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Keio University

Finding Solutions to Psychosocial Challenges Facing Older Adults -Researchers collect and summarize studies using realist evaluation (RE)-

A research group has used realist evaluation (RE) to extract and summarize the findings of 54 studies that examine solutions to the psychosocial healthcare issues facing older adults. The group was led by Keio University researchers, including Shinya Mitani, a Ph.D student in the nursing program at the Graduate School of Health Management, and Professor Hiroki Fukahori in the Faculty of Nursing and Medical Care.

Realist evaluation (RE) is a social science research approach with roots in realism and the works of English philosopher Roy Bhaskar. The method, which is used by researchers throughout Europe, is said to help develop, evaluate, enhance, and disseminate solutions and policies to deal with complex psychosocial issues. This is because RE not only focuses on a solution's outcomes, but also identifies the conditions under which the solution is effective and the underlying mechanisms (see Fig. 1). This research group undertook this study believing that RE would be effective in advancing solutions in Japan and Asia, regions where super-aging has led to an accumulation of issues influenced by changes in family dynamics and growing segments of the population that suffer from dementia.

This study's findings indicated that it would require a considerable number of specialists and financial resources to properly assess solutions to the psychosocial challenges facing older adults using RE. The team hopes that this study will serve as the foundation for further investigation using RE of solutions to the psychosocial challenges facing older adults.

The research group also included Assistant Professor Hirofumi Ogawara from Sophia University, Professor Tetsuya Sakakibara from the Tokyo Woman's Christian University School of Arts and Sciences, and Professor Haruta Junji from Keio University. The outcomes of the study were published in *BMJ Open* on August 30, 2024.

1. Background of Research

Older adults in super-aging societies are facing an increasing number of psychosocial challenges in healthcare. These challenges have complex factors such as changing family structures, with an increase in single- and two-person households, as well as growing populations of older adults with dementia. To address these challenges, more researchers are turning to realism¹, a philosophical perspective that encourages the use of objective data, and then analyzing these observations through realist evaluation (RE)² to develop effective remedial measures. This group of researchers posit that RE is a promising tool in examining solutions to the psychosocial challenges facing older adults, and have mapped the relevant studies that use RE to evaluate measures to improve said issues in healthcare.

2. Research Design and Findings

The researchers used what’s called a “scoping review”³ to map and analyze 54 studies. The psychosocial challenges that the researchers hope to address with RE span a variety of issues including improving dementia care, avoiding emergency admissions or reducing the duration of hospital stay, and preventing adverse events caused by social isolation and loneliness (see Table 2). 28 studies (51.9%) utilized both statistical methods to process numbers and interviews. More than half of the studies (57.4%) were conducted in the UK (see Table 1).

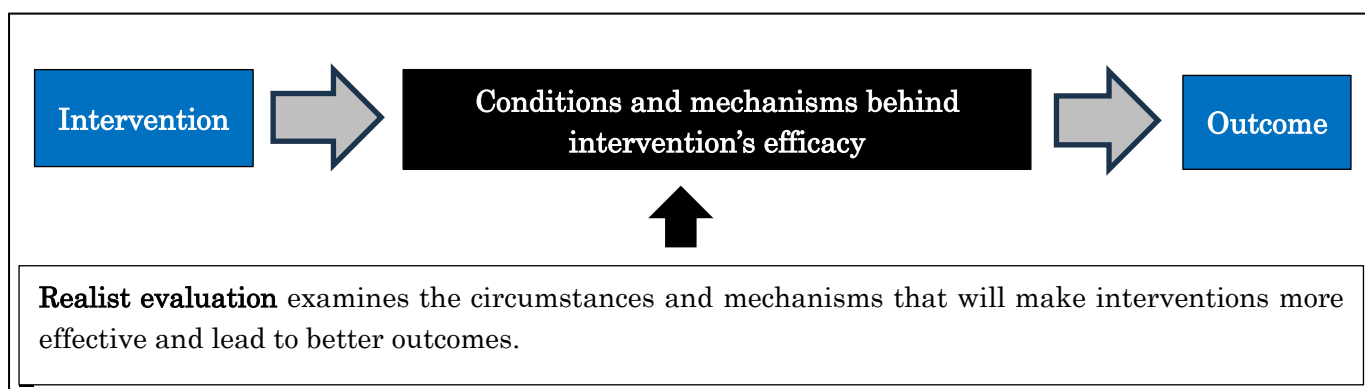


Figure 1. Visual breakdown of realist evaluation provided by the research team

Table 1. Key components of the studies included (some overlap)

	<i>N</i>	(%)
Country of origin (n=54)		
UK	31	(57.4)
Australia	8	(14.8)
Canada	4	(7.4)
The Netherlands	4	(7.4)
Denmark	2	(3.7)
Others†	5	(9.3)
Type of research (n=54)		
Mixed methods	28	(51.9)
Only qualitative methods	25	(46.2)
Only quantitative methods	1	(1.9)

†Brazil, Belgium, Finland, Norway, and Sweden

Table 2. Psychosocial challenges targeted by the 54 studies

	(%)
Avoiding emergency admissions or reducing the duration of hospital stay	(20.4)
Improving dementia care	(20.4)
Promoting changes in organizations such as elderly care facilities	(18.5)
Promoting independence and care for activity of daily living	(14.8)
Supporting aging in one’s preferred place	(13.0)
Promoting end-of-life care	(13.0)
Promoting fall prevention	(11.1)
Reducing the family care burden	(9.3)
Improving medication management	(9.3)
Preventing adverse events caused by social isolation and loneliness	(9.3)
Preventing the exacerbation of chronic diseases	(7.4)

3. Future Developments

By mapping 54 studies, researchers learned that use of RE was prevalent, particularly in the UK, to search for solutions to psychosocial challenges facing older adults. They also suggest

that there are major time and expertise implications with RE-based research in order to analyze statistical data and interviews. Therefore, they stress the need for securing the requisite human and financial resources for such research. Experts predict that the elderly population of Japan and other Asian countries will continue to grow. This study is expected to be a valuable model moving forward for medical and long-term care researchers and policy makers in various countries, both at the national and regional level, in using RE to address the psychosocial challenges faced by older adults.

Glossary

1. Realism: A branch of philosophy originating from English philosopher Roy Bhaskar which explains how the real world can be understood. In realism, attempts are made to comprehend reality through the observation of objective data and interpretations based on human experiences.
2. Realist evaluation (RE): A social science research method developed by British sociologists Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley in the 1990s. It evaluates the results and mechanisms of solutions (interventions or policies). Using the concepts of context (the situation in which a problem requiring a solution arises), mechanism (the mechanism by which the solution operates), and outcome (the results brought about by the solution), it explains and theorizes how a solution can be made more effective. The development of more persuasive theories is expected to aid in the formulation and revision of solutions. In recent years, it has been increasingly used in the fields of healthcare and welfare.
3. Scoping review: A method of systematically searching for and comprehensively collecting papers, materials, and information within a research area to quickly map out its key concepts and findings. Researchers value this method for its ability to identify gaps in scientific literature.

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