Reviewer’s report

Title: RAMESES Publication standards: realist syntheses

Version: 1 Date: 31 October 2012

Reviewer: David Gough

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HAVE THE GUIDELINES BEEN PRESENTED AND EXPLAINED IN A WAY THAT THE COMMUNITY CAN FULLY UNDERSTAND AND IMPLEMENT THESE?

I very much welcome these guidelines. Realist synthesis is an important form of review and there is not always clarity about its methods or standards of reporting. I have come across many cases of people stating that they were undertaking realist syntheses which on inspection did not seem to me to be following realist methods.

Although these guidelines are excellent in many ways I believe that their benefit could be significantly increased if they were further refined before publication. I make some suggestions for this below. These suggestions are based on the draft versions made available to me in October 2012. I have never undertaken a realist synthesis and I apologize for any of my comments that are based on errors in my understanding of the issues.

(i) Lack of context about the realist synthesis compared to other methods

a) Realist synthesis is one of a very many approaches to reviewing literature

The opening of the introduction to the abstract positions realist synthesis in opposition to Cochrane reviews: ‘There is growing interest in realist synthesis as an alternative to (or to extend and supplement) conventional Cochrane-style reviews.’ (page 2). This could be questioned on several grounds: Cochrane reviews are well known but are probably not the most common form of review; some Cochrane reviews do include theory driven approaches; and surely guidelines for realist reviews should contextualize themselves against other approaches that emphasize theory driven or mixed methods approaches rather than in opposition to Cochrane.

b) Much of the text on ‘What is realist synthesis’ could apply to other methods of evaluation research and reviews. For example:

Expressions such as “What works for whom under what circumstances, how and why?” (page 4 and 13) and ‘Realist inquiry seeks to unpack the context#mechanism#outcome relationship’ (page 4) are often used in discussing realist synthesis but these ambitions are not limited only to realist synthesis
reviewers and may be part of the reason that some people consider they are undertaking realist reviews when they are not.

Similarly, the ‘key tenets’ of realist philosophy (page 5) state that our understanding of social reality is mediated through our brains, that macro and meso and micro levels contexts interact, and that we hypothesize mechanisms to understand how contexts effect outcomes. These are also tenets shared by many other approaches to evaluation research.

The ‘potential for insights that go beyond the narrowly experimental paradigm of the randomised controlled trial’ (page 5) is also shared by many evaluating complex interventions.

c) In addition, some of the text could also apply to other forms of review. For example:

‘.. review may generate a large number of avenues that might be explored and explained, and because resources and timescale are invariably finite, the expectation is that the review must be contained by progressively focusing both its breadth (how wide an area?) and depth (how much detail?). This important process may involve discussion and negotiation with (for example) content experts, funders and/or users.’ (page 13)

And:

‘Realist reviews do not exclude sources solely on the basis of their study design’ (page 16)

Recent references which discuss the differences between approaches to systematic reviews include papers by myself and by Sandelowski:

Gough D, Thomas J, Oliver S (2012) Clarifying differences between review designs and methods, Systematic Reviews, 1:28


(ii) Lack of clarity about the distinctive features of the realist synthesis method

The authors of the guidelines could quite reasonably argue that they need to specify what realist reviews do even if other reviews do the same. The difficulty is that the guidelines do not aim to provide a detailed account of the method, so the reader may not be clear about the defining characteristics of a realist review compared to other forms of theory driven evaluation reviews. Some of this specificity of realist reviews is revealed as you read through the progressive sections of the guidelines but I believe that it would be more helpful if there were clearer statements about the specific methods of realist synthesis at the start of the guidelines. I understand that the philosophical approach is key and drives everything else, but without clear statements about the interpretative method, it is more likely that people will misunderstand the approach.
My understanding is that a realist review undertakes an iterative interpretative synthesis of theories or mechanisms followed by empirical testing of those theories. The same could be said of other theory-driven approaches to reviewing. What seems to be distinctive (due to the particular orientation of realist methods) is that the empirical testing stage is also iterative (in contrast to a priori empirical testing of other approaches). This iterative approach in the second stage of a review does become evident as you read through the guidelines (e.g. page 13 on the evolving questions, page 16 on iterative searching, page 19 on selection and appraisal and synthesis,) though some sections give a bit of a mixed message – see section (iii) below). I believe the guidelines would be much clearer if this fundamental difference about iteration in empirical testing was spelt out at the very start of the guidelines. If however I am wrong about the approach to empirical testing, then maybe this whole issue could be made clearer in the guidelines.

(iii) Text might be interpreted as inconsistent or accurate in terms of describing the method

a) Qualitative or quantitative methods?

The example for Item 2 of the Abstract (page 11) states: ‘Realist review - a qualitative systematic review method whose goal is ..’. Is realist synthesis a qualitative method? It seems to me that it uses quantitative approaches in empirical testing and so uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. This seems to be confirmed by later text in the same example with empirical statements of likelihood: ‘Learners were more likely to accept a course if ….’ and ‘Interactivity’ led to effective learning only if…’. I would suggest not using the terms quantitative and qualitative as they create a very confusing and imprecise distinction (see Gough et al (20112) and Sandelowski et al, (2012).

b) Are the screening examples iterative?

The example for Item 9 on the Selection and appraisal of documents (page 17) reads like the application of a priori inclusion criteria tool for screening rather than an iterative process.

Similarly, Figure 1 of the flow chart of search (Item 12 on page 22, 35 and 40) looks similar to those using a priori methods. This might unintentionally give the impression that this was the approach to searching, rather than the more iterative strategies of realist reviews.

(iv) Other unclear text

a) Repetition of rational for realist reviews

The examples for Item 3 rationale for review (page 12) seem to focus on why a realist review was used rather than the need for a review of some sort. This is a bit repetitive as it is also dealt with in example for Item 6 on the rationale for using realist synthesis (page 14).
b) Clarity about scoping the literature

The example for Item 7 on scoping the literature (page 15) states ‘we started out by conducting a rapid review’ but this term is not explained – what type of rapid review is it?. This followed by the explanation which starts ‘ This step ..’ without a very clear explanation about what this step is or involves.

c) Technical terms

Does the word ‘demi-regularity add anything in ‘recurrent patterns (or demi-regularities) of outcomes ‘ (page 21)?

(v) Possible implicit criticisms of other methods

A few words in the text might be interpreted as a critique of other approaches or positioning of realist synthesis as the only review method examining complexity. This might be over sensitive on my part but little would be lost by removing words such as ‘merely’ from ‘Realist review is not a technical process – i.e. merely following a set protocol ‘ (page 18). Research that uses a priori methods undertakes conceptual work in advance and after the study rather than during (as is done in iterative methods such as realist reviews) and their methods are not ‘merely’.

(vi) Reporting of detail of methods used

The draft guidelines clearly state the importance of transparency in reporting and that this may be problematic with publication in journals with word limits (page 30).

I believe that it would also to be useful to even more explicitly warn against the dangers of a lack of detail existing in the methods of a specific review. A realist review can be a very large undertaking involving an interpretative review of the theories/ mechanisms being examined and then a number of sub-reviews checking the empirical evidence supporting different aspects of those mechanisms. It would not be surprising if a review team found that it did not have the resources to examine all the details of this process yet submit a paper for publication that seemingly covered all of these areas. I have come across such realist reviews that were fascinating and well executed in many ways, but which on examination had very little detail of the empirical testing stage of the many sub areas of the review.

HOW WELL HAVE REPORTING STANDARDS BEEN ADHERED TO?

They have not been published so we do not yet know but I have witnessed much confusion over what a realist review is and so these guidelines would be very helpful.

ARE ALL CLAIMS AND STATEMENTS FULLY SUPPORTED WITH EITHER NEW DATA OR REFERENCES TO PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS?

I believe so – but see comments under the first section above.
HOW USEFUL WILL THESE GUIDELINES BE TO AUTHORS AND EDITORS?
They will be very useful. They will be even more useful when accompanied by the planned ‘quality standards and training materials’ (page 9). It might have been preferable if the quality standards had been published with or before the reporting guidelines.

HAVE SIMILAR GUIDELINES BEEN PUBLISHED PREVIOUSLY?
Not that I am aware.

DO THE AUTHORS HAVE THE REQUIRED EXPERTISE AND KNOWLEDGE TO DESIGN THESE GUIDELINES?
Yes, they are leaders in the field of realist synthesis methods.

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interest beyond academic debate on these issues.