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## **Causal Dynamics and Policy Development: the contribution of evolutionary and complexity perspectives**

### **Abstract:**

How can public policy-makers make good decisions? The most common answer is that good policy decisions are evidence-based.

The advocates of EBPM are typically concerned with evidence of the impact of a particular intervention. Evidence is collected and evaluated – ‘systematically reviewed’ – so as to produce a rigorous assessment of ‘what works’.

In practice however any new policy is launched into a world already crowded with policy initiatives, ancient and modern, whose effects and impacts interact. Nevertheless, if we make some simplifying assumptions, appropriate statistical methods are available with which we can, in principle, partition and disaggregate these effects and isolate the contribution to those impacts of any particular intervention. To separate out these effects is however more than just a technical matter.

It carries an implicit ontology of the social world, as one that can be disaggregated into a set of independent ‘variables’ that additively compose this world’s causal mechanisms.

The challenge to this ontology has been voiced with particular eloquence by Pawson (Evidence-Based Policy: A Realist Perspective, 2006). A social policy intervention does not so much impact upon as engage with active stakeholders. The ‘impacts’ of the intervention depend in part on how these stakeholders respond and what projects they pursue. Stakeholders pull them in different directions, partly in pursuit of their respective projects, but also as a result of the practical learning and knowledge exchange that accompanies any intervention.

Pawson offers a response in terms of ‘critical realism’. This is centrally concerned with the foregoing contingencies, unpicking the ways that they activate, inhibit or reshape the impact of any given policy intervention. It is in these terms that Pawson lays out a new protocol for systematic reviews and illustrates its application in a series of case studies.

This still leaves Pawson focussing primarily on the individual intervention. Interventions however are not isolated: they are embedded in multiple systems of interacting elements. Nor are interventions and their potentialities fixed. On the contrary, the identity, the potentialities and the impact of any intervention are contingent on the various synergies that it develops – or fails to develop - with other interventions. This is an evolutionary version of realism. What matters are the transformative synergies that develop among these interventions and their stakeholders.

It is this ontology of evolutionary or transformative realism that provides the vantage point from which this paper will re-consider the theory and practice of EBPM and systematic review.