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Analysing decision-making and policy outcomes in government: a critical realist perspective

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*Analysing decision making and policy
outcomes in government: a critical realist
perspective*

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**The Open
University**



Format of presentation

- ◆ Background to the research - previous approaches
- ◆ Research focus - central and local government initiatives to deliver e-government (drawing on the work of Horrocks and Morton)
- ◆ Methodology - case studies + various data collection methods and techniques
- ◆ Data analysis and brief review of findings
- ◆ Benefits of using a CR approach
- ◆ Issues

Background: explaining the implementation gap



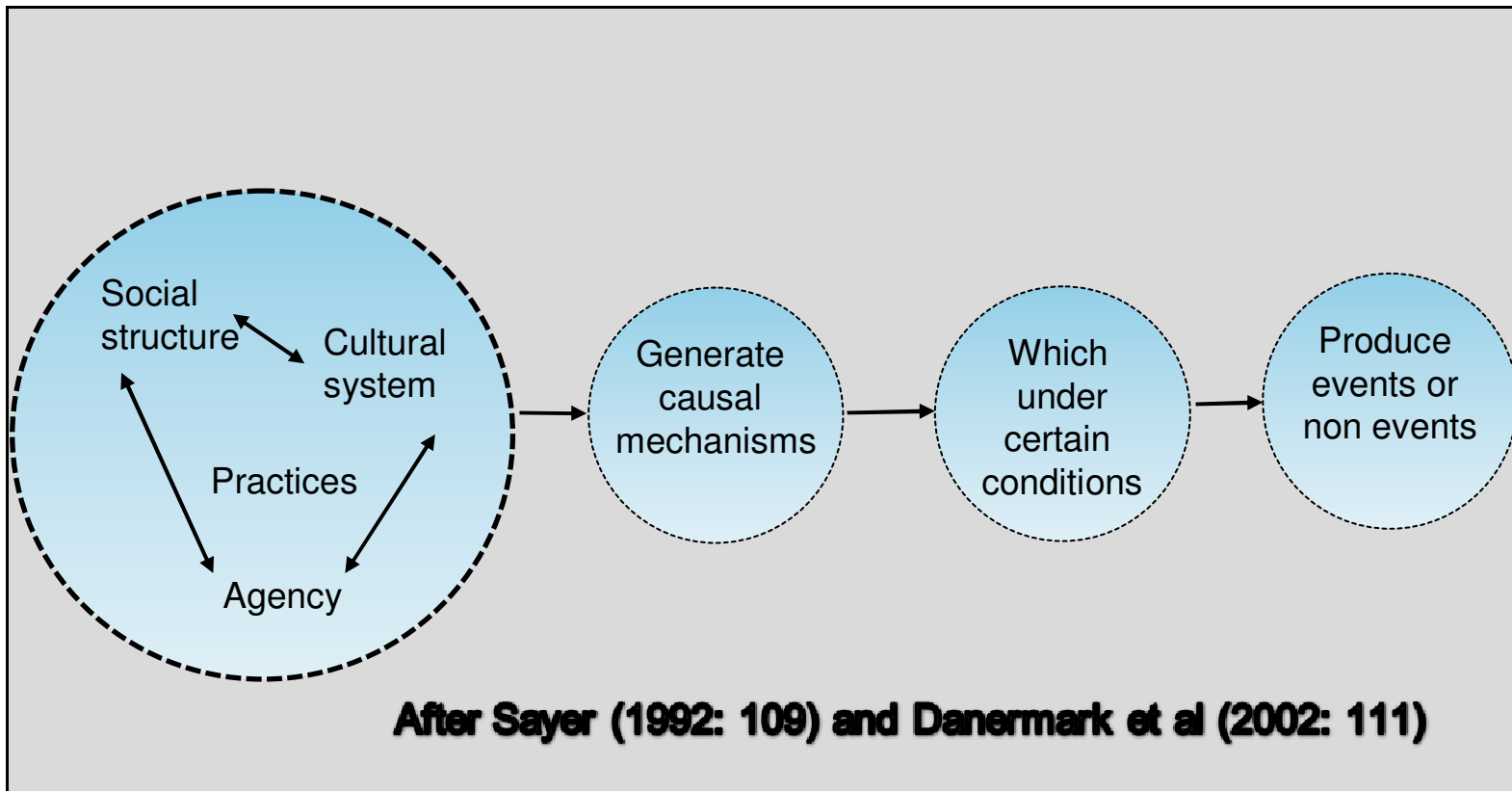
Research focus: the frequently observed phenomenon of the difference between planned and actual policy outcomes.

In broad terms analyses fall into two schools:

- ◆ The prescriptive school - if only detailed and formally stated processes and practices were closely followed then the desired policy outcomes would be forthcoming.
- ◆ The descriptive school - recognise that policy and decision making is complex, emergent, etc, who largely base their analyses on perceived conjunctions of events that (they argue) explain why unplanned outcomes occur.

In contrast the goal of the research reported here was to develop an understanding of the chains of causation - and tendencies - leading to differences in planned and realised policy outcomes.

A realist explanatory framework





Characteristics of previous research

- ◆ Institutional, moving toward to social construction/social shaping

Multiple case study based: descriptive and/or seeking similarities/differences – *regularities* - between variables. E.g.

- ◆ Features of governments that enable or constrain e-government
- ◆ The ‘webbing’ of British local government
- ◆ ICTs as the drivers of change
- ◆ Project champions*

*Because of this work I was particularly interested in Archer’s distinction between:

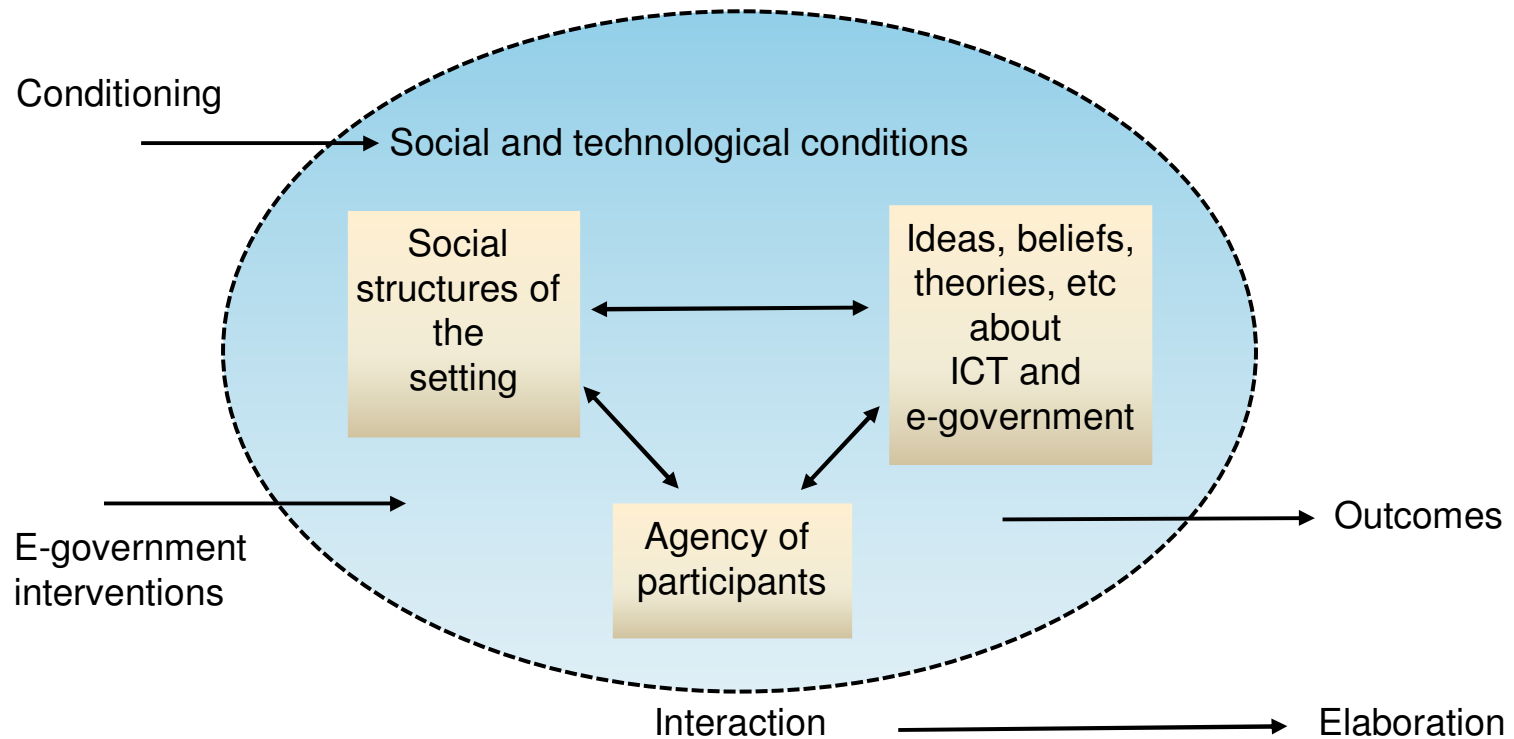
- ◆ Corporate agency: shapes the context in which all actors operate
- ◆ Primary agency: inhabits this context but in responding to it also reconstitute the environment which Corporate Agency seeks to control

Research focus: government initiatives to deliver e-government



- ◆ Developing and implementing strategic IS/IT plans and policies to “deliver” (i.e. to drive or enable) e-government, virtual government, joined-up government and other IS/IT intensive reform agendas
- ◆ Front office: e.g. decentralisation and devolution - access to and delivery of services – online, contact points, helplines, etc
- ◆ Back office: e.g. Reengineering - outsourcing, centralisation, relocation, remote working, partnerships, etc
- ◆ E-democracy: e.g. online voting, consultation, access to information, etc

A realist (open systems) conceptualisation of e-government



A realist comparative methodology (Morton 2010, after Bergene, 2007)



Step	Focus	Analytical Task
1	External analysis	Describe the larger structural context of the cases and key influential ideas
2	Internal structural analysis across cases	Delineate common and unique structures and compare how they were manifest in different cases
3	Comparative analysis of mechanisms evident in individual case studies	Delineate common and unique mechanisms and compare how they were manifest in different cases
4	Contingent conditions triggering mechanisms	Describe the contingent conditions of the cases
5	Implications of causal mechanisms for e-government projects	Detailed description and retrodution of causal mechanisms, support in the literature, plus indication of the implications for e-government of theorised causal mechanisms

Methods: case studies



Micro level case studies set/framed within the wider and deeper context of government and public sector (abductive and retroductive)

Horrocks

- ◆ Single case – Council X
- ◆ Longitudinal (18 months)
- ◆ Multiple units of analysis (i.e. various policies/projects)
- ◆ Rationale: *extreme/unique* therefore *revelatory* – *future tendencies?*

Morton

- ◆ Multiple case – central government departments
- ◆ Longitudinal (over several months)
- ◆ Single unit of analysis (i.e. one policy)
- ◆ Rationale: *comparative* therefore possibility of documenting *tendencies*



Methods: data collection

Ethnographic, often bordering on action research, specifically:

- ◆ Structured, semi structured and informal interviews/discussions
- ◆ Participant and non participant observation
- ◆ Documentary material: reports, minutes and agendas, project proposals, plans and records, policy statements, transcripts of speeches, other research and consultancy material
- ◆ Survey of attitudes to and knowledge of IT*
- ◆ Pilot e-democracy project*



External structural analysis - examples

- ◆ Central government – local government
- ◆ Local government – local government (hierarchies and tiers – power relations)
- ◆ Governments – citizens (the electorate) and MPs/councillors
- ◆ Central agencies – departments (e.g. Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit)
- ◆ Dependency on service delivery agencies (e.g. NHS, third sector)
- ◆ Dependency on market based entities (e.g. consultants and contractors)

Influential ideas:

- ◆ information society, the network society, electronic town meetings, digital cities, e-democracy, community governance, joined up government, new public management (outsourcing, market testing, reengineering, etc), private good - public bad, government by the market, etc,

Data analysis: Horrocks' approach (1)

Working to Archer's morphogenetic cycles



T1 – Key objective: to ascertain 'How the powers of the parts condition the projects of the people.'

- ◆ Pre-distribution of structural emergent properties (e.g. social systems, institutional structures and roles)
- ◆ Pre-constitution of cultural emergent properties (e.g. ideas, theories, beliefs)
- ◆ Pre-grouping of peoples' emergent properties (e.g. vested interests, and the relative power and types of relationships [necessary or contingent] of actors and corporate agents)
- ◆ Evidence of social and systemic contradiction or complementarities (indicative of whether transformation or reproduction will occur)



Data analysis: Horrocks' approach (2)

T2 – T3 Key objective: analysis and evaluation of the different courses of action open to agents and how the opportunity costs of each are confronted and played out through social, socio-cultural and group interaction.

- ◆ Identification of how, why and where interaction takes place between the vested interests (i.e. agents and actors) identified at T1
- ◆ Identification and tracking of the changing resource distributions of different vested interests and how these influence the relations and transactions between them
- ◆ Identification of the different forms of interaction between vested interests (i.e. defensive, concessionary, competitive, opportunistic)



Data analysis: Horrocks' approach (3)

T4 Key objective: to evaluate what the outcome of interaction has been in terms of structural, cultural and group elaboration (reproduction or transformation)

- ◆ Examples of transformation or reproduction of structure, culture and agency
- ◆ The new or revised contradictions or complementarities brought into being by the examples of transformation or reproduction
- ◆ The possibilities for future transformation or reproduction (i.e. revised complementarities and incompatibilities)

'The end-point and the whole point of examining any particular cycle is that we will then have provided an analytical *history* of the emergence of the problematic properties under investigation.'
(Archer, 1995: 91, original emphasis)

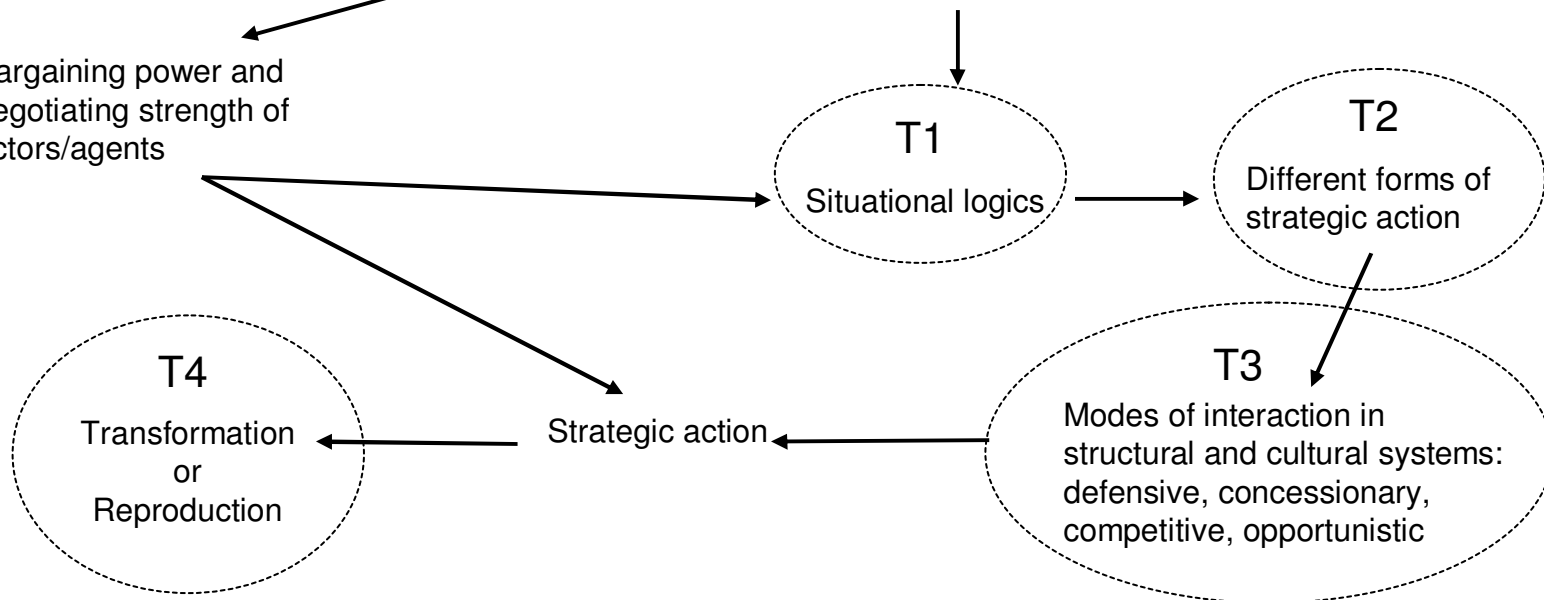
The relationship between first and second order emergents, interactions and outcomes



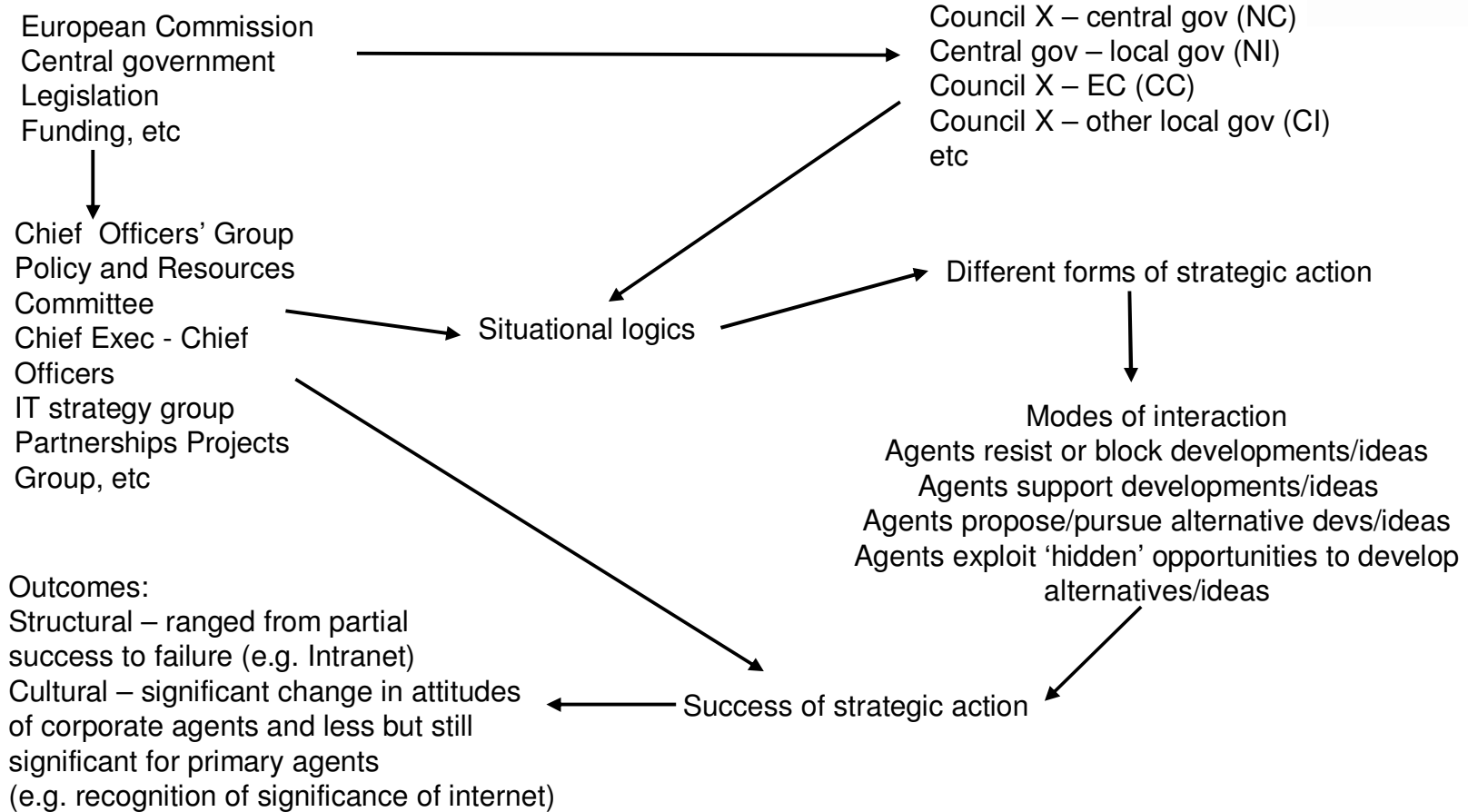
1st order emergents =
The shape of distributions of
resources, social structures,
institutional systems and roles

2nd order emergents =
Institutional relationships:
Necessary or Contingent
Complementarities (NC or CC)
Necessary or Contingent
Incompatibilities (NI or CI)

Bargaining power and
negotiating strength of
actors/agents



Examples of causal relations for Council X



Data analysis: Morton's approach (1)

CR with a touch of Archer



Stage 1: preliminary analysis at the empirical level

1. Initial identification of important elements within the case(s), such as key events and what led to them, key actors and corporate agents (groups), contextual conditions, issues, processes of interaction, intermediate and eventual outcomes.
2. On the basis of 1 compilation of the case study narrative as a description of the empirical manifestation of the phenomenon.
3. Abstraction of necessary relations to identify social structures.

Data analysis: Morton's approach (2)



Stage 2: theorisation of plausible mechanisms

4. Identification of key ideas and discourses held or influential for agents and their constraining and enabling effects.
5. Use of Archer's morphogenetic approach to understand the necessary compatibilities and incompatibilities of agential situations.
6. Retroduction of causal mechanisms using counterfactual questions and abductive reasoning.
7. Compilation of the realist explanation of outcomes in terms of social structures and causal mechanisms.

Structural elements of causal mechanisms

1 (after Morton, 2010)



Mechanism	Entity	Parts and relations	Property
Advocacy	Any group or individual in the organisation who promotes a particular course of action or objective	Organisational actors/corporate agents in structurally related positions with specified powers or who gain the support of others with greater powers	Relative power to garner resources to promote a particular issue or objective, raise awareness, challenge existing arrangements, form an alliance or oppose the actions of other groups and initiatives

Structural elements of causal mechanisms # 2 (after Morton, 2010)



Mechanism	Entity	Parts and relations	Property
Resistance	Senior managers, business unit heads, and intended system users	Organisational actors in structurally related positions with specified powers	Organisational autonomy grants authority to dispute e-government proposal and projects
Fragmentation	Management and staff of departments and business/specialist units	Organisational actors in structurally related positions with organisational autonomy	Autonomy grants authority and resources to develop alternative IS/IT systems in response to real or perceived needs

Some insightful comments from Council X (evidence of fragmentation)



‘...there are very few councils who have contracted out to the extent that we did, or so long ago...full contracting out plus full devolution of power to departments. I think that puts us in a very unusual position.’

‘There isn’t a corporate policy on anything There are corporate edicts which democratic groups produce...But they can’t actually implement them. That’s not a fertile environment for fresh ideas.’

‘The authority used to be the traditional, centrally dominated, “Stalinist” council. Decentralisation got rid of that. But now we have lots of Stalin’s, each with their own empire.’

Structural elements of causal mechanisms

3 (after Morton, 2010)



Mechanism	Entity	Parts and relations	Property
Management intervention	The most influential actor, or managerial corporate agent internal to the organisation	Highest position within the organisational structure with wide agential powers	Major powers to manage the organisation including the power to restructure
Political intervention	The most influential political corporate agent	Highest position within the political domain of the organisation with wide powers	Major powers to direct the organisation including the ability to remove senior management
Government intervention	Central government	Central government exists in a structural relation with local government. Powers are given legitimacy through elections	Central government has extensive powers over local government (e.g. statute, legal, resourcing)

Structural elements of causal mechanisms

4 (after Morton, 2010)



Mechanism	Entity	Parts and relations	Property
Project control	E-government advocates who control e-gov projects	Organisational actors in structurally related positions which grant authority to direct e-gov projects	Power to reorientate and control direction of e-government projects
Collaboration	Community of Practice (CoP) e.g.	Membership of CoP	Power to generate sharing of information and ideas amongst individuals and groups with common interests and needs in the organisation

Examples of contingent conditions



- ◆ Constant pressure – political, legislative, cultural – for organisational change
- ◆ Belief in the “transformational” power of new information and communication technologies
- ◆ Varying levels of technology, system and process incompatibilities within the case study organisations
- ◆ A general dependency in varying degrees on the availability of IT products and services from market based suppliers
- ◆ Obsolete IT platforms and applications
- ◆ Unrecognised or unacknowledged complexity and dynamism within and outwith the organisations



Benefits of using a CR approach

- ◆ Fine grained – recognises, documents and analyses complexity
- ◆ Holistic – recognises, documents and analyses the relationship and inter-relationship of the structural, cultural and agential
- ◆ Non deterministic – i.e. however powerful contextual features may be agency always retains the power to act in a variety of ways
- ◆ Provides the basis for realist(ic) statements about possible future outcomes (tendencies) of policy and decision making



Issues with use of the CR approach

- ◆ Access – extensive, prolonged, consistent and secure
- ◆ Complex – recording, ordering and analysing material is difficult
- ◆ Highly investigatory – risk of alienating participants
- ◆ Ethics - maintaining anonymity becomes difficult
- ◆ Resource intensive – particularly time