



Realist Evaluation Interviewing – A ‘Starter Set’ of Questions

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The following table is designed to be read alongside the document ‘The Realist Interview’, in this series. It provides examples of basic questions that can be adapted for use in realist interviews, with an explanation or rationale for each.

Question / Question structure

Can you tell me what your involvement in (or contact with) [programme / element of programme] has been?

What do you consider the outcomes of [programme / element of programme] to have been for [specific stakeholder group]?

For programme participants, this question can be asked “for yourself”, “for your family”, and so on.

Can you give an example of [outcome named in previous question]?

Do you think that the outcomes have been the same for all [people within the specific stakeholder group – e.g. participants, workers]? In what ways have they been different?

Have the outcomes been the same for [specific sub-groups identified in the programme theory – e.g. specific disadvantaged groups; different religions]. In what ways have they been different?

Rationale

Realist interviewing assumes that people know different things according to their roles. Use the answers to this question to tailor future questions to what it is that the respondent can be expected to know about.

Realist evaluation assumes that programmes have different outcomes for different groups. The question should be asked repeatedly for different groups (e.g. children, parents, workers, the community as a whole) until the range of outcomes has been identified. If expected outcomes are not identified, it is OK to prompt for those outcomes. If unexpected outcomes are identified, prompt for greater description. Outcomes should be verified using other data types and sources where possible.

Prompt for evidence of the nature and extent of the outcome. Also serves as a check on socially desirable responding.

Realist evaluation seeks to identify “in what respects, for whom” and “to what extent, for whom” programmes achieve outcomes. The question can be asked repeatedly for different groups – but to manage interview length, would usually focus on the stage of the implementation chain that is the focus of the evaluation

The focus of a realist interview is the programme theory. The question is seeking more specific information about “for whom” the programme has and has not been effective (in what respects, to what extent), but probing specifically in relation to sub-groups that are identified in the programme theory.

We are very curious about how [programme/ element of programme] causes its outcomes. How do you think the programme has caused, or helped to cause [outcome identified by respondent]?

Do you think [the programme/element of programme] changed the way [stakeholder group] thinks or feels about [programme objective] in any way? In what ways? Can you provide examples?
For participants: Has the programme changed the way you think or feel about [x] in any way?

There are lots of ideas about how [programme/ element of programme] actually works, and we think it probably works differently in different places or for different people. One of those ideas is [brief description of main mechanism]. Has it worked at all like that here/for you? Can you give an example?

What is it about the way [programme] was implemented that made a difference to how it worked?
Or 'What is it about the way [Organisation] works that makes a difference to how it works?

We've seen that this [programme] work differently in different places. What is it about this place that makes it work [so well, less well]?

If you could change something about this programme to make it work more effectively here, what would you change and why?

What else do you think we need to know, to really understand how this programme has worked here?

Initial question leading into exploration of mechanisms. Many participants will identify programme activities (e.g. training) or resources (e.g. funding). It is ESSENTIAL to probe further – e.g. – So what did the training provide that was new? Was it mainly about new skills, do you think, or new attitudes? Or: So what exactly was the outcome of the training? How did that help cause (the later outcome)?

Realist evaluation uses the construct of 'reasoning and resources' to explain how programmes cause outcome. This is an explicit probe for 'reasoning' in relation to a specific aspect of programme theory. E.G. – Programme may expect stakeholders to change their understanding of their roles or responsibilities and adapt their behaviour accordingly. So the question might be "Has programme affected how teachers think about their role in any way?"

The subject of a realist interview is the programme theory. The aim is to get the respondent to refine the programme theory for the particular context about which they know. This question should be asked about at least two different explanations of how the programme might work – as a check on socially desirable responding, and to elicit whether the programme works differently for different people.

Realist interviewing sees specific aspects of implementation as aspects of context (i.e. factors that affect whether and how mechanisms fire). The aim is to understand how implementation has affected mechanisms and therefore outcomes. Probe for both positive and negative aspects of implementation.

Realist evaluation assumes context does affect outcomes (by affecting which mechanisms fire). Probe for aspects of culture, local resources/lack of them, local relationships, relationship between organisation and participants and so on.

Often elicits understandings of why programme has not worked as effectively as it might (i.e. mechanisms not firing, aspects of context) as well as strategies for improvement.

Open probe that enables participants to comment on anything not covered by the interview. Structure of the question keeps the focus on 'how the programme works' and 'in this context'.

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