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EDITORIAL

Realist Evaluation and Synthesis in Psychology: Thriving in Complexity, Stalled by Language Barriers

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Since Pawson and Tilley's seminal work *Realistic Evaluation* (1997), realist evaluation and synthesis have become powerful approaches for understanding complexity, providing a compelling alternative to positivist approaches. Realist evaluation and synthesis have thrived in fields such as health, education and psychology. These approaches are grounded in realist philosophy, theory-driven and begin to ask, "What works, for whom, under what circumstances and why?". This is a question that many readers will find appealing for the complex reality of psychological practice. Despite growth in Anglo-speaking countries, uptake of realist research in Spanish-speaking countries has been slow. This is not due to a lack of relevance but rather to documented barriers such as limited language-accessible resources, scarce training opportunities, and the dominance of traditional positivist paradigms in Spanish-speaking contexts—factors reflected in the low scientific output from these regions and the methodological challenges observed in low- and middle-income countries (Gilmore, 2019; Booth et al., 2019). This editorial aims to advocate for the suitability of realist evaluation and synthesis for psychology and propose that more resources in Spanish, along with networks like RAICES, should be created and invested in to support meaningful uptake and use in Spanish-speaking communities.

Psychology is rooted in complexity. More often than not, research reports inconclusive findings in psychological science (Pfefferbaum et al., 2022). Psychologists almost always work in open systems across layers of individual, relational, cultural

and institutional contexts. Traditional evaluation approaches championing positivism often aim to remove this complexity by isolating variables and finding universal causal relationships attributed solely to the intervention. While helpful in some aspects, they frequently do not account for the generative causal mechanisms that could "unpack the black box" and highlight why and how things work within a particular context. Yet, this is key to consider in psychological science.

Realist evaluation and synthesis present a compelling alternative. These approaches go a step further in understanding how and why programmes work in particular contexts. In psychology, a field that values contextual meaning and theory, realist approaches offer ontological, epistemological, and methodological alignment. They support the complexity of psychological inquiry rather than reduce it to solely the observable.

In realist terms, to understand how programmes work, we start by creating initial programme theories about it, that is, how we expect the programme to work. We then test and refine these theories iteratively during the evaluation or synthesis process to develop a clearer explanation of how the programme works, for whom and in what circumstances. A helpful heuristic in the realist approach for building generative causal theories is the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configuration. This framework helps explain how a programme can lead to specific outcomes by interacting with mechanisms and contexts. In English-speaking contexts, these approaches and tools have already been used to understand youth mental health, among

other areas of clinical and health psychology (Jagosh et al., 2024).

One primary reason for the low uptake in realist research in Spanish-speaking contexts could be attributed to the language barrier. The core literature, training materials and methodological innovations have been published in English, such as the seminal work *Realistic Evaluation* or the methodological guidance from RAMESES (Wong et al., 2013). Spanish-speaking researchers face challenges accessing these approaches in a non-native language. These circumstances unintentionally create a situation of structural exclusion—where knowledge production and dissemination are concentrated within English-speaking silos—thereby limiting accessibility and innovation from Spanish-speaking researchers and institutions. The dominance of English in scientific publishing disproportionately affects scholars from the Global South, including Latin America and other Spanish-speaking regions, by imposing linguistic barriers to publication and visibility in high-impact journals (Adebisi et al., 2024; Ilhan et al., 2024). Without concrete reforms to promote multilingual publishing, support bilingual researchers, and enhance training and infrastructure in these regions, such structural inequities in realist evaluation and synthesis will continue to widen the scientific divide between the Global North and Spanish-speaking countries. This is a significant concern and a missed opportunity for psychology, which embraces complexity and contextual relevance. Being left behind could lead to a lack of methodological diversity in the evaluation approach that may not be aligned with the complexity of psychological theory and practice.

The uptake of realist approaches is happening slowly. Published realist work in Spanish is becoming available (Parra, 2019). RAICES (Red de Análisis, Investigación, y Comunidad en Evaluación y Síntesis Realista para el Mundo Hispanohablante) is the first Spanish-speaking community focused on realist evaluation and synthesis to make these approaches more accessible through monthly webinars, translated materials and community building with academics, evaluators and students. These efforts are starting to spark a broader discussion in psychology and related fields regarding complexity and different evaluation methods relevant to Spanish-speaking communities. For sustained growth, investment is needed not only in networks such as RAICES but also in broader systemic reforms—such as integrating realist evaluation into postgraduate psychology and mental health training curricula, offering formal training in Spanish at academic institutions, developing mentorship pathways, and promoting methodological diversification across both academic and private sector organisations. In parallel, journals and publishers can support wider access by accepting bilingual or dual-language publications, while bilingual researchers can play a pivotal role by translating key concepts, mentoring peers, and promoting engagement within their linguistic communities. This editorial is an invitation to psychologists – academics, evaluators, researchers and students – in Spanish-speaking contexts. Embrace the complexity that psychology brings to the table, and consider realist approaches in your work. Perhaps more than any other field, psychology grapples with questions and theoretical richness that realist approaches are uniquely

positioned to answer. Let us not allow language to be a barrier that prevents the evolution of meaningful evaluation and synthesis practices. Whether evaluating a clinical intervention or exploring mechanisms of change in youth psychological development, realist thinking may offer a rich framework for exploration. By joining networks like RAICES, collaborating across languages and contributing to scholarship in this area, this is the start of something bigger. Complexity is not a problem to be simplified — it is a reality to be embraced.

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Alejandro Argüelles Bullón: Conceptualisation, investigation, writing, review and approval of the final version.

Andrew Harding: Critical revision of the manuscript, Writing - Review & Editing and approval of the final version.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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DECLARATION OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

We used DeepL to translate specific sections of the manuscript to Spanish and Grammarly to improve the wording of certain sections. The final version of the manuscript was reviewed and approved by all authors.

DISCLAIMER

The authors are responsible for all statements made in this article.

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