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What doesn't work, for whom and why in," Let's get realistic: why 'what works' will probably not work in evaluative sport research". A response to Haudenhuyse and Debognies (2021).

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Abstract

This paper provides a short response to the critique of realist evaluation written by Haudenhuyse and Debognies (2021) and published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics. No doubt experienced realist evaluators will have already made a wry judgement on the perspicacity of their opinions. However, new researchers and evaluation commissioners newly considering a realist approach may be dismayed by what they read. This paper is an antidote to such dismay, providing a more accurate illustration of what realist evaluation is, and what it can do for sports policy and management.

This short article is a response to the paper, "Let's get realistic: why 'what works' will probably not work in evaluative sport research" authored by Haudenhuyse and Debognies (2021) which purports to be a critique of a realist approach to the evaluation of sports policy published in this International Journal of Sports Policy and Politics. At the risk of creating a straw man from their work, their paper essentially presents the following arguments about the realist approach in sport. Firstly, they argue that realist researchers and evaluators have a positivistic and pragmatic preoccupation with 'what works'. Secondly, they claim that realist approaches are technocratic, in so much that real world problems are transformed through the methodology (via the application of programme theories, and context mechanism outcome configurations) into scientific and technical problems. Their third claim focuses on the supposed evangelical nature of realist evaluation where "currently, amongst some sport scientists and consultants, there seems to be an unquestioned (blind) belief *in* and uncritical acceptance *of* realist evaluation approaches." (Haudenhuyse and Debognies, 2021, pg 2). What is more, this evangelical labelling compares realist evaluation to a church, a gospel and some type of cult-like space where there is no other way to do evaluation. This leads to their final argument where they claim that realist evaluation can disempower, subjugate and downgrade the expertise of practitioners.

This response is not intended to be a point-by-point contestation of Haudenhuyse and Debognies' work, since the present authors believe that such a rebuttal is neither necessary nor desirable. No doubt, experienced realist researchers will read their paper, form their own conclusions and move on to more worthwhile endeavours. Rather, this paper is addressed to those new to realistic evaluation, or at the beginning of a realist study or higher degree, who may find themselves dismayed unnecessarily by what they read in the paper. What is more,

given that the commissioning of realist evaluations is becoming more common in the sport policy landscape, this paper should sooth anxieties of new commissioners of realist work who may share this dismay.

So, to begin at the beginning. The title of Haudenhuyse and Debognies' paper questions the ability of realist methods to answer questions of "what works" in sports programmes. Now if one wishes to ask simply "What works?" then one does not need a realist approach, but would do better focus on Cochrane Reviews in related areas (Oude 2009, for example); each a veritable mausoleum of rigorous, well meaning and occasionally eye watering expensive attempts to answer just that. But such seekers will look there in vain for any realist studies.

This absence results, in part, from the "what works?" question. The entry level question for a realist study is, 'What works for whom and why?' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) not "what works?". The difference between the two questions is neither trivial nor semantic. Consider some good examples of realist approaches to evaluating sports policy that encourage realist researchers and stakeholders to develop assumptions and beliefs about how a programme may work, test them and then refine how and why the programme works for learning . We only need to go back as far as 2007 to Coalter's 'Wider Social Role for Sport' (which will have been for many realist researchers in sport their first flurry into realist thinking) to see the importance Coalter places upon moving beyond asking what works, to appreciate what the conditions are within sports programmes and interventions to make sense of why and how things work. Since then, Coalter has made a number of contributions to the sport policy and management space developing and promoting explanatory ways of thinking in the field (see Coalter *et al.* 2020).

Building from this, Redgate *et al.* (2022) for example provide a careful, causal exploration and explanation of the range of outcomes that can be observed in a Football Association programme to create coach developers through the delivery of a post graduate diploma curriculum. Their evaluation did not only address the question of 'has the PG diploma for coaches worked' but goes deeper to explain what it is about the complexities of the PG diploma that worked, for whom in which circumstances and why. Their starting point in this evaluation consisted of developing realist programme theories collaboratively with FA stakeholders to capture how and why the PG diploma was intended to work. Through their testing and refining of these programme theories through qualitative interviews, their evaluation uncovers three pathways to differing benefits for coaches depending upon context articulating how, why and for whom these pathways manifest themselves. This is useful for the FA who commissioned this work in that they are presented with explanations about what is causing this PG diploma to work (or not) in different ways for different people. As a result, it offers insight and learning on how to improve the programme for those designing and implementing it. Realist evaluators would call this a good, wholesome evaluation of a project. But one can almost imagine Haudenhuyse and Debognies asking plaintively "yes, but does it work"? Realist evaluators would mostly answer with a sad shake of the head at the unsophisticated question.

Now then, to get to the causal explanations derived in Redgate *et al.*, and any other well-crafted realist evaluation, it is necessary to apply a range of techniques, generally structured around a programme theory consisting of resources and the resulting reasoning (mechanisms) operating, and activating in a particular context to generate observable outcomes (see Dalkin

et al.'s. (2015) articulation of the CMMO). This seems to agitate Haudenhuyse and Debognies, who regard this as technocratic and indicative of

“a limiting worldview on society and humanity as a whole. A worldview in which human behaviour can be reduced to rational and predictive actions” (p. 4).

Although rhetorically powerful, the accusation strikes at the nature of causation rather than realist thinking. One can only have causation if things happen for a reason, and this remains so for any methodological approach. If realists really held the worldview outlined by Haudenhuyse and Debognies, then it would be scarcely necessary to develop causal programme theories. It would be far easier to postulate a logical participant response and test it with some kind of randomised control trial. Realists never do that. Rather, realists attempt to capture and understand key elements of the diverse, rational, emotional, irrational, contextually constrained, bizarre, perverse and otherwise contrary responses to programme resources given to participants and stakeholders in as rigorous a manner as possible (please see Skivington *et al.* 2022 for more). It may be that Haudenhuyse and Debognies have conflated the logical *method* of the realist analysis with the implied behaviour of *subjects* of that analysis – an understandable muddle.

This brutally technocratic positioning of realist evaluation by Haudenhuyse and Debognies creates a platform for them to argue that such an approach limits the space for participation of wider stakeholders. This comes as news to realist evaluators who invariably engage in dialogue with stakeholders at the earliest stage to facilitate the construction of the very programme theories that attract Haudenhuyse and Debognies' ire. Examination of the methods used by Redgate *et al.* for example (2022) reveal interviews with key stakeholders; in this case the Football Association, coach developers and the delivering University, at the start of the study to develop the programme theories, and post testing interviews and events with those same stakeholders to refine and consolidate their results. What is more, realist researchers interested in sport may also look to more broader health and social care settings to see good examples of engaging collaboratively with stakeholders. For example, Griffiths *et al.* (2022) get to grips with how and why person-centred dementia interventions work by collaboratively producing realist programme theories with under-represented groups, and wider stakeholders which demonstrates how realist approaches can be inclusive and participatory to foster 'use' for those involved. And again, it is a common experience for realist evaluators to have to explain to stakeholders that although their programme “works” (to commit the heresy) it does not do so for the reasons espoused at the start of the evaluation. And, usually when such conversations take place, they do so in a collaborative environment where mutual professional relationships are established (Schula *et al.* 2016).

The final part of our response reflects upon the nature of the realist research community. Haudenhuyse and Debognies evoke an evangelical positioning of realist evaluation to that of a rather strict religion where:

“Currently, amongst some sport scientists and consultants, there seems to be an unquestioned (blind) belief *in* and uncritical acceptance *of* realist evaluation approaches.”

Now there may be such people in the field, although the present authors and their associates have never met any such practitioners or scientists. On the contrary, those embarking on a

realist approach are encouraged to do so in a critical way, considering the relevance of the approach to the area in question, whilst also considering other methods of evaluation. Furthermore, practitioners may also be encouraged to embed realist approaches alongside these other evaluation approaches (for example look no further to Brown *et al's.* (2020) work on realist economic evaluation and Harris *et al's.* (2019) combining of realist evaluation with Q methodology). If it were to exist, such blind faith, or at least an ignorant acceptance of method, is more commonly found amongst positivists and adherents of the randomised control trial “gold standard¹”. Far more common are realist evaluators in a perpetual wrestling match with the underlying metaphysics, anxiously parsimonious over what parts of a study to keep as realist, realist informed or non-theory driven and endlessly equivocal over what is a mechanism, what is a context and whether or not these have led to any identifiable outcomes. Fortunately, there are now many well networked realist evaluators to debate with and find support from; and new researchers should not be discouraged from reaching out to the network of genial realists that Haudenhuyse and Debognies mistake for a malign cult.

So, to conclude by directly addressing those at the start of their realist evaluation adventure. How dismayed should you be by Haudenhuyse and Debognies’ critique? For commissioners it is simple. If you are a commissioner that commissioned realist evaluators to do a quick job to satisfy the terms of a tender then you should be very dismayed because your evaluators will keep bothering you by asking about how things work. On the other hand, if you really want to go beyond *what* worked and look at *why* things worked and learn to make even better projects in future, then you may eschew dismay and congratulate yourself for choosing your method wisely. For new researchers, if you find that your work resembles the bleak picture of realist research painted by Haudenhuyse and Debognies’ critique then dismay is in order. You need to think harder because it should not do so. This is no unusual hardship; even if you do not recognise these criticisms in your work to date then you will need to think harder when putting together a credible context, mechanism and outcome based programme theory, that reflects the empirical and actual worlds as well as engaging your key stakeholders. But, to paraphrase GK Chesterton, if a job is worth doing it is worth doing even if it's not done all that well. In this case, we contend that even if your allegedly technocratic elements are not perfect (and it’s likely that they will not be), it is still most probable that you will glean valuable insights into the dynamics of your programme that you would not have understood from any other approach. Astonishing good luck to you.

¹ It is curious that this term is used so blindly. The gold standard was abandoned because it produced catastrophic outcomes and was open to government manipulation and nationalist fantasy. See Keynes (1925)

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