RAMESES Delphi - Round 2

Introduction

Thank you for continuing to help us with the RAMESES project.

In Round 1 of our Delphi process, we had asked panel members for suggestions of Items to include in the RAMESES publication standards for meta-narrative and realist syntheses – 'RAMESES statement'. What we hope to produce are publication standards rather than detailed guidance on how to conduct a meta-narrative or realist synthesis. Your comments related to how to conduct reviews have however been captured for later use when we develop our training materials. We hope to make our standards relevant to researchers, journal editors, peer-reviewers and funders.

We have collated all your responses and compiled a list of potential Items for inclusion in the 'RAMESES statement'. In Round 2, we would be grateful if you would please rate each Item for:

• Relevance (should we include an Item on this theme/topic at all?)
• Content (should we word this Item like this?)

There will be a free text box for you to make comments on any aspect of an Item. To help you understand why an Item has been included we have also provided a brief explanation.

This survey will take you between 30 to 60 minutes to complete.

You may at any time stop and return to where you left off by clicking on the unique web link you were sent inviting you to take part in this survey. You may also go back to previous items if you wish.

We would be most grateful if you would please try to complete the survey by Sunday 8th January 2012 at the latest.

Please click on the NEXT button below to proceed.

RAMESES Delphi - Round 2

PART 1 - Realist Synthesis

The questions in PART 1 cover potential Items for inclusion in the RAMESES publication standards for Realist Synthesis only.

The first four Items are topics for consideration in the Introductory section.

Please click on the NEXT button below to proceed.

Item 1: Title - Realist Synthesis

Item 1: Title

In the title, identify the document as a Realist Synthesis or Review.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
Our background searching has shown that some realist reviews are not flagged as such in the title and may also be inconsistently indexed, and hence are more difficult to locate during searching. The terms realist synthesis and realist review are both in widespread use. Consistent use of one term is likely to aid indexing and identification.
We are interested to find out which term you prefer and why.

Please choose your preferred term:

○ Realist Synthesis

○ Realist Review

○ No preference

Reason(s) for choice of term (optional):

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 2: Abstract - Realist Synthesis

Item 2: Abstract

As far as possible taking account of journal-specific formatting and content requirements, the abstract should contain brief details of the study context, review question or objectives; search strategy; selection and appraisal of documents; analysis and synthesis methods; results; and conclusions/implications.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:

Apart from the title, an abstract is the only source of information accessible to searchers unless the full paper is obtained. The information in it must allow reviewers and/or users to decide if the review is relevant to their needs.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

RAMESES Delphi - Round 2

Item 3: Rationale for review - Realist Synthesis

Item 3: Rationale for review

Explain why the review was done and what it is likely to add to existing understanding of the topic area.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:
As with all research, a background section explaining what is already known and what the researchers considered the 'knowledge gaps' to be is a helpful orientation. Some realist reviews are done with the goal of adding to the academic literature (e.g. a thesis); others may be undertaken for a specific purpose (e.g. to inform policy in a particular setting).

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 4: Objectives and focus of review - Realist Synthesis

Item 4: Objectives and focus of review

State the purpose of the review and the review question(s). Define and justify the scope of the review.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
A realist review research question contains some or all of the elements of 'What works, how, why, for whom, to what extent and in what circumstances, in what respect and over what duration?' and applies realist logic to address the question (see Item 11).

Because a realist review may generate a potentially infinite number of things that might be explored and explained, and because resources and timescale are invariably finite, 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) context experts, funders and/or users. It is typical and legitimate for the review question and/or the breadth and depth of the review to evolve as the review progresses. How and why it evolved is usually worth reporting either here or in item 16.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Methods section - Realist Synthesis

The following questions cover potential Items for inclusion in the Methods section of the RAMESES publication standards.

Please click on the NEXT button below to proceed.

Item 5: Protocol - Realist Synthesis

Item 5: Protocol

The final protocol (i.e. the account of what was actually done) should be reproduced, at least in summary form, in the document which presents the main findings. If this is not done, the omission should be justified and a reference or link to the protocol given. It may also be appropriate to publish the original protocol (e.g. as set out in the grant proposal or developed in the early stages of the review).

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:

The study protocol for a realist review differs in significant respects from that in a traditional meta-analytic review. As noted above (in Item 4), the research question and scope (and, by implication, all subsequent steps) of a realist review can (and often should) evolve over the course of the review. However, this does not mean the review can meander uncontained. An accessible summary of what was done, in what order, and why is essential for interpreting the review. Comparing the original protocol with the final account of what was done may provide transparency on how the review's processes has evolved in its bid to build understanding of the topic area.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 6: Rational for using Realist Synthesis

Item 6: Rationale for using Realist Synthesis

Explain why realist synthesis was used.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:
Realist synthesis is a theory-driven method that is firmly rooted in a realist philosophy of science. It places particular emphasis on understanding causation (in this case, understanding how programs and policies generate outcomes through human decisions) and how causal mechanisms are shaped and constrained by social context. This makes it particularly suitable for reviews of certain topics and questions – for example, complex social programmes that involve human decisions and actions. It also makes realist review less suitable than other review methods for certain topics and questions – for example those which seek primarily to determine the average effect size of a simpler intervention administered in a limited range of conditions. The most common limitation of published 'realist' reviews is inadequate engagement with the philosophical principles of the realist approach and the implications these have, firstly, for understanding programs and how they work, and secondly, for cumulating evidence and explanation.

The published literature on realist review indicates that some review teams have deliberately adapted the method as first described by Pawson. The description and rationale for any adaptations made should be provided. Such information will allow criticism, debate and counter criticism amongst review teams and users on the suitability of such adaptations.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 7: Scoping the literature - Realist Synthesis

Item 7: Scoping the literature

Describe and justify the initial process of exploratory scoping of literature.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
This step is used to build an understanding of the programme or intervention(s) of interest and identify provisional programme theories. If identification of programme theories is not deemed to be appropriate at this stage, this should be justified. Findings from the scoping exercise should be reported in the Results section.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 8: Searching processes - Realist Synthesis

Item 8: Searching processes

State how the search was done and provide details on all the information sources accessed in the review. Where electronic search strategies were used, the information should include (for example) name of database, dates of coverage, limits applied, and date last searched. Contact with relevant content experts should be indicated.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:

Searching should be guided by the objectives and focus of the review, and revised iteratively in the light of emerging data. Data relevant to a realist review may lie in a broad range of sources that may cross traditional disciplinary, program and sector boundaries. Searching is thus likely to involve searching for different sorts of data, or studies from different domains, with which to test different aspects of any provisional theory.

A single maximally sensitive search is most unlikely to be sufficient. Search methods using forward and backward citation tracking are more likely to help in finding the documents necessary to develop and then test provisional theories. Realist reviews do not exclude sources solely on the basis of their study design, hence 'methodological filters' (for example, to identify randomised controlled trials) should used with caution, if at all.

Searching is likely to be iterative because as the review progresses new or refined elements of theory may be required to explain particular findings, or to examine specific aspects of particular processes. As new elements of theory are included, searches for evidence to support, refute or refine those elements may be required. If undertaken the process used for any such additional searches should be clearly documented. A search strategy that does not change as the review progresses may suggest insufficient reflection on emerging findings.

Sufficient detail should be given to enable the reader to judge whether searching was sufficiently extensive and directed to locate key sources needed for theory building and/or testing.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 9: Selection and appraisal of documents - Realist Synthesis

Item 9: Selection and appraisal of documents

Explain how judgements were made about documents to be included and excluded, and justify these.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
Realist review is not a technical process. Rather, it requires a series of judgements about the relevance and robustness of particular data for the purposes of answering a specific question.

Within any one document, there may be several pieces of data that serve different purposes in the review, such as helping to build one theory, refining another theory and so on. Therefore the selection (for inclusion or exclusion) and appraisal of the 'worth' of any document cannot be based on an overall assessment of document 'quality'. An appraisal of the 'worth' of any section of data (within a document) should be made on two criteria:
• Relevance – whether it can contribute to theory building and/or testing; and
• Rigour – whether the method used to generate that particular piece of data is credible and trustworthy.

A wide range of documents can potentially contribute to a realist review. For example, outcome and impact studies, qualitative interviews, ethnography, questionnaire surveys, mixed-method case studies, and close reading of policies, business plans, websites, project initiation documents and 'grey literature' write-ups of programmes may all contribute in different ways to identifying and elucidating programme theories. Because of this range and realist review's focus on relevance and rigour, it can initially be difficult to 'whittle down' the number of documents that are potentially eligible for inclusion in a review. This process can only occur as the data sources are analysed in detail. Thus, in practice, the selection and appraisal stage may need to run in parallel with the analysis stage.

Description of the selection and appraisal process should be sufficiently detailed to enable a reader to estimate how likely it is that researchers inadvertently excluded data that may have significantly altered the findings of the review.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

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Item 10: Data extraction - Realist Synthesis

Item 10: Data extraction

Describe and explain which data were extracted from the included documents and justify this selection.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:
There are two purposes for data extraction:
1) to assist data analysis and synthesis and
2) to add to the transparency of the review process.

The extracted data may consist of descriptions (e.g. of the detail of what was done in a programme), findings (e.g. cure rates, mortality) or explanations about how and why the programme may have worked in particular contexts. Of particular interest to the realist reviewer are data which support the use of realist logic to answer the review's question(s) – e.g. data on context, mechanisms, and outcome configurations, demi-regularities, middle-range and/or programme theories. Realist review is used for a wide range of research questions, so it is impossible to be prescriptive about which data should be extracted. However, the link between the research question and the type of data extracted should be clear.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 11: Analysis and synthesis processes - Realist Synthesis

Item 11: Analysis and synthesis processes

Describe the analysis and synthesis processes in detail. This section should include information on the constructs that are analysed, describe the analytic process, and document and justify any changes in this process as the study unfolded.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:

In a realist review, the analysis and synthesis processes occur iteratively and may be sequential or in parallel. At the centre of any realist analysis is the application of a realist philosophical 'lens' to data. A realist analysis of data specifically seeks to analyse data using realist concepts. Specifically, realism adheres to a generative explanation for causation – i.e. an outcome (O) of interest was generated by relevant mechanism(s) (M) being triggered by context (C). Within or across the documents, recurrent patterns (or demi-regularities) of outcomes and their associated mechanisms and contexts (CMO configurations) are likely to occur.

During synthesis the goal is to make sense of the analysed data using theory, at at least one of two levels. Firstly, theory (or theories) may be sought, developed and/or refined to explain how it is that a programme (or part of a programme) achieves its outcomes (that is, the mechanism(s) operating within a program) and the contexts in which those mechanisms do and do not fire. This provides a realist program theory. Secondly, theory (or theories) may be sought, developed and/or refined to explain, at a somewhat more general level, the pattern of C, M and Os. A full realist analysis addresses both these levels and attempts to make sense of the relationship between these two levels. Syntheses which address only one level may also be considered realist syntheses assuming that they apply and demonstrate application of a realist philosophy of science. The level(s) of analysis chosen will depend on the review's focus. The theories used may have been developed and/or refined from the data and/or be refinement of existing substantive theory.

The key analytic process in realist review involves iterative testing and refinement of theoretically based explanations using empirical findings in data sources. Reviewers may draw on any appropriate analytic techniques to undertake this testing. Explanation and justification for the choice of techniques should be provided.

Ideally a description should be provided on how the all the individuals involved in the review have been involved in the analysis and synthesis processes, and how these evolved as the review took shape.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

RAMESES Delphi - Round 2

Results section - Realist Synthesis

The following questions cover potential Items for inclusion in the Results section of the RAMESES publication standards.

Please click on the NEXT button below to proceed.

Item 12: Document flow diagram - Realist Synthesis

Item 12: Document flow diagram

Ideally within a flow diagram, provide details on the number of documents assessed for eligibility and included in the review with reasons for exclusion at each stage as well as an indication of their source of origin. A template (which may need further modification to suit the data) is given in Figure X.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:
A flow diagram provides an accessible summary of the sequence of steps and gives and indication of the volume of data included and excluded at each step.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

RAMESES Delphi - Round 2

Item 13: Document characteristics - Realist Synthesis

Item 13: Document characteristics

Information on the characteristics of the documents included in the review should be provided.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
Characteristics of documents might include for example (where applicable) full citation, country of origin, study design and (where applicable) main findings. A clear summary of the characteristics of included sources adds to the transparency of the review and may help readers judge the coherence and plausibility of inferences. Reviewers may wish to report data source characteristics within one or more tables.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 14: Main findings - Realist Synthesis

Item 14: Main findings

Present the key findings with a specific focus on theory building and testing.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:

The defining feature of a realist review is the nature of the theory(ies) it offers. Such a theory explains why a social programme / intervention generates particular outcomes in particular contexts, in terms of one or more mechanisms – that is how the programme's infrastructure and resources trigger particular decisions or behaviours in human participants. Programme theories are usually 'middle-range' – that is, specific enough to generate propositions that can be tested about aspects of the programme but sufficiently abstract to be applicable to other programmes. Mechanisms are contingent: they are causal processes that have a tendency to occur in a particular set of conditions, but which do not always occur (because the circumstances have to be right for any particular mechanism to operate, and because many mechanisms can operate concurrently, sometimes cancelling each other out).

The validity of a 'realist' review which talks about programme theories or mechanisms but which expresses these as simple and linear relationships between variables should be questioned.

The findings of a realist review consist largely of inferences about the links between context, mechanism and outcome and the theory(ies) that account for these links. It is important that where inferences are made this is clearly articulated. It is also important to include where possible as much of an explanation to show how these inferences were arrived at.

Transparency of the review process can be demonstrated, for example, by including such things as a detailed worked example, verbatim quotes from primary sources, or an exploration of disconfirming data (i.e. findings which appeared to refute the programme theory but which, on closer analysis, could be explained by other contextual influences).

When presenting inferences about context-mechanism-outcome configurations, reviewers should be clear about what they have categorised as context, what as mechanism and what as outcome, and justify this taxonomy. In a realist review a mechanism involves the interaction between particular inputs (or resources) and human reasoning which produces a particular outcome (or not).

More than one piece of data might be needed to support an inference. It is sometimes appropriate to build the argument for an inference as an unfolding narrative in which successive data sources increase the strength of the inference. Provide enough details about each data item to identify its source and enable readers to make judgements about its relevance and rigour.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Discussion section - Realist Synthesis

The following questions cover potential Items for inclusion in the Discussion section of the RAMESES publication standards.

Please click on the NEXT button below to proceed.

Item 15: Summary of findings - Realist Synthesis

Item 15: Summary of findings

Summarise the main findings with attention to the research question, focus of the review, and intended audience.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:
In order to place the findings in the context of the wider literature and policy need, it is necessary to summarise briefly what has been found. This section should be succinct and balanced, explaining one or more key theories which emerged from the analysis and highlighting the strength of evidence for the main inferences. This should be done with careful attention to the needs of the main users of the review.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 16: Strengths, limitations and future research directions - Realist Sy...

Item 16: Strengths, limitations and future research directions

Discuss both the strengths of the review and its limitations. These should include (but need not be limited to):
[a] consideration of all the steps in the review process and
[b] comment on the adequacy and trustworthiness of the explanatory insights which emerged. The limitations identified may point to areas where further research is needed.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Content - (Item wording)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Explanation:

Realist reviews may be constrained by time and resources, by the skill mix and collective experience of the research team and/or by anticipated or unanticipated challenges in the data. These should be made explicit so that readers can interpret the findings in the light of them. A common challenge in realist reviews is that in order to focus the review, some material is omitted at each successive stage. Some aspects of the topic area therefore end up being reviewed in detail and rich explanatory insights produced for these. Other aspects are neglected (relatively or absolutely). It is thus inevitable that in generating illumination, the review will also cast shadows. These should be highlighted in the discussion so as to indicate areas where other reviews might focus.

Limitations imposed by any modifications made to the review process should also be reported and justified.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 17: Comparison with existing literature - Realist Synthesis

Item 17: Comparison with existing literature

Compare and contrast the review's findings with the existing literature on the same topic matter.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:
Comparing and contrasting the findings from a review with the existing literature may help readers to put these into context. For example, this item might cover questions such as; how does this review compare to other reviews (e.g. were they theory-driven?); what does this review add, and which body of work in particular does it add to?; has this review reached the same or different conclusion to previous reviews?; and has it answered a question previously identified as important by leaders in the field?

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 18: Conclusion and recommendations - Realist Synthesis

Item 18: Conclusion and recommendations

List the main implications that are justified by the data and place these in the context of other relevant literature. If appropriate, offer recommendations.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:

A clear line of reasoning is needed to link implications with the findings presented in the results section. If the review is small and preliminary, or if the strength of evidence behind the inferences is weak or moderate, firm implications for practice and policy may be inappropriate.

If recommendations are given, these should be presented appropriately. The explanations in realist analysis are highly dependent on contextual influences. It follows that recommendations must be contingent (for example only under certain contexts will a particular mechanism be triggered to generate the desired outcome) rather than statements that X should or should not be done.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):

Item 19: Funding - Realist Synthesis

Item 19: Funding

Details should be provided for the funding source (if any) for the review, the role played by the funder (if any) and any conflicts of interests of the reviewers.

Please rate this Item for:

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 = Strongly Agree
Relevance - (Item inclusion)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Content - (Item wording)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Explanation:

The source of funding for a review and/or personal conflicts of interests may influence the research question, methods, data analysis and conclusions. No review is a 'view from nowhere', and readers will be better able to interpret the review if they know why it was done and for which sponsor.

If a review is published, the process for reporting funding and conflicts of interest as set out by the publication concerned should be followed.

Please comment on item, including wording (optional):