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Use of the Realist Framework at the Georgia Health Policy Center

The Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) has become an international leader in the application of the realist framework to research, evaluation, and synthesis. The realist approach was first introduced by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley in 1997.¹ In contrast to evaluation approaches that seek to answer “Does an intervention work?” or “Was it effective?” the realist approach provides a framework for discovering “What works for whom in what circumstances?”¹

Realist researchers expect outcomes to vary across interventions and subgroups based on an underlying assertion that no program works the same way for all people in all places all the time. This framework helps program developers and policymakers understand the varying conditions in which an intervention takes place and explain the underlying contexts and mechanisms that influence the outcome. The realist framework examines:

- Context — Broader conditions (individual, interpersonal, institutional, infrastructural, or geographical) into which an intervention is introduced.
- Mechanism — How the change will be achieved. Mechanisms includes two parts: resources (e.g., the intervention) and changes in mindset, reasoning, decisions, or actions that are or are not triggered by introduction of resources into a particular context.²
- Outcome — The intended and unintended results or consequences produced when different mechanisms are stimulated in varying contexts.

Ultimately, this explanatory approach prepares practitioners, program and intervention designers, and policymakers to develop increasingly effective solutions and tailor strategies to fit specific populations and conditions based on accrued evidence.



The realist evaluation cycle is based on the scientific method. The process is iterative and includes four phases. Repeating the realist research cycle across programs, settings, or time can aid in identifying patterns, deepening insights, and enabling further refinement of working hypotheses and the potential for more pragmatic conclusions.

Realist principles have also been applied to evidence review and synthesis, as well as to the full research cycle. For complex interventions operating within complex systems, the realist approach to evidence synthesis aims to address complexity by describing patterns of relationships between how an intervention is delivered, contextual factors, and the outcomes.

This approach can provide greater understanding of interventions and supportive implementation contexts for policy decisionmaking.³

¹ Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
² Dalkin, S. M., Greenhalgh, J., Jones, D., Cunningham, B., & Lhussier, M. (2015). What's in a mechanism? Development of a key concept in realist evaluation. *Implementation Science*, 10, 49.
³ Pawson, R., Greenhalgh, T., Harvey, G., & Walshe, K. (2005). Realist review — A new method of systematic review designed for complex policy interventions. *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, Suppl 1, 21-34.

Project Examples

Multisite Evaluation of Bridging for Health: Improving Community Health Through Innovations in Financing⁴

Evaluators are increasingly called upon to evaluate complex initiatives implemented in broadly different contexts, requiring them to understand context-specific elements and incorporate design flexibility. As the national coordinating center for Bridging for Health: Improving Community Health Through Innovations in Financing, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, GHPC provided technical assistance to support seven communities' efforts to address an upstream driver of health by rebalancing and aligning investments and fostering linkages among health care, public health, and other sectors.



The Bridging for Health evaluation team at GHPC combined developmental and realist evaluation approaches. Both approaches foster evaluation of complex, innovative interventions operating in dynamic environments. The use of a multisite local-national evaluator model maximized contextual knowledge and provided rapid data collection for ongoing feedback loops at the site and national coordinating center levels. This enabled continual learning through iterative sensemaking, which informed adaptation of the technical assistance approach.

A Rapid Realist Synthesis of Treatment Services for Co-Occurring Substance Use and Mental Health Problems⁵



Ireland's Health Research Board engaged GHPC to conduct a rapid realist review and synthesis of the global literature to inform best practices for the integration of treatment and services

for individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance use conditions.

The review included an iterative and systematic search process, engagement with knowledge users representing both providers and individuals with lived experience, and multiple stages of data analysis and synthesis. The review identified characteristics that influence successful implementation and outcomes, as well as approaches to facilitating access and integrating mental health and substance use services. Recommendations were categorized by the four levels where actions can be taken: policy or system, organizational and provider, service and treatment, and individual and family.

Results from this review provide insights into building integrated systems using evidence-based models of care to improve outcomes for individuals with co-occurring disorders.

Collective Impact Evaluation at the Colorado Health Foundation⁶



In early 2013, as the idea of collective impact gained momentum, the Colorado Health Foundation embarked on a collective impact initiative to align its funded work within delivery

system payment reform to realize greater impact from its investments, to reduce duplication, and, ultimately, to improve the health of Coloradans.

The Foundation demonstrated its organizational commitment to rapid-cycle learning and partnered with GHPC to support that learning. The Foundation's interest in realist evaluation as a learning tool was rooted in a desire for real-time improvement and understanding what actions influenced success or failure more broadly in deeply collaborative work.

Developmental evaluation, with its frequent cycles of data collection and sensemaking, combined with a realist lens enabled understanding of the interactions of numerous factors and how they enabled or inhibited outcomes. The GHPC evaluation team identified several context-mechanism-outcome patterns that emerged in the initiative's dynamics.

⁴ Heberlein, E. (Ed.). (2019). *Bridging for Health: Improving Community Health Through Innovations in Financing*. Atlanta, GA: Georgia Health Policy Center. <https://ghpc.gsu.edu/download/bridging-for-health-book/>

⁵ Minyard, K., Manteuffel, B., Smith, C. M., Attell, B. K., Landers, G., Schlanger, M., & Dore, E. (2019). *HRB Drug and Alcohol Evidence Review: Treatment services for people with co-occurring substance use and mental health problems. A rapid realist synthesis*. 6. Dublin, Ireland: Health Research Board.

⁶ Landers, G., Price, K., & Minyard, K. (2018). Developmental Evaluation of a Collective Impact Initiative: Insights for Foundations. *The Foundation Review*, 10(2), 80-92. <https://ghpc.gsu.edu/download/developmental-evaluation-of-a-collective-impact-initiative-insights-for-foundations/>