

The trial on trial: evidence in interdisciplinary contexts

Friday, March 28, 2014, University of Essex

Spaces of Evidence is a global network of scholars, practitioners and activists exploring the intersections of politics, measurement and evidence-based policy in health, development, economics, medicine and beyond. On March 28, we're hosting a one-day workshop on the philosophical, evidentiary, political and economic implications of the growing use of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in global policy-making.

Our March workshop – which launches the ESRC-funded *Spaces of Evidence* network – is centered on the nature, methodology and legal implications of the growing use of RCTs in health and social policy impact assessment. Since the mid-20th century, RCTs have revolutionized the way we test and regulate new pharmaceutical drugs. More recently, a second major shift has taken place: policy-makers in fields beyond medicine have adopted RCT methodologies in order to evaluate policies in law, justice services, human rights and social welfare, to name just three areas. In development economics, there has been a growing use of field trials which use principles of randomisation to appraise the effectiveness of policies in, for example, alleviating poverty, curbing discrimination, or empowering local decision-making.

The UK's Conservative-led coalition is embracing the use of RCTs. A 2012 report published by the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insights Team laid out nine steps towards establishing and carrying out more RCTs to inform and formulate domestic policy. It's a similar story at the international level, where standard-setting bodies such as the WHO are becoming increasingly reliant on RCT evidence in order to gauge the effectiveness of different policy approaches to healthcare delivery.

Despite the embrace of RCTs as “gold-standard” tools of impact assessment and policy formation – or indeed, *because* of the scope, scale and unknown implications of this growing embrace – an increasing number of scholars and practitioners are raising concerns over the appropriateness of this methodology for capturing divergent social and political practices. To date there has been very little interdisciplinary discussion of the political, commercial and ethical challenges raised by RCTs in practice. It's time to put “the trial on trial,” exploring the ethical, political and economic consequences of the growing use of RCTs in medicine, social policy, global development and economics.

Our launch event is funded by the ESRC. For more details, see www.spacesofevidence.net. This is an open meeting, but spaces are extremely limited. For further information or to reserve a place, please write to Daniela Boraschi, programme coordinator: evidence@essex.ac.uk

Programme, March 28, 2014

9.00	Coffee and tea, Foyer, Tony Rich Teaching Centre
9.20	Opening Remarks – Room TC1.17 Dr. Linsey McGoey (Essex)
9.45	Session One – The trial in historical and policy contexts <i>Chair: Dr. Ian Harper (Edinburgh)</i>
	Dr. Rosalind Eyben (Sussex) “Origins of the evidence discourse.....and some of its real world effects”
	Professor Nancy Cartwright (Durham) “RCTs in Context: Putting them together with the rest of the evidence”
11.15	Coffee and Tea, Foyer
11.30	Session Two – Evidence in practice: legal and governance challenges <i>Chair: Dr. Will Davies (Warwick)</i>
	Dr. Monika Krause (Goldsmiths College) “Citizen, Beneficiary, Guinea Pig: The trialization of commitment in public policy”
	Dr. Carolijn Terwindt (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Berlin) “Health Rights Litigation Pushes for Accountability in Clinical Trials in India”
1.00	Lunch, Teaching Centre Foyer
2.00	Session Three – Design and performance management: following RCTs in action <i>Chair: Daniela Boraschi (Essex)</i>
	Dr. Simon Cohn (Cambridge) “Fidelity, infidelity and generalisability in relation to behavioural intervention studies”
	Dr. Ayo Wahlberg (Copenhagen) “Improving life: when outcomes are subjective”
3.30	Break
3.35	Dr. Teun Zuiderent-Jerak (Linköping University) “EBM <i>and</i> Sociology on Trial: Tinkering with Evidence Infrastructures”
4.15	Closing remarks and open discussion Dr. Ann Kelly, University of Exeter
4.45	Wine Reception