

Gill Westhorp & Brad Astbury

Bio

Gill Westhorp (*Community Matters*) is Director of a small consultancy company specialising in realist evaluation and realist synthesis in South Australia. She undertook her PhD with Professor Nick Tilley, developing realist methodologies for community based settings with poor or limited outcomes data. She has undertaken many realist evaluation projects, primarily in education, health and community services settings. She is also undertaking one realist synthesis project and involved as an Associate Investigator in another. Gill is Co-Convenor of the SA Branch of the Australasian Evaluation Society and Convenor of the national Special Interest Group in Realist Evaluation and Realist Synthesis. She regularly provides training in evaluation and realist methodologies both nationally and internationally.

Brad Astbury (*University of Melbourne*) is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Program Evaluation, Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne where he teaches within the Masters of Evaluation course. His interests lie in evaluation theory and social research methodology. Brad has conducted evaluations in a number of areas, including corrections, education, health promotion, and various family and community service interventions. Many of these projects have been informed by a realist approach to evaluation research, and have often included the application of mixed methods to develop, test and refine program theory.

Workshop title

Realist Evaluation: Principles and Practice

Target audience

Beginning and intermediate evaluators with an interest in the practical application of realist evaluation theory

Workshop content

This one-day workshop provides an introduction to the principles and practice of realist evaluation. Main topics to be covered include: key concepts and foundations of realist evaluation theory; alternative approaches and practical guidelines for eliciting program theory, hypothesising mechanisms within program theory; identifying links between substantive theory and realist program theory; using qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques for testing and refining Context-Mechanism-Outcome Configurations (CMOCs); realist logic of inquiry and analysis; and using the findings of realist evaluation to improve social programs and cumulate knowledge about what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

Detailed workshop outline

This workshop will be of interest to a diverse range of participants who would like to learn more about realist evaluation, such as: evaluation practitioners, policy-makers and program developers, staff who manage and deliver programs, as well as evaluation commissioners. The workshop is structured around four sessions, as follows:

Session 1 – Basic Concepts

- The development of ideas about program theory-driven evaluation
- Pawson and Tilley's 'scientific realist' version of program theory
- Philosophical assumptions
- Analytical constructs (context, mechanism, outcome, CMO configurations)

Session 2 – Theories and Mechanisms

- The realist evaluation cycle
- Identifying program theories
- Hypothesising CMOCs within program theory

- Data for testing CMOC hypotheses and refining program theory

Session 3 – Identifying ‘what matters’ about context and outcomes

- Contextual sensitivity of mechanisms
- Hypothesising and testing critical features of context
- The conceptual difference between context and ‘moderators’
- Identifying intended (and unintended) consequences of programs

Session 4 – Synthesising learning.

- Using realist evaluation to improve programs and policies and cumulate knowledge of middle-range program theory.
- Application to participants’ own evaluation projects.

Expected learning outcomes

At the completion of this one-day workshop participants should:

- Understand the fundamental principles and key concepts associated with realist evaluation theory;
- Have developed knowledge of key methodological strategies used by realist evaluators to understand and explain programs;
- Understand the processes and logic involved in building, testing and refining realist program theory;
- Have greater insight into how realist evaluation theory can be usefully applied in real-world settings to improve programs and cumulate knowledge;
- Be aware of the major benefits and challenges associated with realist evaluation practice.

Teaching strategy

The format will be a mix of presentation, group discussion of concepts, and application exercises using case study materials.