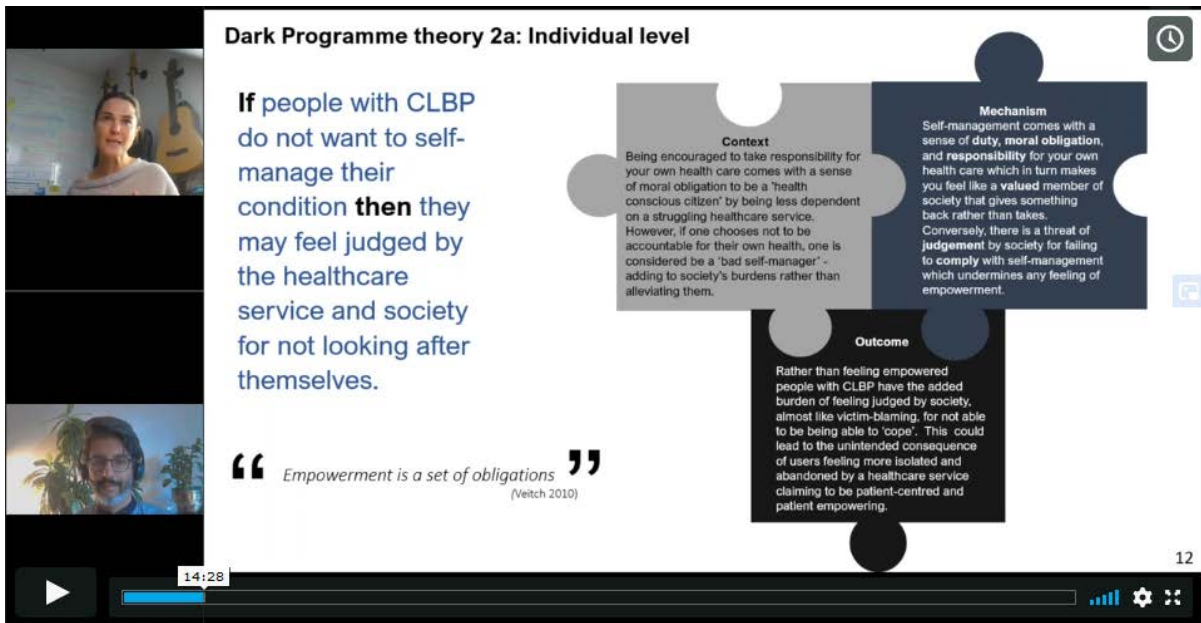


Reflections on my first international online conference.

Rebecca Hunter, PhD Student



Dark Programme theory 2a: Individual level

If people with CLBP do not want to self-manage their condition then they may feel judged by the healthcare service and society for not looking after themselves.

“ Empowerment is a set of obligations ”
(Veitch 2010)

Context
 Being encouraged to take responsibility for your own health care comes with a sense of moral obligation to be a 'health conscious citizen' by being less dependent on a struggling healthcare service. However, if one chooses not to be accountable for their own health, one is considered be a 'bad self-manager' - adding to society's burdens rather than alleviating them.

Mechanism
 Self-management comes with a sense of duty, moral obligation, and responsibility for your own health care which in turn makes you feel like a valued member of society that gives something back rather than takes. Conversely, there is a threat of judgement by society for failing to comply with self-management which undermines any feeling of empowerment.

Outcome
 Rather than feeling empowered people with CLBP have the added burden of feeling judged by society, almost like victim-blaming, for not able to be being able to 'cope'. This could lead to the unintended consequence of users feeling more isolated and abandoned by a healthcare service claiming to be patient-centred and patient empowering.

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In August, I presented at my first international conference, albeit from my office at home. Due to the Covid 19 Pandemic the CARES Realist 2020 Training Conference was held online in Canada by the director of the Centre for Advancement in Realist Evaluation and Synthesis (CARES) and moderated online by two lecturers in the UK. In total, there were 60 delegates and 21 presenters. In addition to the UK, presenters came from Columbia, USA, Ireland, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand. The conference was held for three hours each day either in the morning or afternoon, depending on the time zone of the speakers. The presentations were recorded for those who couldn't make the live broadcast. In addition, the comments made on the interactive forum were collated by the moderators and sent to the speaker for feedback. At the end of each day the conference host gave a written summation of the issues raised and offered his own thoughts.

As much as I missed the opportunity to fly to Canada and meet fellow Realist researchers face to face, it was a fantastic conference and a great learning experience. Due to the global pandemic, online conferences are likely to become more common place. For this reason, I thought I would take this opportunity to briefly share the pros and cons of my experience.

The CARES conference was a useful opportunity to clarify my thoughts around my research to date and forced me to organise my theories into a coherent structure. There is nothing like the looming deadline of a conference to get you to sit down and write. It was also useful to be able to demonstrate how my reading around substantive theories such as Neoliberalism and Foucault's power discourse brought a different lens to viewing the literature and how they shaped my programme theories. Putting my presentation together highlighted areas where I felt my knowledge was sound but also areas that needed developing.

Presenting at the conference was a valuable chance for me to 'own my knowledge' and to adopt the identity of, not only a doctoral researcher, but a realist researcher. It was great to be able to speak in the realist vernacular and have people understand the terminology. I was able to communicate by the messaging forum to a researcher in Australia who was struggling with justifying why he chose one substantive theory over another, and by writing to him, I was able to practise my own arguments and justifications. I realised I knew more than I thought I did and, more importantly, I could share this knowledge with others in a comprehensible way. In this regard it was a great confidence boost. Finally, since it was designed to be a training conference, it was really useful to hear from researchers, both experienced and novices, about areas of the realist methodology that they found difficult or how they applied it in different ways.

That said, it was an intense conference. I was surprised at how tiring and difficult it was to actively listen to the speaker whilst engaging in synchronous online discussion. The moderators asked probing questions on the forum to get people to engage with the presentation, which was useful, but difficult. This was compounded by people typing complex thoughts in quick 'Tweet' like sentences so as to comment in a timely fashion before the presenter moved on to another slide. I occasionally found these comments hard to decipher and the nuance was lost altogether.

So, is this the future of research conferences? Without travel and accommodation, they are certainly cheaper and more convenient to attend. There is also a great deal of learning to be gained and it still affords the researcher a platform from which they can practise their presentation skills and communicate their thoughts. There was also some semblance of networking, I have continued to email a few delegates since the end of the conference and for some, this may be an easier way to develop relationships than face to face encounters. That said, from my own personal perspective, I miss people. I find it easier to bounce ideas around in conversation and partially formed ideas are, for me, easier to express verbally than in text messages. Finally, of particular importance to me—as a new researcher looking for opportunities beyond my PhD—an online conference does not afford you the serendipitous encounter. The throw away comment which could open the door to the next research opportunity or job. So, in sum, although the conference was a great opportunity and I am pleased and proud to have participated in it, I look forward to getting back into the room with my fellow academics and sharing our thoughts face to face.