparisons **according to theories**
  - M: ‘increasing social capital’
    - Where no increase in social capital (e.g. high social capital; extreme isolation)  
⇒ no change *in outcomes*
    - Where social capital increased  
⇒ change *in outcomes*.
  - Having therefore collected data about social capital (networks formed, trust, access to services, action on referrals...)
  - Analyse:
    - whether / for whom social capital increased,
    - whether ↑ social capital associated with ↑ outcomes

# Realist analysis is NOT (just) thematic analysis

- Themes = ‘what is common’, convergence on meaning
- Realists are looking for ‘what is different’, and why
  - Different outcomes imply different mechanisms – look for outcome differences first and work back; OR
  - Different contexts hypothesised to affect whether/how/for whom: look for contextual differences and work forward.
  - There will be themes, but they will be ‘within contexts’ or groups, not necessarily across them.

# Analytic approaches

- Modified analytic induction?
  - Select rich case/transcript and analyse in depth; develop theory from that
  - Modify theory (adding/amending C,M,O) with each subsequent interview
- Theory based matrix?
  - Elements of theory x respondent
- Modified grounded theory?
  - Develop theories from the data
  - Within CMO structure; protecting 'disaggregation'

# Analysing for context

- What affects whether and which mechanisms fire?
- Parenting program:
  - own upbringing - **re**: inter-generational transmission of attachment;
  - attendance at other parenting or child development programs - **re** causation; comparison of 'what's different or effective';
  - developmental and behavioural issues for children - **re** parental perceptions, relationships, attachment style;
  - parental attitudes to and expectations of children – **re** 'which parents'; mechanisms of change;
  - referral into program (**re** self-referred - higher motivation?);
  - relationship status and living arrangements – **re** social support;
  - perceptions of social norms re parenting – **re** social judgements.

# Analysing for mechanism

- Reasoning + Resources
- Resources:
  - material, financial, social, psychological, intellectual...
  - 'new to the participant'
  - enabled or facilitated change
- Reasoning: attitudes, values, beliefs, 'logic in use'
  - response to the program/initiative
  - changed as a result of the initiative



# Reading for mechanisms

- [Therapist] doesn't sort of answer things for us, he sort of says, 'how does that make you feel', or 'what do you feel when you look at this', and it's that realisation that it's OK to have feelings and it's OK to be able to express your feelings. ... I was always brought up that, you know, don't wear your heart on your shirt-sleeve. I was brought up, ... feelings are something you keep to yourself. ... You start dealing with people's feelings and you get in to their head and you don't want to have people to get into your head... (Participant 7)
- *Um, I'm starting to work out exactly what her [daughter's] mood swings are, how she feels, ... and that's a big deal for me because I was never allowed to do that. I was never allowed to be angry, I was never allowed to be upset at anything and I want her to be able to explore all of her emotions, you know, ... "It's okay to feel like that". (Participant 1)*
- It made me look at things differently – try to deal with things differently as a person, rather than storing it, be able to speak up and say something. ... For me, the deep discussions made me think about things that happened when I was a child, that I was storing all these feelings. I didn't see any connection between that and how I was with the kids. I see now I have to deal with that to avoid flying off the handle at little things. (Participant 4)

# Analysing for interactions (M&O)

- participants offer direct explanations
  - “A good teacher has more or less got to come down to your level to be able to communicate with you, **if they’re talking down to you all the time** then it won’t sink in because **you get your back up and that’s it, you seal off, you shut off** but if somebody can communicate with you, just show you quietly how to do things...”
- co-location in the same sentence / paragraph
  - ...in the last couple of weeks I’ve actually got the **courage** to stand up to people and say, ‘Look, butt out, this is between me and her – no-one else – and if you don’t like it, tough luck’.
- ‘referring back’
  - “you know how I said...”
- conjunctions
  - and, but, because, if, when, so...
  - “She had the people skills so she could really communicate and held our attention.”

# Synthesis

- Patterns / groups of outcomes
- Which mechanisms associated with which outcomes?
- Which contexts associated with those mechanisms? Which are not?
- Relationship to and implications for program theory (refined program theory)
- Relationship to formal/substantive theory
  - Reference group theory – Pawson, how different groups respond to ‘naming, shaming and faming’
  - Attachment theory – How different parents respond to different kinds of family support/parenting programs
  - Cultural cognition theory ...

# Summary

- Realism is a philosophy with implications for methodology and methods, not a method in itself.
- The purpose of realist investigation is explanatory, not (just) descriptive.
- The subject of a realist interview is a piece of theory.
- Samples are purposively selected to test the theory.
- Interview questions are developed to explicate theory about how and why things work differently in different contexts.
- Analytic methods depend on the stage of theory development.
- The product is refined theory

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