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Understanding and improving compound pressures in general practice: a realist review protocol

Emily Owen-Boukra¹, Ruth Abrams², Tanya Cohen¹, Claire Goodman³, Cecily Henry¹, Laura Ingle¹, Kamal Mahtani¹, Margaret Ogden¹, Nia Roberts⁴, Rupesh Shah⁵, James Thomas⁶, Geoff Wong¹, & Sophie Park¹.

Emily Owen-Boukra¹ - <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5558-8567>

Job title: NIHR HSDR Research Fellow
BA (Hons), PhD, FRSPH

Ruth Abrams² – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2974-7859>

Job title: Senior Lecturer, Workforce, Organisation and Wellbeing
Qualifications: BA, MSc, MRes, PhD

Tanya Cohen¹ – <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6700-008X>

Job title: PPI Co-applicant
Qualifications: BA (Hons)

Claire Goodman³ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8938-4893>

Job title: Professor of Health Care Research
Qualifications: PhD, FQNI, MBE

Cecily Henry¹ - <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0922-5545>

Job title: PPI Co-applicant
Qualifications: BSc (Hons), MA

Laura Ingle¹ – <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8478-652X>

Job title: GP and Clinical Lecturer
Qualifications: MA, BM BCh, FHEA

Kamal Mahtani¹ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7791-8552>

Job title: GP and Professor of Evidence Based Healthcare
Qualifications: BSc, PhD, MBBS, PGDip, FRCGP

Margaret Ogden¹ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4611-5095>

Job title: PPI Co-applicant.
Qualifications: BEd

Nia Roberts⁴ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1142-6440>

Job title: Senior Outreach Librarian
Qualifications: MSc, AFHEA

Rupesh Shah⁵ - <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7441-1497>

Job title: Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor - Engineering and Innovation

Qualifications: BSc (Hons), PhD, FHEA

James Thomas⁶ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4805-4190>

Job title: Professor of Social Research and Policy

Qualifications: PhD

Geoff Wong¹ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5384-4157>

Job title: GP and Associate Professor of Primary Care

Qualifications: MA, MBBS, FHEA, MD(Res), FRCGP

Sophie Park¹ – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1521-2052>

Job title: GP and Professor of Primary Care and Clinical Education

Qualifications: MBChB, M.Med.Sci (dist), EdD, SFHEA, FRCGP

Affiliations

¹ Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

² School of Health Sciences, University of Surrey, Surrey, UK

³ Centre for Research in Public Health and Community Care, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

⁴ Bodleian Health Care Libraries, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

⁵ School of Engineering and Innovation, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

⁶ UCL Social Research Institute, University College London, London, England, UK

Corresponding author: Emily Owen-Boukra, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, Woodstock Road, Oxford, OX2 6GG, UK. Email: Emily.owen-boukra@phc.ox.ac.uk X: @EmilyOwenBoukra

Understanding and improving compound pressures in general practice: a realist review protocol

Abstract

Background: Compound Pressures (CP) significantly impact the role of General Practice (GP) in supporting human health. These pressures include climate change, pandemics, and financial crises. CP can be predictable, pre-determined, or unpredictable in nature and scope. Strategies to address the demands arising from CP range from short-term initiatives to buffering existing GP systems to ensure flexible and agile resources. Interventions designed to prevent, identify, and manage CP may result in both intended and unintended outcomes.

Aim: To conduct a realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and three embedded studies within a review (SWAR) about CP affecting GP and the delivery of effective, equitable patient care.

Design and setting: Realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and three SWARS.

Method: We will conduct a realist appreciative inquiry facilitating patient and stakeholder input into the review scope, focus, and initial programme theory development. This approach emphasises the identification of assets, successes, hopes, and aspirations to enable positive change. Based on these insights, we will conduct a realist review of empirical and grey literature. This project includes three elements of methodological innovation (SWARs). First, evaluation of how appreciative inquiry can inform initial programme theory development. Two further SWARs will examine how artificial intelligence might a) support the identification of relevant resources at title and abstract, and full-text stages, and b) support data extraction and analysis in future realist reviews.

Conclusion: Our research aims to understand the effects of CP on GP, supporting preparation and solutions that can inform future policies, interventions, and support systems.

Keywords: Compound Pressures; General Practice; Equitable Patient Care; Realist Appreciative Inquiry; Realist Review; SWAR

How this fits in: The term, Compound Pressures (CP), as defined by the National Institute for Health and Care Research, refers to an increasingly complex set of challenges facing health and social care (1). CP have implications for patients, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and systems, such as general practice (GP). Our research will encompass a realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and three methodological studies within a review (SWARs) to examine the characteristics of CP in GP, proposed solutions, and both the intended and unintended outcomes of CP interventions, with a particular focus on maximising effective and equitable patient care. We will address existing knowledge gaps and establish a foundation for more targeted approaches and strategies to mitigate the effects of CP.

Introduction

Compound Pressures (CP) on the National Health Service and social care systems have become an important concern for patients, healthcare professionals, and policymakers. These pressures include, but are not limited to, winter pressures, climate change, weather-related events (e.g. global warming, flooding, cold, or heat), financial crises, and pandemics (e.g. COVID-19). CP are anticipated to persist and escalate in both frequency and severity due to global challenges, such as climate change and international conflicts, which impact food security, energy, housing, and financial stability. The capacity to respond to these crises is interconnected with factors such as the cost of living, social deprivation, population morbidity (levels of disease and ill health in the community), and the resources available within health and social care systems (2). The Future of General Practice (GP) report indicated that 90% of healthcare is delivered in primary care (3). Consequently, it is crucial to enhance our understanding of how CP can impact GP and its role(s), contribution, and collaboration with the broader health and social care system. This includes the impact of CP interventions on patient equity, workforce composition, and well-being, as well as the relationship between the workforce and organisational structures.

This research addresses these critical concerns using realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and studies within a review (SWAR) methodology. The realist approach enables us to examine how and under what circumstances interventions/initiatives may or may not work, and to form explanations for these observed similarities and differences (4, 5). This approach is particularly suitable for this research, which aims to enhance understanding of the nature of CP and identify appropriate future mitigation and support strategies. Additional methodological details are provided in our PROSPERO

registration (CRD42025636290) (6). The scope and focus of this review will be informed by preliminary patient and public involvement (PPI) and stakeholder engagement, using an appreciative inquiry approach to explore not only inherent challenges but also positive aspects, successful outcomes, and mitigation strategies. In addition, the project incorporates three SWAR components (7) to inform the methodology for future realist reviews.

Method

Aims and objectives

Aims: To conduct a realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and three embedded SWARs about CP affecting GP and the delivery of effective and equitable patient care.

Research questions: How, why, when, and in what circumstances might CP be addressed in GP to maximise effective and equitable patient care?

Specifically, within the available literature:

1. What are the characteristics of CP in UK GP?
2. What are the reported GP solutions to CP?
3. What are the intended and unintended outcomes for GP to CP interventions?
4. How can GP support approaches to CP?
5. How can patients and the public work with services to approach CP in GP?

In addition, three SWARS ask:

1. What is the value of an appreciative inquiry approach in informing the initial programme theory (IPT) development for a realist review?
2. How might Artificial Intelligence (AI) support (or not) the identification of relevant resources at title and abstract and full-text stages?
3. How can AI be used (or not) to support data extraction and analysis in future realist reviews?

Research plan/methods

We will begin by conducting a realist appreciative inquiry, which is a form of participatory action research (8). This approach comprises a strengths-based framework designed to facilitate positive change by identifying and enhancing individuals' assets, successes, hopes, and dreams (8, 9). This framework shifts away from traditional problem-focused orientations by instead seeking to identify: 'what is working; why is it working; and what could be in the future?'. The appreciative inquiry will inform the initial search terms and focus for our realist review, such as the characteristics we initially focus on and the potential interventions and solutions. Subsequently, a realist review will synthesise data from the available literature to produce and refine an evidence-based programme theory about causal explanations in relation to CP. This will support: (1) the delivery of effective and equitable patient care; and (2) the inter-relations between CP challenges and solutions with GP service provision.

Research design and theoretical framework

A realist approach is ideal for exploring this complex and new field of literature. We will include grey literature, such as recent policy changes, linking this with elements of PPI and stakeholder theories and substantive published evidence (4). From the outset, a realist approach acknowledges that different contexts lead to different outcomes, thus, identifying the underlying generative mechanisms regarding how responses to CP work (or not). The project findings will be used to identify important system-level contexts that may be amenable to change (4). Our patient and stakeholder involvement work encompasses the following:

1. **IPT development:** We will read relevant literature to develop an IPT. The IPT will: (1) explore the characteristics of CP in UK GP; (2) examine how GP may support CP approaches; and (3) explore how patients may collaborate with GP services to address CP. We will expand this IPT in collaboration with our PPI/stakeholder groups;
2. **Discover:** Through structured group discussions and narrative-based inquiry, stakeholders will articulate their strengths, virtues, interests, and experiences of collaborative success. They will share instances of approaching and addressing CP, where they experienced high levels of engagement and motivation. PPI will also share experiences of successful CP interventions/responses, and the positive impact on their care;
3. **Dream:** This phase will include PPI and stakeholders envisioning potential enhancements to patient care; exploring strengths, attributes, and virtues; and examining how these could be synthesised, leveraged, and combined. Through a series of creative activities and structured

tasks, PPI and stakeholders will engage in discussions regarding their preferred approaches to addressing and resolving CP. Additionally, PPI will describe their desired approach for collaborative efforts among key stakeholders in responding to CP.

Our realist review protocol will build on the realist appreciative inquiry and will be guided by Pawson's five iterative stages (4) and current quality and publication standards (RAMESES) (10, 11), which are outlined below.

Step 1: *Locate existing theories:* Following the preliminary work conducted during the appreciative inquiry phase, we will expand our IPT for the realist review. This will describe assumptions regarding important influences on CP. Where possible, it will outline potentially important contexts, mechanisms and outcomes pertaining to CP. We will invite our stakeholder/PPI groups to provide feedback and examine the differences, dissonance, and commonalities between the appreciative inquiry initial phase and what we are identifying within the initial review searches and identified literature.

Step 2: *Search for evidence:* We will conduct systematic searches to identify a relevant 'body of literature' with which to refine the IPT from Step 1. The search strategy will be designed, piloted, and conducted by NR. It is anticipated that our searches will combine free text and subject heading (e.g. MeSH) terms for CP and GP, respectively. The following databases are expected to be searched: MEDLINE; Embase; CINAHL; PsycINFO; Cochrane Library; HMIC; the Web of Science (Science and Social Science Citation Indexes); and web sources including Overton/Google Scholar. Additional relevant databases will be searched, and 'cited by' article searches and searches of citations contained in the reference lists of documents will be undertaken. Grey literature will be identified through a search of relevant websites.

Step 3: *Article Selection:* This process comprises three stages: screening based on title and abstract; screening based on full text; and final selection of full-text documents based on their relevance (whether they contain data that contribute to theory building and/or testing) and rigour (whether the methods used to generate the relevant data are credible/trustworthy) (4). To ensure consistency, a random 10% sample of decisions will be independently checked at each stage by RA. Any discrepancies will be addressed through discussion with the research team.

Step 4: *Extracting and Organising Data:* Data extraction and organisation will be undertaken by EOB. Discrepancies/disagreements will be discussed with the research team. The included full texts will be uploaded into EPPI-Reviewer for coding. These will be both coded inductively (codes created to categorise data reported in included studies), deductively (codes created in advance of data extraction and analysis, as informed by the IPT), and retroductively. Each new element of relevant data will be used to refine the programme theory, and as it is refined, included studies will be re-scrutinised to search for relevant data that may have been missed initially. A random sample of 10% extracted data and coding will be independently checked for quality control.

Step 5: *Synthesising the evidence and drawing conclusions:* Data analysis will use a realist logic of analysis to make sense of the IPT. EOB will undertake this step with support from the research team and PPI/stakeholders. We will use interpretive cross-case comparison to explain how and why observed outcomes have occurred, for instance, by comparing literature in which interventions have produced successful (or unsuccessful) outcomes to CP, examining how context has influenced reported findings. We will use a proven analysis/synthesis process which we have successfully used for previous large scale funded realist reviews (12).

Step 6: Two co-production events will build upon the PPI and stakeholders' appreciative inquiry stages and the realist review. Participants will be invited to reflect on the project findings regarding both CP and the three SWAR approaches. We will extend the appreciative inquiry approach in these final discussions to co-produce recommendations with PPI and stakeholders concerning CP (e.g. priorities, key interventions, and approaches) and future realist review methods (including the value of appreciative inquiry and AI).

This review incorporates three methodological studies:

- SWAR 1 examines how appreciative inquiry can inform IPT development.
- SWAR 2 explores how AI can assist with identification of key relevant papers.
- SWAR 3 uses AI alongside humans for data extraction and analysis.

Dissemination and impact

Two events will be conducted with relevant public, practitioner, and policy participants to co-produce resources and recommendations regarding a) future CP strategies and interventions, and b) how

SWARs can inform future realist methods. These events will inform the development of outputs (e.g. short reports, academic papers) tailored for policy, practitioner, and public audiences.

Discussion

By conducting a realist appreciative inquiry, realist review, and three methodological SWARs, we will generate and refine an evidence-based programme theory regarding causal explanations in relation to CP to support: (1) the delivery of effective and equitable patient care; and (2) the inter-relationships between CP challenges and solutions with GP service provision. Our research will provide nuanced insights regarding reported solutions to CP, the intended and unintended outcomes for GP-to-CP interventions, and how patients can collaborate with services to approach CP in GP to maximise effective and equitable patient care. We will address existing knowledge gaps and provide a foundation for more targeted approaches to mitigate the effects of CP.

Strengths and limitations

Our realist appreciative inquiry and review are well-suited to this novel and expanding field of knowledge. Realist analysis can address the diverse contexts in which various mechanisms and outcomes emerge. The realist approach also facilitates the inclusion of PPI and stakeholder perspectives, thereby informing selection, analysis, and dissemination approaches throughout the project timeline. This is crucial to ensure that selected texts and analytical categories are pertinent to GP and relevant to contemporary challenges and potential practice/policy solutions. Our research also builds upon a previous realist review that examined the sustainability of the GP workforce (13-15). However, a potential limitation of this research is its reliance on existing literature. As CP is a new concept, the literature surrounding it may be limited. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that many 'older' issues may reasonably be re-conceptualised as CP, potentially providing relevant data.

Implications for research and/or practice

By identifying the interactions between contextual factors and underlying mechanisms, this research has the potential to produce transferable causal explanations that can inform the development of targeted interventions, policies, and support strategies. The findings may facilitate the formulation of more flexible and responsive approaches for managing CP in GP. Additionally, the three innovative methodological SWARs will support efforts to maximise opportunities for evidence-informed policy

and practice, while ensuring deliberate and high-quality engagement with relevant literature. These SWARs will serve as a foundation for future realist research approaches.

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Ethical approval

The realist appreciative inquiry was approved by the University of Oxford's Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (reference: MS IDREC 959104).

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This protocol has not been peer reviewed by BJGP Open. The authors confirm that it has undergone external peer review by NIHR HSDR. The authors confirm that we have provided an honest, accurate and transparent account of the revision with no important omissions.

Competing interest

Dr Ruth Abrams is a member of the Editorial Board of the BJGP.

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