Nothing as scientific as a good theory. Nothing as practical as a good theory.

Ray Pawson
“The Science Behind Clinical Systems Improvement”
Warwick Jan 2008
Parallels between 'improvement science' and 'theory-driven evaluation' … Starting with the aphorisms:

**The Central Law of Improvement:**

“Every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it achieves” Berwick 1996

**The Iron Law of Evaluation:**

“The expected value of any net impact assessment of any social program is zero. Our best a priori estimate of a net impact assessment of a program is that it will have no effect. The average of net impact assessments of a large set of social programmes will crawl asymptotically toward zero.” Rossi 1985
From ‘treatments’ and ‘dosages’ to ‘complex innovations thrust into complex systems’

Research must:

• Admit contingency and thus ask ‘what works for whom in what circumstances in what respects, with what durability, at what cost ... … and why?’

• Seek ‘theory transfer’ rather than ‘empirical replication’. Achieve lesson learning between applications and policy domains by working at a middle-level of abstraction.

• Face complexity and develop approaches that swallow up and synthesise large volumes of existing research.
BUT WHO IS SHAMED?

- Poll-tax protesters named in the local newspapers
- Sex offenders under community notification
- Under-performing schools identified in league tables
- Motor manufacturers named in the Car Theft Index
Public notification – basic theory

i) **Identification**: in which the performance or behaviour in question is observed and then classified, measured, rated, ranked, verified, etc.

ii) **Naming**: in which information on, and the identity of, the failing or deviant party is disclosed, publicised, disseminated, notified, published, broadcast, registered etc.

iii) **Public sanction**: in which the broader community acts on the disclosure in order to shame, reprimand, reproach, censure, control, influence, avoid the named party.

iv) **Recipient response**: in which behavioural change follows the sanction, with the subjects being shamed, regretful, penitent, contrite, restrained, re-integrated etc.
Poll-tax protesters named in the local newspapers

*Poll tax non-payment* – there were a great many sanctions imposed: fines, wage arrest, court appearances etc. Protesters thus ignored or even *celebrated* disclosure of their names in the local press. *Policy abandoned.*
Sex offenders under community notification

Notified Sex Offenders are resentful or scared by public attention. One key result is non-compliance with registration and displacement to other localities. Re-offence rates remain static.
Under-performing schools identified in league tables

- *Schools* respond to league table positions tactically - increasing resources to marginal candidates (middle grades) and excluding/not entering hopeless ones (lowest grades). *Grades improve.*
Motor manufacturers named in the Car Theft Index

Car manufacturers – are embarrassed by adverse publicity and loss of reputation (and downturn in sales) - respond with genuine improvements in vehicle security. Car crime goes down.
Findings: The nature of ‘policy learning’

The theory under further refinement

For N&S to ‘work’ the following configuration should be in place:

• the named party should be an ‘aspirational insider’
• the shaming mechanism should be dovetailed with other mechanism (e.g. market sanctions)
• the disclosure should carry intense (but controllable) media interest
• the disclosed data should unambiguous both in allocating blame and in suggested remedial action
• the disclosing authority should have had exemplary watchdog credentials, which are operated benignly
And Finally

What it feels like to do realist synthesis …

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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