

Frequently Asked Questions about Realist Evaluation



The RAMESES II Project

1. What is the difference between realist evaluation and realist synthesis?

Realist evaluation is, as the name implies, a form of evaluation. Data is collected from primary sources. This can include field research, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis. Realist synthesis – also known as realist review – is a form of literature review. Realist review can use published peer-reviewed articles, evaluation reports, other gray literature, existing data sets (for example census information) and in some cases, interviews to supplement the literature. Many realist projects involve a mix of realist evaluation and realist synthesis. For more information, see 'What's in a Name' in this series.

“Causation is at the heart of realist evaluation. Causation is about examining ‘what causes what to happen’”

This is an example of realists' recognition that in an open social system, there are multiple different causal mechanisms operating at different levels of systems. Those mechanisms interact in different ways in different contexts, which means that some people who experience poverty end up homeless. Furthermore, Fitzpatrick (2005) highlights that while positivists conceptualise poverty as a variable and measure what proportion of people experiencing poverty are homeless, realists ask “what is it about poverty that could cause homelessness?” Thus, realists seek to explain what it is about poverty (context) that gives rise to a causal pathway (mechanism) which leads to homelessness (an outcome).

2. How does realist evaluation differ from other types of theory-driven evaluation?

Realist evaluation uses realist causal explanation, which asserts that outcomes are caused by underlying mechanisms rather than directly by the programmes themselves (See 'What is a mechanism' in this series for further information). Whether or not these mechanisms operate depends on supportive or disabling contexts. Realist programme theory describes how the underlying mechanisms are expected to operate in different contexts and what outcomes will be generated if they do (or don't). Many other forms of programme theory do not address underlying causal processes. (See Funnell and Rogers, 2011 for examples of different kinds of programme theory).

3. Why would I want to use realist evaluation?

Realist evaluation is useful if you want to understand ‘what works, for whom, under what circumstances and why?’. Realist evaluation is not required for evaluations that do not seek to answer questions about ‘how’ or ‘why’ programmes work the way they do.

4. What does the word ‘causation’ mean and why is it important in realist evaluation?

Causation is about ‘what causes what to happen’. There are different understandings of causation in different evaluation paradigms. Some paradigms are based on what is called ‘a successionist view’. In this view, a correlation between ‘independent’ variables (things that are varied or controlled – think ‘input’ variables) and ‘dependent’ variables (the outcome of interest) is examined. If the relationship is confirmed across many cases, causation is taken to be established. Realist evaluation assumes that there is something underlying

that relationship – a mechanism that causes the outcome – which will only operate if the circumstances are right. (See ‘What is a mechanism?’ in this series). Consequently, realists take the perspective that “what causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we observe it happening” (Sayer, 2000). Realist evaluators are trying to do more than identify that there is a relationship – they are trying to explain it.

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To take an example, a study could take 1000 university students and ask half of them to study the night before an exam, and the other half to not study the night before the exam. Then if you find that the students who studied the night before the exam did 80% better than students who did not, you would say you have evidence to suggest that studying the night before an exam improves exam results. This is based on a successionist view of causation that confirms A leads to B if we see it happening many times. The realist approach would seek to understand why it is the case that studying the night before an exam leads to the improved results. It could be because of better retention of information, or greater confidence and less stress, any or all of which could impact on performance. The realist investigation could also be used to try to explain what happened for those who studied but did not do better (lack of sleep, increased sense of inadequacy leading to greater stress and so on).

6. What kinds of questions should I pose in a realist evaluation?

Realist evaluation does not ask: ‘Does this intervention work?’ or even ‘Did the intervention work this time?’. Those questions ask for an ‘on average’ answer. Realists assume that every programme will work for some people and in some contexts, but not others. The ‘on average’ answer will be hiding some for whom it did, some for whom it didn’t, and potentially, some for whom it caused harm. Realist evaluations ask some

or all of the elements of the question ‘What works for whom, in what respects and to what extent, under what circumstances, and how?’. The question is not just ‘does it make a difference’ but ‘what is it about X that makes a difference to whom, why (or why not)?’ Understanding this helps inform decisions about whether and when to use particular kinds of interventions, and how to adapt them to local circumstances.

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7. What is a CMO configuration?

CMO configuration (sometimes written as CMOC) stands for context-mechanism-outcome configuration. It is the basic causal explanatory framework for realist evaluation and realist reviews. Stated as a sentence, it means ‘In this context, this mechanism generates this outcome.’ It is a tool to help remember what needs explaining: all outcomes are a result of interactions between contexts and mechanisms.

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9. What does it mean to say that the CMO configuration is a heuristic?

A heuristic is a model or framework that is designed to support investigation or discovery, even if the framework itself is used in an incomplete way or is messy. In a realist evaluation, the CMO configuration is used in different ways. It can be used to frame evaluation questions; to predict outcomes in different circumstances (and thus to select outcome indicators to look for), and as a framework for analysis. The CMO as a heuristic is simply a reminder of the realist causal explanatory framework.

References

Funnell S and Rogers P (2011) *Purposeful program theory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sayer A (2000) *Realism and Social Science*, London: Sage.

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