

The Realist Interview

The RAMESES II Project



Realist interviews are theory-driven interviews, meaning that theory should be used explicitly and systematically throughout the interview process. Realist interviews are qualitative in nature: participant views are explored through conversations.

However, the purpose of the realist interview is different to other types of interviews. In constructivist interviews, researchers tend to explore participants' views and experiences of the topic under investigation. The aim is to elicit and understand the respondent's world view and experiences. Realist interviews investigate propositions about how, where, when and why programmes are and are not effective. It is the programme's story that is pursued. This is achieved by capturing the participants' stories about the programme because those experiences can illuminate the varying processes (mechanisms and contexts) and manifold outcomes of the programme. To do so the interviewer should relate with respondents in a distinctive process called the 'learner-teacher cycle'.

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The teacher-learner cycle

In realist interviews, the subject matter of the interview is the programme theory (or some aspect of it). Theories are placed before the respondents for them to comment on, with a view to confirming, denying and refining the theory. The realist premise is that the research process will usually start by theorising, then will test those theories; the theories will be refined and tested again. In this iterative process, our understanding of the real world is also refined.

In realist studies, qualitative data are not considered simply to be constructions (as they would be in some

kinds of constructivist interviews). While the subjective nature of human knowledge is acknowledged, data are considered to be evidence for real phenomena and processes, and are used to make inferences about these processes. The realist investigator tries to understand how each fragment of evidence contributes to their interpretations and explanations and how their ideas are tested and refined within and between those fragments. The interview is one of many testing tools.

While realist interviews can be used to develop programme theory, the teacher-learner cycle usually involves teaching the interviewee the particular programme theory under test. This implies a key pre-condition: that the evaluator has already established those theories. The realist investigator should also, whenever feasible, arrive at the interviews armed with some understanding about what happens in the natural setting, because it supports a conversational style of interview. This understanding can be more or less well developed depending on resources and time constraints. It may be grounded in previous experience in a sector or issue area, come from prior interviews (for example, while developing the programme theory), and/or from synthesising grey and academic literature and other data sources.

Interviews should start with general questions about interviewees' role in, experiences of and views about the programme. Subsequent questions follow up their responses, asking them to tell their stories about specific experiences or issues with the programme, its participants, and constraints. Each of these questions investigates something about the programme theory being tested. Specific elements of programme theory can then be explicitly introduced and tested with the respondent. In order to avoid allegations of 'leading the interview', it is a good idea to test multiple, including contradictory, theories about the same aspect of the programme with the same respondent.

In the first round of interviewing, questions will be mainly

exploratory. Questions will try to ascertain how the programme works for whom and in what circumstances. As the evaluator becomes more knowledgeable about programme nuances, the questions evolve. They become less standardised and more tailor-made to refine specific context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations. The ideas in these configurations are made explicit to the interviewee, although not necessarily described as “context”, “mechanism” and so on. The respondent can then teach the evaluator about those specific components of the programme in their circumstances and help the refinement process or they can refute the interviewers’ hypotheses with their examples.

The theory-testing purpose of evaluation shapes the interview relationship. The roles of teacher and learner are not static, but fluid. At some stages the interviewer is teacher (“here is an element of programme theory”) and at other times the interviewee is (“and here’s how it does or doesn’t work here”). The idea is that the interview evolves into a discussion, thinking through the complexities of the programme.

Theories will be surfaced, refined and finally consolidated. Sometimes these three processes will happen within the same evaluation – or the same interview – but due to constraints, some evaluations or interviews may have to stop at theory gleaning or early stages of refinement. Other evaluations start from a more advanced base and move from theory refinement to consolidation.

How many realist interviews are enough?

Realist hypotheses are not confirmed or abandoned through saturation in interviews, but using multiple types of data obtained in a multi-method strategy. A theory may be gleaned, refined or consolidated not just in the next interview(s), but also while digging for nuggets of evidence in other sources of data (e.g. documents, routinely collected administrative data).

At the design stages of realist evaluation projects, it can be difficult to establish a definite number of interviews required. Evaluators become more knowledgeable of programme successes and barriers as they start conversing with staff and stakeholders. It is at that point that theories take firmer shape and a more definitive interview sample can be developed.

However, more is not necessarily better. Because the unit of analysis is not the person, but the events and processes around them, every respondent (every staff member, every participant) can uncover a collection of micro events and processes, each of which can be explored in multiple ways to test theories. Depending on the evaluation design, this can mean that a relatively small number of participants

with detailed knowledge of the programme are interviewed multiple times to fully test and refine the initial programme theories, rather than interviewing many people once.

Who to interview and who knows what?

Sampling for realist interviews is theory based. That is, respondents are selected because they are in a position to cast light on a hypothesis or a particular aspect of programme theory.

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Different points of views must be pursued, not to ensure ‘balance’ or to achieve ‘consensus’, but because different perspectives are needed to investigate patterns and uncover unintended outcomes. Specifically, respondent selection should be based on their ‘CMO investigation potential’. It is necessary to work out ‘who can tell you what’ about context, mechanisms and outcomes.

For initial theory gleaning, it is better to start by interviewing practitioners rather than users of the programme: people who know the programme well. In some programmes, this will be those whose job it is to monitor what goes on (e.g. middle managers, ward managers); in others, it might be senior practitioners.

Frontline practitioners could be the next set of interviewees because they are good sources of information about the participants for whom interventions do and don’t work, and about programme barriers and unintended consequences of implementation at the ‘coalface’. Different practitioners will have different experiences and this may shed useful light on multiple aspects of programme theory.

Participants of the programme (e.g. service users, patients, claimants) can generally talk about their own outcomes and the change processes to which they attribute those outcomes. They can also tell you about their own circumstances, which may be relevant to the ‘individual’ components of context.

If the programme theory suggests that the programme will work differently for particular sub-groups or in particular sets of circumstances, it is important to ensure that those sub-groups or contexts are represented in the sample. It is also important to ensure that the evaluator can identify which set of interview data relates to which sub-group or context. Without that, realist analysis is all but impossible.

Westthorp and Manzano have developed a ‘starter set’ of questions for realist evaluation interviewing (See ‘Realist Evaluation Interviewing – A ‘Starter Set’ of Questions’ in this series).

Further Reading

Manzano A (2016) The craft of interviewing in realist evaluation. *Evaluation* 22(3): pp.342–360

Pawson R (1996) Theorizing the interview. *British Journal of Sociology*, pp.295–314.

Pawson R and Tilley N (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage

I have an idea. Let's all show our cards. It will be much easier to decide if we should fold.



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