

What is a Realist review and what can it do for me?

Dr Geoff Wong
Walport Clinical Lecturer
University College London, London, United Kingdom

Brief Bio:

Dr Geoff Wong a Walport Clinical Lecturer in the Research Department of Primary Care and Population Health at UCL. He is also a GP Principal in Swiss Cottage, London and Education Lead for Camden Primary Care Trust. He qualified in Medicine from Cambridge University and (what is now) Guy's, King's and Thomas' Medical school in London and went on to undertake his vocational training in North London. He was awarded a Doctorate in Medicine (MD) for his realist review on the use of the Internet in medical education in 2009. Within UCL he is a tutor on a web based MSc course in International Primary Care and has collaborated with leading experts in the field on the synthesis of data from complex interventions using realist methodology.

Brief presentation outline:

Systematic reviews are regularly used to synthesise the evidence from complex interventions. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that reviewers who seek to make sense of the evidence base from such interventions face significant epistemological and methodological challenges that limit the conclusions they can draw and the generalisability of their findings. A promising approach is the use of realist synthesis method which seeks not only to try to explain how and why certain interventions work, but also to understand the contexts in which they work best.

Realist synthesis has been developed specifically in sociology to try to unpack the 'black box' of complex interventions. It is a research method that is new to biomedicine and draws on a very different epistemological tradition to that used in the more familiar Cochrane type reviews. The aim of this presentation is to introduce this synthesise method and familiarise fellow researchers to its possibilities, strengths and weaknesses using a recently conducted realist synthesis in medical education as a case example.