Reviewer’s report

Title: Realist synthesis: illustrating the method

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Reviewer: RAY D PAWSON

Reviewer’s report:

Many new methods of systematic review have been devised in recent years – all with the objective of trying to synthesise the evidence on complex interventions, those which are unlikely to be implemented in the same way, unlikely to be directed at exactly the same problem, and unlikely to be mounted in the same set of circumstances. The paper attempts a much needed exposition of some of the nuts and bolts of one such method - realist synthesis. The paper is primarily a methodological exposition - outlining the methods, clarifying terms, providing worked examples, adding notes of caution and commentary. Above all it attempts to bring to the surface many of the tacit steps and much of the ‘detritus’ that is rarely seen in published reviews.

This referee’s report is provided by the prime instigator of the method and editors will have to factor this into consideration in interpreting the recommendations. In general terms, my view has always been that realist synthesis (RS) is a ‘logic of inquiry’. RS does not come with a technical rule book and so adaptations such as the attempt, as here, to incorporate some elements of traditional reviews are welcome and necessary.

More specific comments:

1. In such a fast moving field, some of the paper’s early commentary about lack of published discussions on and examples of the method are already a little outdated. There are now several including:


More significant perhaps is a current SDO funded project led by Greenhalgh and linking a couple of dozen research teams to develop methodological guidance, publication standards and teaching resources for realist synthesis. www.jiscmail.ac.uk/RAMESES

A couple of references would remedy this immediate difficulty. Clearly there are opportunities for collaborative learning that lie beyond the scope of the present paper.

2. The paper is largely consonant with realist principles (at least in my view of them), except perhaps the following:

Figure 1 still uses the term ‘dose’ – this sits uncomfortably with complex system
level innovations. What is the dosage in evidence informed healthcare?

The term ‘narrative’ is used to describe the end points of the synthesis. Again this is redolent of other traditions in which the review seeks to provide some overview. RS aims for a revised programme theory, aimed at better implementation and targeting of a programme.

Many of the core questions addressed are ‘what’ questions. There is relatively little detail on the development of these but I gained a sense that these were trying to amass ‘factors’ relevant in evidence informed healthcare, rather than prime question of the realist approach, namely – question about ‘why’ a programme or its factors work.

3. The paper is very difficult to follow and digest. Many of the examples and most of the interest of the paper is lodged in tables and additional files. The narrative line jumps all over the place. No doubt there are good reasons for this – journal wordage requirements, multiple authorship, the fact that it is a methodological paper, the fact that the substantive results are published elsewhere, the fact that this too huge an area to any method of review to encompass. Nevertheless, it is a punishing ride for the reader – who would need quite a background in both the method and the policy domain to follow many points made. I have no specific suggestions for resolving this. The paper should either be taken on its own terms or rewritten in smaller digestible chunks.

This is an important paper on the finer points of the craft of synthesis. I hope it finds publication in some form.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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 interests'