Realist Evaluation and Ethical Considerations

The RAMESES II Project

Realist evaluation is a form of primary research and will usually involve human participants. It is important that evaluations are conducted ethically. Ethical conduct includes but is not limited to complying with professional ethical standards and local ethics regulatory requirements. Approval by an official body is often required before collecting data from participants and in some cases staff. Realist evaluators come from a range of different professional backgrounds and work in diverse fields. Evaluators should ensure that they are aware of and comply with their professional obligations and local ethics requirements throughout the evaluation.

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A common question is whether realist evaluation studies have particular ethical implications compared to other evaluation designs. There are a number of assumptions about the relationship between evaluation approaches and ethical considerations. For example, some assume that positivist driven methods like some types of questionnaires have fewer and more manageable ethical issues than constructivist data collection tools (interviews, observations, visual methods). Others propose that constructivist methods are more ethical, especially those that include participatory approaches and try to minimise power differentials between evaluator and participants. Experienced evaluators know that ethical considerations arise with every data collection technique. They are also aware that conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas may arise at every stage of the evaluation (Leone et al, 2016): the commissioning and contracting stage, design, programme theory development, data collection and analysis, presentation of results, utilisation of findings, and so on.

In all types of evaluation approaches, ethical issues emerge over time, can be generated by the evaluation, and can change as the evaluation progresses. Because realist evaluation is methodologically iterative and emergent (Pawson, 2013), it can be difficult to specify some aspects of how things will be done before the start of the evaluation. For example, the sampling criteria, how many interviews will be done, exactly who will be interviewed and what each of the stakeholder topic guides will look like may not be known at the beginning of the project. Even when they have been planned, they may change as findings emerge and theory is refined. One challenge that all realist evaluations face when seeking formal ethical approval is that legitimate changes may be required to the methods used and participants recruited as the evaluation evolves.

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The key realist principle to remember when thinking about the ethical implications of realist evaluation is how the project is ‘ethical for whom, in what contexts, in what ways and how?’ (Williams and Westhorp, 2016). Proposals for ethical approval should clearly distinguish the implications of the evaluation for different groups (e.g. programme architects, commissioners, programme managers, frontline managers, service providers, patients or participants, caregivers, evaluators, and so on) and different contexts (across institutions, locations and time spans). This includes particular attention for vulnerable groups (e.g. children, prisoners, participants who are incapable of giving consent). Both benefits and risks for each group and each context should be considered: approval depends on the balance between risk and benefit.
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Realist evaluation proposals should identify strategies for iteration included in the design and the steps that will be taken to manage ethics in relation to iteration. This flexibility implies a number of practical issues to take into consideration: costs of running the study, time-span of the research including the need for ethic committee approval amendments, and technical issues (language used in questionnaires, realist interview guides, and so on).

Realist evaluators should be able to explain to an ethical review committee how and why their methodological decisions have been made, in terms that committee members will understand. Specific implications of the realist methodology will need to be explained. This is likely to include the need to link data across contexts, mechanisms and outcomes and specific strategies to address those implications should be included. For example, it might be necessary to be able to link different data types for the same participant, meaning that the data must be stored in such a way that those linkages can be made. However, depending on the nature of the data and the size of the sample, this may increase the risk of inadvertently identifying informants. This becomes an even bigger issue if data is being stored for future re-use or made available for other researchers later. Therefore, data should be anonymised before they are permanently stored and research data should be stored separately from personally identifying data.

Anticipating that changes may be needed is important when seeking ethical approval. Flexibility may need to be built into the project to allow for iteration to occur without the need to apply for an amendment to ethical approval while at the same time identifying what sorts of more major changes would require such amendments to be made. These distinctions will need to be explained and discussed with those who provide and monitor ethical approval.

Another possible issue for attention is the role of the evaluator in relation to other stakeholders and the programme itself. Realists often walk a fine line, neither completely external and ‘objective’ nor internal. They may contribute to developing programme theory; bring research knowledge to the table; put aspects of theory to stakeholders or participants in interviews; and work with varying degrees of participation by stakeholders in evaluation design, data collection and analysis. These roles have power implications that should be thought through and addressed.

In summary, during the commissioning, design, conduct and impact of realist evaluations, ethical issues will emerge and transform over time. The evaluator should tailor what s/he does in order to achieve intended outcomes while maximising the benefits and minimising the risk of harms for different people and organisations in different circumstances.
References

Further Reading

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This project was funded by the National Institute of Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research Programme (project number 14/19/19).

Professor Trish Greenhalgh’s salary is part-funded by the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre, NIHR grant number BRC-1215-20008.

The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the HS&DR programme, NIHR, NHS or the Department of Health.

We gratefully acknowledge the intellectual input from Emma Williams (Associate Professor, Charles Darwin University, Australia) in the preparation of this document.