

# Realist evaluation, realist synthesis, realist research – what’s in a name?



## The RAMESES II Project

### Realist research

Realist research is a collective name for research that is underpinned by the principles of realist philosophy (see ‘Philosophy’ in this series). Realists argue that there *is* a real world out there but our understanding of it is filtered through our senses, cultures and experiences (Wong et al 2012; Westhorp, 2014). Realist research uses a generative understanding of causality (Bhaskar, 1975, Pawson, 2008). That is, the outcomes we observe are generated by causal processes and forces that we cannot see (see ‘What is a Mechanism?’ in this series), and which operate (or not) according to contexts in which they occur (see ‘What do realists mean by context?’ in this series). Consequently, outcomes vary in different contexts.

“Realist research uses a generative understanding of causality...”

### Realist social research

Realist social research seeks to explain how and why the social world works and uses the relationships between contexts, mechanisms and outcomes to do so. For example, Fitzpatrick (2005) discusses the causes of homelessness. She notes that some positivists (see ‘Philosophy’, in this series) (for example, Randall and Brown, 1999) argued:

*...there are continuing problems of rough sleeping in areas with no housing shortage. Equally, the great majority of people in poverty or with mental health, or substance abuse problems, do not sleep rough. ... It follows that housing shortages, poverty, mental health and substance misuse problems cannot be said to cause rough sleeping. (p. 5)*

This view, Fitzpatrick argues, is underpinned by a successionist understanding of causality (if we see x and then we see y, on a regular basis, then x causes y.) In

research, this translates as seeking correlations between observable or measurable variables. However, Fitzpatrick (2005) argues that poverty and housing shortages are “real causes of homelessness if they can be shown to have a tendency to bring about homelessness, even if they only bring about actual homelessness on some occasions”.

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 only 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).

### Realist evaluation and realist synthesis

Realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and realist synthesis (also known as realist review, Pawson, 2006) are both specific forms of realist research. They focus on understanding social programmes, initiatives or interventions. This is what makes them different from other forms of realist social research, which seek to understand other social phenomena. Realist evaluation is, as the name suggests, an approach to evaluation; realist review is an approach to literature review and synthesis of existing evidence.

Realist evaluation and realist synthesis are underpinned by a premise that all policies, programmes and initiatives combine activities, roles and resources which are designed to solve a social problem. However, they rely on human volition as well as a range of other factors to make them work. Some of those factors are social. For example, the success of an exercise routine to

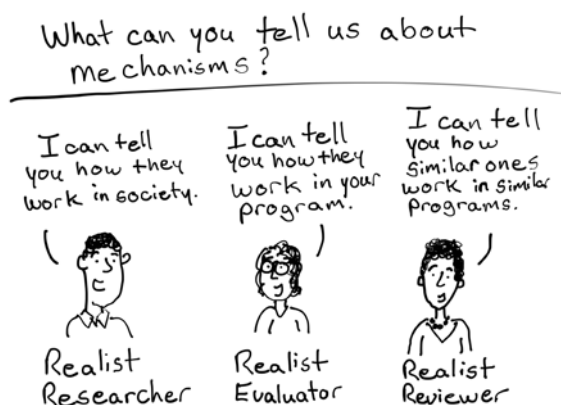
reduce back pain may depend on the adherence of the person with pain to the programme (which will in turn be affected by a range of social and personal factors), access to available facilities, a willing coach, a group of like-minded exercise buddies, and so on. A realist approach recognises that programmes are not universally successful and work better in some circumstances than in others. Programmes implemented in different contexts work through different mechanisms and produce different patterns of outcomes. Thus, realist evaluation and synthesis do not seek to determine the ‘average effect’ of a programme or answer the question ‘what works?’. Rather they try to explain in what respects, for whom, in what circumstances and why a programme or policy works.

“A realist approach recognises that programmes are not universally successful and work better in some circumstances and conditions than in others.”

Realist evaluation uses mainly primary data. The evaluator ventures into the field and collects data in order to develop, test and refine a programme theory to explain for whom and in what circumstances and why an intervention or programme works. Realist evaluation is usually a multi- or mixed methods approach and usually involves both qualitative and quantitative data. The sorts of data that might be collected include (but are not limited to) routinely collected or survey data, interview data with stakeholders and participants, preferably using realist interview methodology (Pawson, 1996; Manzano, 2016); and documentary or observational data.

“Realist evaluation uses mainly primary data.”

The term realist evaluation is also sometimes used when primary data is used to develop programme theory (a necessary first stage before testing and refining it). Depending on the nature of the data used, this can be the first stage of evaluation, developing the programme theory



so that appropriate indicators and data collection tools can be developed in the next stage. Alternatively it can be the realist equivalent to an ex-ante evaluation, predicting the likely outcomes of a programme prior to its implementation.

“Realist synthesis uses mainly secondary data.”

Realist synthesis uses mainly secondary data. It is a form of systematic literature review (Pawson, 2006). The process of *theory elicitation* (identifying the theory) is carried out by consulting any relevant material – policy documents, grey literature, editorials, think pieces – and stakeholders to identify the ideas and assumptions about how a programme is intended to work. The process of *theory testing* is undertaken by synthesising existing research into elements of the programme theory, including evaluations of programmes or interventions that share the same programme theory. This might include studies which identify outcomes (for example, outcome evaluations or research trials); studies which identify that interventions have a variable outcomes patterns (for example, sets of studies across a large programme or literature reviews); studies which compare interventions in different contexts (for example, comparative case studies); or those which examine the mechanisms through which a programme works (for example, case studies). The purpose is to synthesise findings from these studies and other relevant data to test and refine theories which explain in what circumstances and through what underlying causal processes interventions produce intended and unintended outcomes.

One of the features that distinguishes realist synthesis from other forms of systematic review is that the focus of the study is not a programme per se, but the programme theory. Because the same programme theory can be used in different kinds of programmes, the range of studies included can be much wider than some other kinds of reviews.

Sometimes realist synthesis and realist evaluation are combined in the same project. For example, a realist synthesis may be used to develop a programme theory and then primary data collected to test and further refine it. Other researchers may develop a programme theory through a realist synthesis, develop a programme to put it into practice, and then evaluate it through a realist evaluation.

To summarise, realist thinking is used to understand causation in both the material and the social world. This can be through realist evaluation, realist synthesis, and other forms of social research which are neither evaluation nor literature review. Realist evaluation and realist synthesis, however, usually focus on the evaluation of policies, programmes, initiatives and interventions.

## References

- Fitzpatrick S (2005) Explaining homelessness: a critical realist perspective. *Housing, Theory and Society* 22(1): pp. 1–17.
- Manzano A (2016) The craft of interviewing in realist evaluation. *Evaluation*, 22(3), pp.342–360.
- Pawson R and Tilley N (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*, London: Sage.
- Pawson R (1996) Theorizing the interview. *British Journal of Sociology*, pp.295–314.
- Pawson R (2008) *Causality for beginners*. In: NCRM Research Methods Festival 2008. <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/245/>
- Pawson R (2006) *Evidence based policy: A realist perspective*, London: Sage.
- Westhorp G (2014) *Realist Impact Evaluation: an introduction* ODI Research and Policy in Development, Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9138.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9138.pdf)
- Wong G, Greenhalgh, T, Westhorp G, Pawson R (2012) Realist methods in medical education research: what are they and what can they contribute? *Medical Education*, 46(1):pp.89–96.

---

## Project team:

Professor Trish Greenhalgh  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD  
[www.phc.ox.ac.uk/team/trish-greenhalgh](http://www.phc.ox.ac.uk/team/trish-greenhalgh)

Professor Ray Pawson  
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS  
[www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/pawson/](http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/pawson/)

Dr Geoff Wong  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD  
[www.phc.ox.ac.uk/team/geoffrey-wong](http://www.phc.ox.ac.uk/team/geoffrey-wong)

Dr Gill Westhorp  
CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY  
[www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/our-teams/603/5928#gillian-westhorp](http://www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/our-teams/603/5928#gillian-westhorp)

Dr Joanne Greenhalgh  
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS  
[www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/greenhalgh](http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/greenhalgh)

Dr Ana Manzano  
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS  
[www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/manzano/](http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/people/staff/manzano/)

Dr Justin Jagosh  
UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL  
[www.liv.ac.uk/cares](http://www.liv.ac.uk/cares)

This project was funded by the National Institute of Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research Programme (project number 14/19/19).

Professor Trish Greenhalgh's salary is part-funded by the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre, NIHR grant number BRC-1215-20008.

The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the HS&DR programme, NIHR, NHS or the Department of Health.

