Realist Reviews from an information specialist’s perspective:

why, what and how
1. Why?
Background
Prayer is amongst the oldest and most widespread interventions used with the intention of alleviating illness...there has been considerable interest in recent years in measuring the efficacy of intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health in a scientifically rigorous fashion.

Objectives
To review the effects of intercessory prayer as an additional intervention for people with health problems already receiving routine health care.

Selection criteria
We included any randomised trial comparing personal, focused, committed and organised intercessory prayer with those interceding holding some belief that they are praying to God or a god versus any other intervention.
Main results

Ten studies are included in this review...For the comparison of intercessory prayer plus standard care versus standard care alone, overall there was no clear effect of intercessory prayer on death...For general clinical state there was also no significant difference between groups...Four studies found no effect for re-admission to Coronary Care Unit...Two other trials found intercessory prayer had no effect on re-hospitalisation.

Authors’ conclusions

These findings are equivocal and, although some of the results of individual studies suggest a positive effect of intercessory prayer, the majority do not and the evidence does not support a recommendation either in favour or against the use of intercessory prayer.
‘Clinical evidence is positively copious and decidedly sleek. By and large, treatments are well defined, trials are tightly controlled and replications abound.’

Ray Pawson

Does Megan’s Law Work? A Theory-Driven Systematic Review
ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice: Working Paper 8
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/realistsynthesis/Supread7.doc

© If you would like to use these slides, please contact ISTeam@exeter.ac.uk
It is unlikely that anything is really this binary

(in the world...)

© If you would like to use these slides, please contact ISTeam@exeter.ac.uk
‘Finding something which works in practice and wondering how it could work in theory’

Walter Heller
2. What?
What follows is radically simplified
Traditional SR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Usual care or Usual care + prayer</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill-health</td>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Realist

© If you would like to use these slides, please contact ISTeam@exeter.ac.uk
3. How?

some options and thoughts

© If you would like to use these slides, please contact ISTeam@exeter.ac.uk
What works, for whom, and in what circumstances

Ray Pawson
The realist approach to searching: Ray Pawson & “purposive sampling”

1) **Background searches**
   “[E]nable the reviewer to make an initial judgement on whether the right volume of materials of the right substance is out there to answer the questions the review is likely to pose”

2) **Search to track programme theories**
   “[F]ocuses on locating the **sources** of administrative thinking, policy history, legislative background and key points of contention that lie behind the intervention....”

3) **Search for empirical evidence**
   “The purpose of such a search is to find primary studies that will help interrogate the explanatory model about how the programme will work”
   “The material sought here...is much more like the orthodox empirical evaluations that are the bread and butter of standard reviews”

4) **Fine-tuning search**
   “Once the synthesis is almost complete the reviewer seeks out additional studies to test those further and revised programme theories that often emerge in the course of the review”

BeHEMoTh (Example)

Be - Behaviour of Interest:
Compliance/acceptability/preference/decision making

H - Health Context: Vitamin Supplement Use

E - Exclusions: NOT 'regression model' OR 'integrative model/integrative care model' OR 'economic model' OR "Markov model" OR "animal model"

MoTh - Models or Theories - “model* OR theor* OR concept* OR framework*” (and/or) Named Models or Theories if required.

Slide from Andrew Booth: In search of Conceptual Richness and Contextual Thickness: Implications of Realist Synthesis for Information Retrieval (CARES Conference, Liverpool)
‘What was done, to whom, and in what circumstances’
The ICRR Handbook: Search Process

Idea #1

1) Identify RCTs/SRs as a method to finding interventions

2) Pull these interventions apart

3) The team’s searches would then become entirely responsive to any theoretical direction of travel

4) Unknown Unknowns. Because you know, who knows?
‘A theory is not like an airline or bus timetable. We are not interested in the accuracy of its predictions. A theory also serves as a base for thinking. It helps us to understand what is going on by enabling our thoughts.’

RH Coase
Search Reporting

‘What was done and how this can be believed.’

David Gough
This is not science

RAMESES says:

name of database, search terms, dates of coverage and date last searched

I would suggest laying this out as*

Database: MEDLINE
Database platform: OVID
Source (if nondatabase): Database
Search date: 16/07/12
Timeframe of search: 1946 to October Week 2 2014
Search strategy: (“intermediate care” or “hospital at home”).ti,ab,kw.
Number of records retrieved: 53
Notes: N/A
File Name: MEDLINE52.txt

Narrative
Conclusions

• Realism seeks to explain complex interventions;

• The review process is less rigidly defined than a traditional SR;

• Literature searching is typically pragmatic: it is not everything which is needed but a range of the right things;

• Exhaustive searches are NOT required; and

• Transparency is important, or so I think.
further reading


RAMASES TRAINING MATERIALS
http://www.ramesesproject.org/media/Realist_reviews_training_materials.pdf

Contact
E: Christopher.Cooper@exeter.ac.uk

© If you would like to use these slides, please contact ISTeam@exeter.ac.uk

The full paper is coming