REALIST REVIEW METHOD
“The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.”

A. Einstein
REALIST REVIEW TASK

- Make explicit the underlying theories or assumptions about how an intervention is supposed to work
- Evaluate theories against the available evidence

WHAT IS A REALIST SYNTHESIS?

- Realist Synthesis - *Theory driven* systematic review (secondary research)

- Goal is *more explanation and understanding than judgment and summation*

- More a “logic of enquiry”- a way of analysing and making *sense of data using a realist lens.*
Why do we need research review method?

- Empirically-driven systematic reviews (e.g. Cochrane or Campbell-style reviews) are more suitable for assessing ‘simple’ interventions such as drug trials.

- Empirically-driven systematic reviews are less suitable for assessing complex social interventions...

...this is because such reviews, which meta-analyse outcomes from multiple studies, have limited capacity in accounting for the effects of culture, community history, geo-political contexts, study design, program theory etc., which characterize complex social interventions.
WHY DO WE NEED RESEARCH REVIEW METHOD?

- Implementation: Long implementation chains
- Context: Outcomes change under differing contexts
- Time: What has happened previously shapes what will happen next
- Outcomes: multiple, planned and unplanned and even contests
- Rivalry: Interventions ‘compete’ with one another in the real world
- Emergence: interventions begets change which causes more change
A SIMPLIFIED DIAGRAM OF A COMPLEX INTERVENTION!
A REALIST APPROACH MEANS SYNTHESIZING

“...to go beyond reportage and summary of existing states of affairs. The point after all is to support fresh thinking to revise policy and launch it in new circumstances” (Pawson, 2006, p. 74*)

...from multiple forms of evidence: research findings, author reflections, and description of program processes and contexts.

...by using ‘abductive reasoning’ and ‘redaction’ to synthesize the evidence;

...by assuming from the outset that key answers to assessment questions are shrouded in a “black box” of programmatic unknowns. The goals is to unpack this “black box”;

• By configuring the contextual features and mechanisms which determine outcomes -(known as C-M-O configuring);
• By identifying semi-predictable patterns or pathways in the data
• (known as demi-regularities);

All this may be explained by one or more (middle-range) theories
Realism is a way of looking at and making coherent sense of this ‘messy’ world we live in.
RESEARCH TO REALITY
REALIST LOGIC:

- What is it ......that works in healthcare quality improvement, for whom, in what circumstances, in what respect, how, and why?
  - Pawson & Tilley 1997

Not: “does it work or not?” But rather, “what works, for whom, and in what circumstances?”
Steps in the review process:

- **Step one**: identifying the review question
- **Step two**: searching for primary studies
  - A search to track program theories
  - A search for primary studies
- **Step three**: quality appraisal
  - Assessment of relevance
  - Assessment of rigour
- **Step four**: extracting the data
  - Annotation, Collation, Reportage
- **Step five**: synthesis
**Steps…**

- **Step five**: possible goals of synthesis:
  - To question program theory integrity;
  - To adjudicate between rival program theories;
  - To consider the same theory in comparative settings;
  - To compare official expectations with actual practice.

INSIGHTS ON REALIST REVIEW

- There is no one way to conduct a realist review
- Context, mechanism, and outcome categories are fluid, overlapping and closely interrelated;
- The logic of realism must be understood and adopted in order to carry out synthesis
INSIGHTS CONTINUED:

- Realist Review is a qualitative-style approach, typically requiring small sample of cases for in-depth analysis;
- “Hand-picking” and snowball sampling techniques are accepted sampling strategies in realist review. The definitions of ‘quality appraisal’ and ‘systematic procedure’ are used differently in realist review as compared to traditional empirical reviews.


• Wong, G., Pawson, R., Owen, L. Policy guidance on threats to legislative interventions in public health: a realist synthesis BMC Public Health 2011, 11, 222

THANK YOU FOR ATTENTION