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**Developing program theory for a realist evaluation of a doula (pregnancy and childbirth support) program.**

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**Objectives/aims**

Birth for Humankind is a community-based doula support program in Melbourne, Australia. The program is independent of the mainstream maternity care system, providing support to women experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, with the aim of increasing holistic and equitable care. A realist evaluation is being undertaken to understand for whom the doula support program works and does not work, in what circumstances and why, with a view to to inform the program’s refinement, sustainability and scalability.

**Methods**

Realist evaluation is a theory driven logic of enquiry based on scientific realist philosophy*.* Programs ‘work’ (have successful Outcomes) only insofar as they introduce the appropriate opportunities (Mechanisms) to groups of people in the appropriate social and cultural conditions (Contexts).

This realist evaluation used key informant consultations and rapid realist synthesis of literature to develop hypothesised program theories laid out in the form of context-mechanism-outcome (C-M-O) configurations. This conference presentation will focus on the process of using the realist approach to develop hypothesised program theory using key informant qualitative data and published literature.

**Main findings**

The realist approach was valuable for seeking and unpacking mechanisms and contextual factors seen to be important for program success. Hypothesised program theories include implementation theories about contexts and mechanisms for key implementation outcomes, as well as theories further along the program pathway that lead to client and system outcomes. The next stage of the evaluation process will test the theories using mixed-methods with program clients, volunteers, staff and professional stakeholders to provide plausible explanations of why, how and in what contexts, program mechanisms lead to particular outcomes.