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

Conference Item

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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

- Institutionalist, 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

- Social and technological conditions
  - Social structures of the setting
  - Ideas, beliefs, theories, etc about ICT and e-government
  - Agency of participants

- Conditioning
- E-government interventions

- Interaction
- Elaboration
- Outcomes
A realist comparative methodology (Morton 2010, after Bergene, 2007)

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

$1^{\text{st}}$ order emergents =
The shape of distributions of resources, social structures, institutional systems and roles

$2^{\text{nd}}$ 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

Different forms of strategic action

Situational logics

T1
Transformation or Reproduction

Strategic action

T2
Different forms of strategic action

Modes of interaction in structural and cultural systems: defensive, concessionary, competitive, opportunistic

T3

T4
Examples of causal relations for Council X

European Commission
Central government
Legislation
Funding, etc

Chief Officers’ Group
Policy and Resources Committee
Chief Exec - Chief Officers
IT strategy group
Partnerships Projects Group, etc

Council X – central gov (NC)
Central gov – local gov (NI)
Council X – EC (CC)
Council X – other local gov (CI)

Modes of interaction
Agents resist or block developments/ideas
Agents support developments/ideas
Agents propose/pursue alternative devs/ideas
Agents exploit ‘hidden’ opportunities to develop alternatives/ideas

Situational logics

Outcomes:
Structural – ranged from partial success to failure (e.g. Intranet)
Cultural – significant change in attitudes of corporate agents and less but still significant for primary agents (e.g. recognition of significance of internet)

Success of strategic action
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.


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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Entity</th>
<th>Parts and relations</th>
<th>Property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Any group or individual in the organisation who promotes a particular course of action or objective</td>
<td>Organisational actors/corporate agents in structurally related positions with specified powers or who gain the support of others with greater powers</td>
<td>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</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Structural elements of causal mechanisms # 2 (after Morton, 2010)

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Entity</th>
<th>Parts and relations</th>
<th>Property</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management intervention</td>
<td>The most influential actor, or managerial corporate agent internal to the organisation</td>
<td>Highest position within the organisational structure with wide agential powers</td>
<td>Major powers to manage the organisation including the power to restructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political intervention</td>
<td>The most influential political corporate agent</td>
<td>Highest position within the political domain of the organisation with wide powers</td>
<td>Major powers to direct the organisation including the ability to remove senior management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government intervention</td>
<td>Central government</td>
<td>Central government exists in a structural relation with local government. Powers are given legitimacy through elections</td>
<td>Central government has extensive powers over local government (e.g. statute, legal, resourcing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Structural elements of causal mechanisms # 4 (after Morton, 2010)

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