

Renee F. Wilson  
Health Policy and Management

# Realist Review

What is it? How is it different than a  
systematic review?

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# Sources

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# What is a Systematic Review?

A type of literature review that collects and critically analyzes multiple research studies or papers.

# What is a Realist Review?

A newer strategy for synthesizing research with an explanatory rather than judgmental focus.

It seeks to unpack the mechanism of how complex programs work (or why they fail) in particular contexts and settings.

# Why Conduct a Realist Review?

Literature on health care management and policy interventions is epistemologically complex and methodologically diverse, which makes it highly suited to realist review.

Epistemology: The study of the nature of knowledge, justification, and rationality of belief.

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What does it mean to say we know something?

To infer a causal outcome one needs to understand the underlying mechanism (M) that connects them and the context (C) in which the relationship occurs.

In order to evaluate whether a training program reduces unemployment (O), a realist would examine its underlying mechanisms M (e.g., have skills and motivation changed?) and its contexts C (e.g., are there local skill shortages and employment opportunities?). Realist evaluation is all about hypothesizing and testing such CMO configurations.



What works?

What is it about this program that works, for whom, and in what circumstances?

# How are Systematic and Realist Reviews Different?

1. The focus of the synthesis is derived from a negotiation between stakeholders and reviewers and therefore the extent of stakeholder involvement throughout the process is high.
2. The search and appraisal of evidence has a purpose and is theoretically driven with the aim of refining theory.
3. Multiple types of information and evidence can be included.
4. The process is sequential and repetitive.
5. The findings from the synthesis focus on explaining to the reader why (or not) the intervention works and in what ways, to enable informed choices about further use and/or research.

# Steps in a Realist Review

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# Clarify Scope

- a. Identify the review question
  - Nature and content of the intervention
  - Circumstances or context for its use
  - Policy intentions or objectives
- b. Refine the purpose of the review
  - Theory integrity – does the intervention work as predicted?
  - Theory adjudication – which theories fit best?
  - Comparison – how does the intervention work in different settings, for different groups?
  - Reality testing – how does the policy intent of the intervention translate into practice?
- c. Articulate key theories to be explored
  - Draw up a 'long list' of relevant program theories by exploratory searching (see Step 2)
  - Group, categorize or synthesize theories
  - Design a theoretically based evaluative framework to be 'populated' with evidence

# Search for Evidence

- a. Exploratory background search to 'get a feel' for the literature
- b. Progressive focusing to identify key program theories, refining inclusion criteria in the light of emerging data
- c. Deliberate sampling to test a defined subset of these theories, with additional 'snowball' sampling to explore new hypotheses as they emerge
- d. Final search for additional studies when review near completion

# Appraise Primary Studies and Extract Data

- a. Use judgement to supplement formal critical appraisal checklists, and consider 'fitness for purpose':
  - Relevance – does the research address the theory under test?
  - Rigor – does the research support the conclusions drawn from it by the researchers or the reviewers
- b. Develop a custom set of data extraction forms and notation devices
- c. Extract different data from different studies to populate evaluative framework with evidence

# Synthesize Evidence and Draw Conclusions

- a. Synthesize data to achieve refinement of program theory: determine what works for whom, how, and under what circumstances
- b. Allow purpose of review to drive the synthesis process
- c. Use 'contradictory' evidence to generate insights about the influence of context.
- d. Present conclusions as a series of contextualized decision points of the general format 'If A, then B' or 'In the case of C, D is unlikely to work'.

# Disseminate, Implement, and Evaluate

- a. Draft and test out recommendations and conclusions with key stakeholders, focusing especially on levers that can be pulled in here-and-now policy contexts
- b. Work with practitioners and policy-makers to apply recommendations in particular contexts
- c. Evaluate in terms of extent to which programs are adjusted to take account of contextual influences revealed by the review: the 'same' program might be expanded in one setting, modified in another and abandoned in another