

Integrating diverse evidence using Evidential Pluralism

Introductory Guide

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1. Evidential Pluralism: What it is and when to use it

Evidential Pluralism (EP) is a framework for understanding how to integrate different kinds of evidence when evaluating whether an intervention works. EP yields evaluations informed by *all* relevant evidence—quantitative and qualitative—not just a small subset of quantitative studies.

EP does this by assessing mechanistic evidence alongside experimental and observational studies. Providing evidence of key features of the proposed mechanism of action of the intervention can raise confidence in effectiveness. On the other hand, if these features are found to be absent, or if key features of counteracting mechanisms are found to be present, this can undermine confidence in effectiveness. Either way, evidence of mechanisms can be highly informative. EP can help us to evaluate this evidence when assessing whether an intervention works.

EP can be thought of as a framework for integrating standard methods for systematically reviewing experimental and observational studies with theory-based methods, which focus on mechanisms. However, while theory-based evaluation designs such as realist evaluation usually seek to ask *how* an intervention works, EP focusses on *whether* the intervention works. Thus, EP provides a methodology for impact evaluation (assessing whether an intervention is an effective means of achieving certain goals), rather than process or implementation evaluation (assessing whether the intervention has been implemented as intended).

EP is particularly appropriate:

- where experimental and observational studies on their own fail to establish or rule out causation;
- where mechanistic considerations might undermine the results of experimental and observational studies (e.g., by identifying potential confounding variables that have not been adequately controlled for);
- to ensure that qualitative evidence informed by stakeholders is not marginalised.

The application of EP to evidence-based medicine is called ‘EBM+’ and the application of EP to evidence-based policy is called ‘EBP+’. The ‘+’ denotes the addition of explicit procedures for evaluating mechanistic evidence, to be used together with the standard methods of orthodox evidence-based evaluation. This guide focusses on policy evaluation, i.e., EBP+. §§2-3 introduce the overall approach. §4 uses an example to illustrate the key steps of an EP evaluation. §§5-8 provide examples of the use of EP to identify gaps in the evidence base. §9 points to further resources and §10 provides a glossary of key terms.

2. Introducing Evidential Pluralism

Correlation is not causation. Why? Because a correlation between intervention variable A and outcome variable B (controlling for potential confounders) could be attributable to any one of a large number of possible explanations—of which causation is just one. For example, a correlation might be due to reverse causation (i.e., B causing A), uncontrolled confounding variables, or various kinds of bias introduced by the study design. If the correlation really is attributable to A being a cause of B then there must be some mechanism of action by which A produces B. So, in order to establish causation one needs to establish not only correlation but also the existence of an underlying mechanism that can account for the extent of the observed correlation. This observation motivates Evidential Pluralism, which is depicted in Fig. 1.

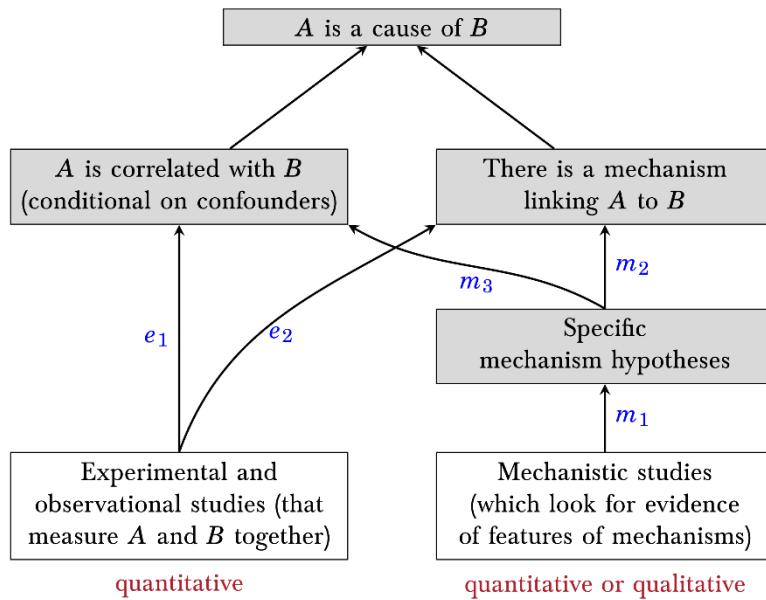


Figure 1: Evidential relationships for causal enquiry, according to Evidential Pluralism.

A purely quantitative approach to evaluation seeks to establish causation just by means of experimental and observational studies that repeatedly measure A and B together with potential confounders. Here, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are particularly informative because they not only provide an estimate of the extent of the correlation (confirming correlation via channel e_1 in Fig. 1), but they also indirectly confirm the existence of an underlying mechanism (channel e_2) because they lower the probability that the correlation is attributable to uncontrolled confounders.

But the presence of an appropriate mechanism can be tested more directly by hypothesising specific features of the mechanism (m_2) and then exploring whether or not these features are actually present (m_1). Such features include key mediating variables, or entities and activities involved in the mechanism, or features of the way in which these entities and activities are organised. A study that looks for such features is classified as a ‘mechanistic study’.

A mechanistic study might use quantitative methods. For example, to test the hypothesis that some variable C mediates a mechanism between A and B , one might carry out an RCT that looks for a correlation between A and C and another quantitative study that looks for a correlation between C and B . A mechanistic study might, alternatively, use qualitative methods. For example, qualitative responses from interviews might be used to isolate features of the ways in which A and B are connected in the lives of individual stakeholders; qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) might be used to test which features of a mechanism are key to its execution. Alternatively, a mechanistic study might use mixed methods: e.g., triangulation from quantitative and qualitative methods to establish the presence of some key feature of interest.

3. How to integrate diverse evidence

EP can provide guidance on where and how to combine quantitative and qualitative evidence:

- Quantitative and qualitative evidence will need to be scrutinised in order to assess specific mechanism hypotheses (channel m_1 of Fig. I).
- A second point of integration arises when ascertaining whether there is a mechanism linking A and B. Here, one needs to consider how plausible it is that some suitable mechanism exists, given quantitative evidence from experimental and observational studies (channel e_2) and the quantitative and qualitative evidence from mechanistic studies (m_2).
- A third point of integration arises when assessing correlation. Although quantitative studies are likely to be most informative here (a_1), mechanism hypotheses can suggest potential confounders that may not have been adequately controlled for, decreasing confidence that A and B are correlated conditional on potential confounders (m_3). Alternatively, if the mechanism is well established and sufficiently simple, the features of the mechanism may increase confidence in a correlation (m_3).

The EP approach to integrating these streams of evidence is summarised in Table I below. See section 4 for an in-depth example that goes through the steps of Table I.

Table I. The EP approach to evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention.

Task	Main questions
1. Specify the causal claim.	What is the intervention, the outcome of interest, the population and the time-frame?
2. Specify the correlation claim.	What are the potential confounders?
3. Formulate specific mechanism hypotheses.	What are the key features of the mechanism by which the intervention is supposed to work? What are the key features of any counteracting and enhancing mechanisms?
4. Search for and assess experimental and observational studies.	What are the search terms? What are the inclusion criteria for the studies? How high quality is each individual study?
5. Screen the need for a mechanistic evaluation.	What is the preliminary status of the correlation, general mechanistic and causal claims? Could evidence of specific mechanism hypotheses change these preliminary determinations? (If so, proceed.)
6. Search for mechanistic studies.	Which features of specific mechanism hypotheses have already been established or ruled out? Which review questions should be used to find studies relevant to remaining features?
7. Assess mechanistic studies.	How relevant are the population and variables of each study? How reliable are its methods? Does it implement these methods well? Are the results independently verified, consistent and robust?
8. Assess specific mechanism hypotheses.	What status do the mechanistic studies confer on each specific mechanism hypothesis?
9. Assess the correlation claim.	Do specific mechanism hypotheses modify the preliminary status conferred on the correlation claim by experimental and observational studies?
10. Assess the general mechanistic claim.	Have alternative explanations of the correlation, such as bias and confounding, been ruled out? How well confirmed are the features of the mechanism complex? Can it account for the magnitude of the observed correlation?
11. Assess the causal claim.	What is the minimum status of the correlation and general mechanistic claims? (This is the status of the causal claim.)

4. Example: Covid-19 face mask mandates

A narrow focus on experimental studies, especially RCTs, resulted in controversy and uncertainty concerning the effectiveness of public health interventions to reduce the spread of Covid-19, including legal requirements to wear a face mask in public. A Cochrane Systematic Review, which included only RCTs, found face masks make little or no difference to the spread of Covid-19.¹ Various limitations of the review and of the studies included have, however, been highlighted. Taking account of a broader range of evidence is crucial to understanding the effectiveness of face masks.² This case study therefore provides a good example of the need for and benefits of an EP evaluation. We sketch such an evaluation here, following the steps set out in Table 1.³

1. Specify the causal claim:

The causal claim is that a legal requirement to wear a face mask in public reduces the prevalence of symptomatic Covid-19 infections and thereby reduces the number of hospitalizations and deaths.

The population of interest is the global population. An evaluation of a specific law on reducing the prevalence of symptomatic Covid-19 infections will focus on the population of the jurisdiction within which the specific law applies. However, here we are concerned with the effectiveness of legal requirements to wear face masks at a more general level.

The legal requirements of interest are those that require a cloth face mask to be worn in public, especially when indoors or when outside and maintaining social distancing is difficult. Exemptions include relevant health conditions that make wearing a face mask problematic or difficult.

2. Specify the correlation claim:

The correlation claim is that a legal requirement to wear face masks in public is negatively correlated with symptomatic Covid-19 infections, conditional on potential confounders. Potential confounders include Covid-19 test rates, other public health measures such as social distancing, underlying health conditions, individual mobility, population density, socio-economic factors, age, gender, temperature and humidity.

3. Formulate specific mechanism hypotheses:

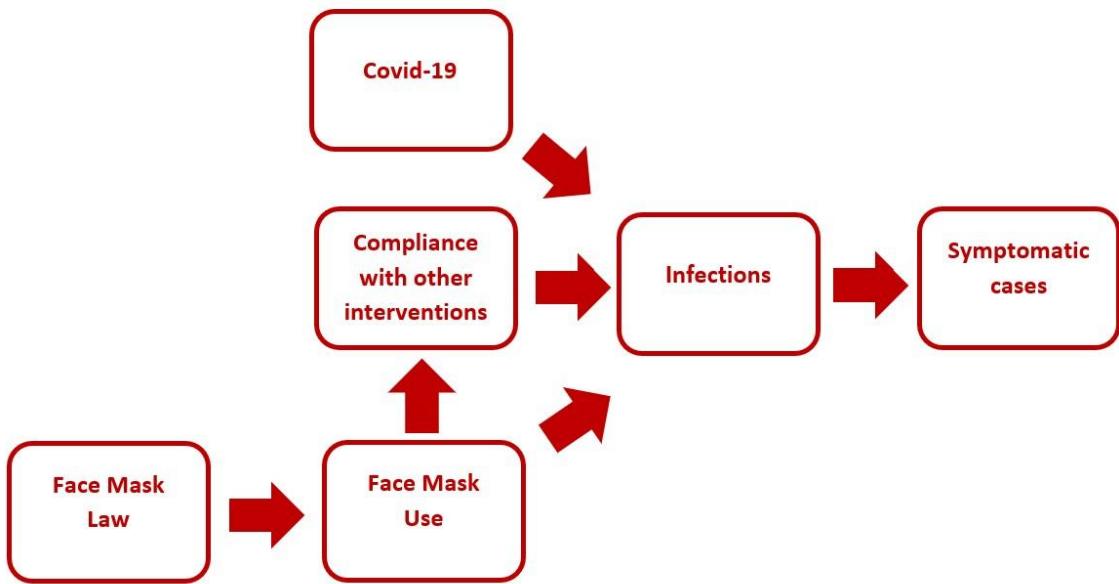
A plausible mechanism hypothesis is that a legal requirement to wear a face mask in public increases the use of face masks which in turn reduces the prevalence of Covid-19 which reduces the prevalence of symptomatic covid infections and thereby the number of hospitalizations and deaths.

A plausible hypothesised counteracting mechanism is that a legal requirement to wear a face mask in public will decrease compliance with other public health interventions, such as social distancing. This in turn would result in an increase in the number of symptomatic infections compared to the number that would have occurred if the legal requirement to wear a face mask had not been introduced.

¹ Jefferson et al., (2023).

² Greenhalgh et al., (2022); Howard et al., (2020).

³ See Trofimov & Williamson (2025) for more details about this evaluation.



4. Search for and assess experimental and observational studies:

An event study conducted in the U.S. that covered all 50 states found mask mandates are associated with a 14% decrease in Covid-19 cases, conditional on several potential confounders including Covid-19 test rates, other public health interventions, individual mobility and weather.⁴

An observational study of matched cohorts from 412 U.S. counties found mask mandates are associated with decreases in Covid-19 cases ranging from 11% to 25 % during a six-week post intervention period, conditional on potential confounders.⁵

Analysis of data covering 188 nations found that mask mandates are consistently associated with lower Covid-19 infection rates in the short term and early adoption of mask mandates is consistently associated with lower infection rates in the longer term, conditional on potential confounders.⁶

5. Screen the need for a mechanistic evaluation:

Taken together, the quantitative studies detect a robust correlation across contexts. It is therefore plausible to conclude that the correlation claim is established and that confidence in the general mechanistic claim is increased.

Although each of the quantitative studies controls for several confounders, some residual confounding may persist. The causal claim is therefore only provisionally established. A mechanistic evaluation is necessary because it could increase confidence in the causal claim.

6. Search for mechanistic studies:

⁴ Adjodah et al., (2021).

⁵ Huang et al., (2022).

⁶ An et al., (2021).

The mechanism hypothesis is that a legal requirement to wear a face mask will increase face mask use and thereby decrease the prevalence of Covid-19 symptomatic infections, hospitalizations and deaths.

The first part of the mechanism hypothesis is that a legal requirement to wear face masks will increase face mask use. Analysis of survey data found that mask wearing increased up to 23.4% after the implementation of State mandates in Hawaii, Iowa, North Dakota and New Hampshire.⁷ Betsch et al. conducted cross-sectional surveys with 6973 German participants. They found that the implementation of a public mask mandate steeply increased mask wearing. They also found that sufficient compliance would unlikely be achieved with a voluntary mask policy.⁸ MacIntyre et al. conducted cross sectional surveys in Sydney and Melbourne (Australia), London (UK) and Phoenix and New York (USA). They found mask mandates are a predictor of mask wearing.⁹

The second part of the mechanism hypothesis is that face mask use will reduce the spread of Covid and thereby reduce symptomatic infections, hospitalizations and deaths. A recently updated Cochrane review found face masks make little or no difference to the spread of Covid-19.¹⁰ In contrast, multivariate analysis of 196 countries found that duration of mask wearing is negatively associated with Covid-19 mortality and that cultural norms and policies supporting public face mask wearing are associated with lower per-capita coronavirus mortality.¹¹ Model simulations found widespread use of face masks effectively reduces community transmission and decreases hospitalizations and deaths.¹² Experimental studies provide support for the efficacy of face masks in reducing transmission by supporting aerosol transmission as a key mode of transmission.¹³

The hypothesised counter-acting mechanism is that a legal requirement to wear face masks increases Covid-19 symptomatic cases by decreasing compliance with other public health interventions such as social distancing. Surveys found mask wearing is positively correlated with complying with other public health interventions, such as social distancing.¹⁴

By combining a range of quantitative and qualitative studies, evidence for each section of the mechanism hypothesis can be provided.

7. Assess mechanistic studies:

The studies relating to the first part of the mechanism hypothesis all support the effectiveness of a legal requirement in increasing face mask wearing. The studies provide evidence across contexts and control for a number of confounders. However, the studies rely on self-reported survey data and therefore there is a risk of recall bias and response bias in the results. Furthermore, although the studies cover a range of geographical regions, they are not fully representative of the global population.

Turning to the second part of the mechanism hypothesis, the Cochrane review included only RCTs and, as the authors acknowledge, the observed lack of effectiveness could be due to study design flaws. Furthermore, most of the studies included in the review evaluated masks in terms of how well

⁷ Adjodah et al., (2021).

⁸ Betsch et al. (2020).

⁹ MacIntyre et al., (2021).

¹⁰ Jefferson et al., (2023).

¹¹ Leffler et al., (2020).

¹² Eikenberry et al., (2020).

¹³ Van Doremalen et al., (2020); Leung et al., (2020).

¹⁴ Betsch et al., (2020); MacIntyre et al., (2021).

they protect the user rather than how well they reduce community transmission and therefore focus on a different outcome of interest to the outcome of interest here. Given these limitations, the results of the systematic review should be taken as inconclusive rather than negative in relation to the effectiveness of face masks in reducing the spread of Covid-19.

Taking account of a broader range of evidence enables a more accurate assessment of the effectiveness of face masks. The other studies considered here provide support for the effectiveness of face masks in reducing community transmission and thereby reducing symptomatic cases, hospitalizations and deaths. Taking account of a broader range of evidence, Greenhalgh et al. conclude that airborne aerosol transmission ‘is likely to be dominant’.¹⁵ A narrative literature review concluded that face masks are effective at reducing community transmission when compliance is high.¹⁶

The survey results undermine the counteracting mechanism hypothesis. The surveys provide evidence across contexts and control for confounders but there remains a risk of bias in the survey results.

8. Assess the specific mechanism hypothesis:

The studies considered here provide support for the first part of the mechanism hypothesis. Some risk of bias remains, however, and the results are not representative of the global population. Therefore, the first part of the mechanism hypothesis is provisionally established.

The evidence considered here provides strong support for the second part of the mechanism hypothesis. The limitations of the systematic review mean it is inconclusive and does not provide high-quality evidence against the second part of the mechanism hypothesis. Taken together, the rest of the evidence considered here provides strong support for the effectiveness of face masks, particularly when widespread adoption of face masks is achieved. Therefore, the second part of the mechanism hypothesis is established.

The survey results provide evidence against the counteracting mechanism. Furthermore, given the extent of the net benefit of a legal requirement to wear face masks found across multiple studies, it is evident that the benefit is not negated, even if slightly reduced. The counteracting mechanism hypothesis is, therefore, arguably false.

Although the second part of the mechanism hypothesis is established, the first part is only provisionally established. The status of the mechanism hypothesis is that of its weakest part. Therefore, on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative evidence considered here, the mechanism hypothesis is provisionally established overall.

9. Assess the correlation claim:

The correlation claim is established. The quantitative and qualitative evidence considered provides strong evidence of both correlation and mechanisms. The evidence of mechanisms increases confidence in the correlation claim to such an extent that it is unlikely that further evidence would overturn it.

¹⁵ Greenhalgh et al., (2021).

¹⁶ Howard et al., (2021).

10. Assess the general mechanism claim:

The evidence of mechanisms provisionally establishes the specific mechanism hypothesis. However, the strength of the quantitative evidence of correlation further increases confidence in the general mechanistic claim. Given the mutually supporting evidence of correlation and mechanism, the general mechanistic claim is established.

11. Assess the causal claim:

On the basis of the quantitative and qualitative evidence considered here, both the correlation claim and the general mechanistic claim are established. Therefore, the causal claim is established.

5. Example: interventions to tackle fake news

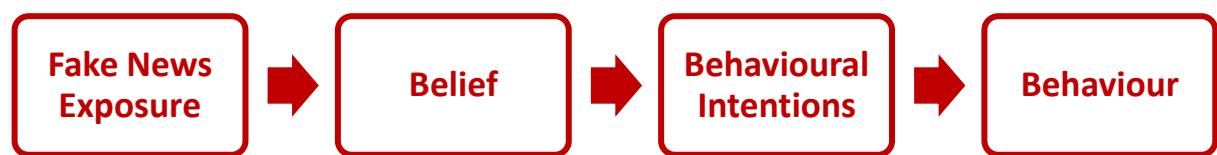
In the following four sections we provide examples of how Evidential Pluralism offers a helpful framework for identifying evidence gaps and how best to fill them.

The Problem

It is often assumed that online fake news has a detrimental impact on behaviour, but is this really the case? According to EP, to establish that online fake news affects behaviour, one needs to establish the existence of both a correlation and a mechanism.¹⁷ This requires combining quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Quantitative studies provide evidence of correlation. For example, there is evidence of a correlation between the amount of misinformation shared and a decrease in daily Covid-19 vaccination rates, conditional on potential confounders.¹⁸

A plausible mechanism hypothesis connecting fake news and problematic behaviour is:



Qualitative and quantitative studies provide evidence of this mechanism.¹⁹ For example, qualitative surveys identify volume of information, repeated exposure, using family and friends as sources of information and emotive content as drivers of belief in fake news.²⁰ An Experimental study found

¹⁷ ‘Fake news’ is here being used to cover all kinds of false and misleading information, including misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.

¹⁸ Pierri et al. (2022).

¹⁹ See, for example, Allington et al. (2021); Greene and Murphy (2021); Lockyer et al. (2021); Pennycook et al (2018); Roozenbeek et al. (2020)

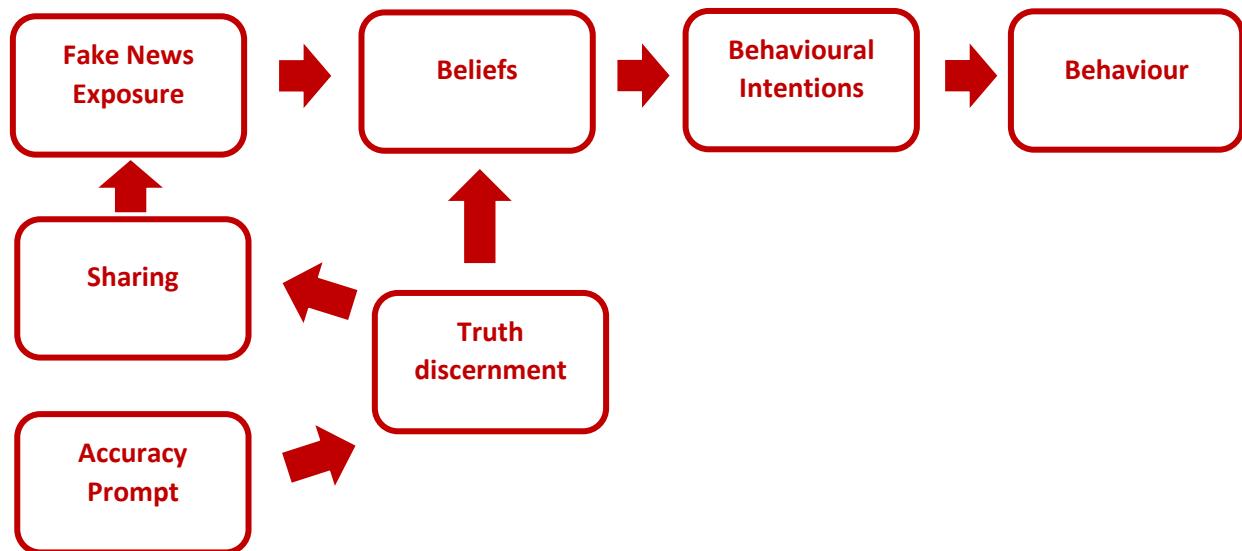
²⁰ Lockyer et al. (2021).

exposure to misinformation is associated with small but significant changes in behavioural intentions and that behavioural intentions are associated with belief.²¹

Thus, by combining quantitative evidence of correlation and quantitative and qualitative evidence of mechanisms, the detrimental effects of online fake news can be established.

Interventions

The above mechanism hypothesis and associated evidence can be used to identify possible points of intervention. For example, accuracy prompts aim to reduce the impact of fake news by improving truth discernment which (i) reduces belief in fake news²² and (ii) reduces sharing of, and in turn exposure to, fake news.²³



Evidence of mechanisms is also crucial to evaluating interventions. Quantitative and qualitative studies provide evidence of mechanisms to support the effectiveness of accuracy prompt interventions. For example, survey studies show that accuracy prompts increase truth discernment and reduce the amount of false content people intend to share online.²⁴ A large field experiment conducted on Twitter shows that accuracy prompts reduce the amount of false content shared online.²⁵ Computational modelling provides evidence that accuracy prompts increase truth discernment and improve quality of content shared by focusing attention on accuracy rather than increasing the amount of deliberation.²⁶

Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence provides strong evidence of mechanisms to support the effectiveness of accuracy prompt interventions. This evidence can be understood to provide

²¹ Greene and Murphy (2021).

²² There is evidence that belief in fake news is driven by failing to engage in reflective reasoning and instead relying on automatic, intuitive thinking. See, for example, Bago et al. (2020); Pennycook and Rand (2019); Pennycook and Rand (2021).

²³ There is evidence that repeated exposure increases belief in fake news. See, for example, Pennycook et al. (2018).

²⁴ Arechar et al. (2022); Brashier et al. (2020); Epstein et al. (2021); Fazio (2020); Pennycook et al. (2020); Pennycook et al. (2021); Pennycook and Rand (2022).

²⁵ Pennycook et al. (2021); Pennycook and Rand (2022).

²⁶ Lin, Pennycook and Rand (2023).

indirect evidence of correlation via channel m_3 in Fig. 1 above. Quantitative evidence of a correlation between accuracy prompts and behaviour, such as improved Covid-19 vaccine uptake, would further support the effectiveness of accuracy prompts.

6. Example: interventions to reduce consumption of alcohol

The problem

Does alcohol consumption cause cancer? EP captures the evidence appraisal procedures employed by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) to answer questions such as this. The IARC *Monographs* programme evaluates the strength of the evidence in order to determine whether a particular preventable exposure can be classified as a possible, probable, or established cause of cancer in humans. IARC determined that consumption of alcoholic beverages does indeed cause cancer.²⁷

A *Monographs* working group evaluates a range of evidence in order to determine whether an exposure is a cause of cancer.²⁸ One subgroup evaluated evidence of cancer in human epidemiological studies relating to alcohol consumption. These quantitative studies provided strong evidence of the existence of a correlation between alcohol consumption and cancer in humans. But such studies alone are often insufficient to establish that the exposure is a cause of cancer, due to the risk of confounding and bias. Another subgroup therefore evaluates the evidence from mechanistic studies in order to determine whether there is a mechanism linking exposure to cancer. These studies can be quantitative or qualitative. There was substantial mechanistic evidence that alcohol causes cancer of the oesophagus, for example.

Interventions

Establishing that alcohol consumption is a cause of cancer and other diseases has led to a number of interventions aimed at reducing alcohol intake. One such intervention is the introduction of minimum unit pricing, that is, a legal minimum price per unit of alcohol. EP can help to assess the effectiveness of such an intervention on different populations.

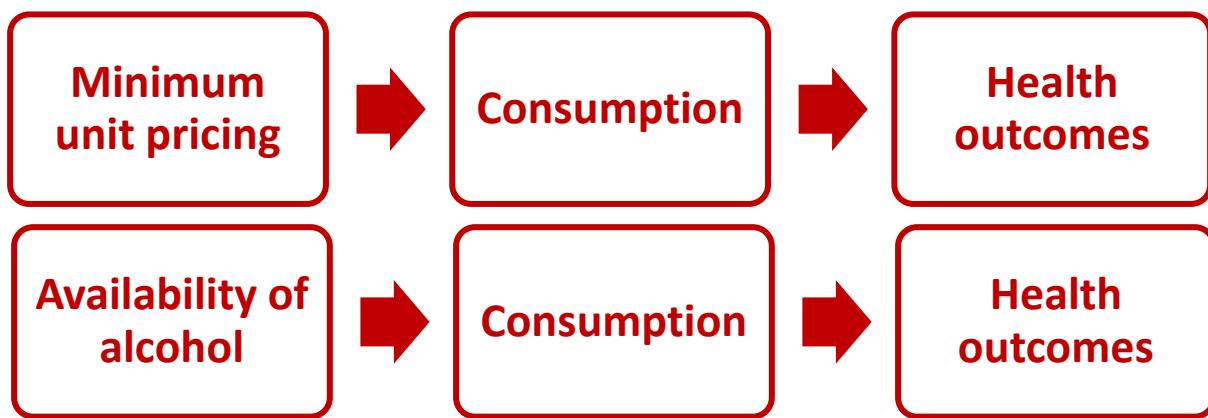
Scotland introduced minimum unit pricing in 2018, but there is currently no minimum unit pricing in England. Quantitative studies comparing England and Scotland have shown a population-level correlation between the introduction of minimum unit pricing and a reduction in deaths and hospitalisations.²⁹ One possible explanation of this correlation appeals to the familiar economic mechanism by which an increase in price leads to a fall in demand and therefore consumption of alcohol. However, there are also alternative mechanism hypotheses. For example, the Scottish population in which minimum unit pricing was introduced may have had an unrelated, simultaneous drop in the availability of alcohol relative to the English control population; it may be a drop in the availability of alcohol, rather than the minimum unit pricing, that is causing most of the reduction in deaths and hospitalisations.³⁰

²⁷ IARC (2010).

²⁸ IARC (2019).

²⁹ See, for example, Wyper et al. (2023).

³⁰ See, for example, PHS (2023) pp. 60-77.



Qualitative and quantitative studies can help to decide between the two competing mechanism hypotheses. For example, quantitative studies help to disconfirm the availability hypothesis by providing evidence of a similar level of availability of alcohol in Scotland and England.³¹ And qualitative or mixed methods studies, for example, studies including structured interviews, help to determine whether it is the affordability or the availability of alcohol that is causing the reduced consumption.³² In this way, integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence can help to establish the effectiveness of a proposed intervention.

7. Example: universal basic income

EP can help to identify gaps in the evidence base, as in the example of Universal Basic Income (UBI). Where the quantitative evidence gives some inconclusive and low-quality support to the claim that UBI is correlated with health and economic benefits, EP suggests that there is a need for additional mechanistic evidence, rather than only additional costly quantitative pilot studies.

UBI is purported to have positive economic effects, by reducing economic inequality and precarity³³, and positive public health effects, by reducing the rate of depressive disorders and preventable long-term conditions, and the subsequent cost on the NHS.³⁴

A number of small-scale trials have been piloted to assess the effectiveness of UBI in the UK: a Welsh pilot study launched in 2022 tested the effectiveness of a monthly £1600 stipend for the wellbeing of 635 people leaving care over 2 years;³⁵ two trials were proposed in 2023 for areas in the North and South of England, in which 30 people would also be given £1600 a month for 2 years;³⁶ and UBI is a point of political discussion in Scotland³⁷ and Ireland.³⁸

However, these micro-trials have limitations: due to their high cost, trial populations are very small, often limited to specific geographic areas and demographics; and while they contain control groups,

³¹ PHS (2023), pp. 72-74.

³² See, for example, Holmes et al. (2022).

³³ See, for example, Lowrey, 2018; Reed et al, 2023.

³⁴ See, for example, Gibson et al, 2020; Johnson et al, 2023.

³⁵ See Drakeford, 2022.

³⁶ See Ali Hussen, 2023.

³⁷ The Scottish Greens party made a 2024 commitment to pursuing UBI in Scotland:

<https://greens.scot/news/scottish-greens-will-move-to-universal-basic-income>

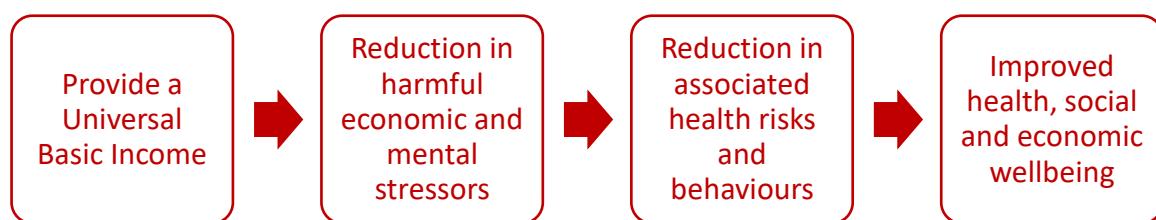
³⁸ See Redmond et al, 2022.

trials can't be properly randomised or double-blinded, as participants know if they're receiving the stipend or not. Thus, they are imperfect trials and produce low-quality, inconclusive evidence.

There is a clear gap in the evidence base, that can be addressed in two ways: by conducting larger, higher quality experimental trials, and/or by seeking mechanistic evidence³⁹.

Larger and more diverse trials are costly and hard to justify in the absence of (provisional) evidence of effectiveness, and even the cost of the small pilots themselves are a barrier for policymakers: the 2022 trial in Wales is not being continued beyond its 2025 end date due to the cost, despite overall positive responses from participants⁴⁰; and the English pilots proposed in 2023 have still yet to launch, as Sadiq Khan argued that "[governmental financial] support is there... someone else would need to fund a pilot."⁴¹ Despite the economic benefits of UBI being modelled by the NHS⁴² and their affordability being rationalised within reasonable budgets⁴³, operating these trials, particularly at larger scales, is too expensive, unjustified, and risk for policymakers to readily adopt.

Rather than investing heavily in scaling up trials, a more cost-effective approach would be to integrate mechanistic evidence with the existing quantitative evidence.⁴⁴⁴⁵ There is currently limited mechanistic evidence for both the positive and negative effects of UBI on participation in the labour market, limited mechanistic modelling of how UBI could be funded and its impact on national budgets, and a limited mechanistic understanding of how UBI reduces low-income related stress and health issues.⁴⁶ There is a clear gap in the evidence base in this regard, and more research is needed to fully explore the hypothesised mechanism underpinning UBI as a health and economic intervention, which can be summarised as follows:



By investigating this proposed mechanism hypothesis through a range of quantitative and qualitative mechanistic studies that provide an understanding of how UBI reduces low-income stress and related health issues, policy makers will be in a better position to evaluate whether and why UBI works or not, and would have higher quality evidence to justify larger scale UBI trials.

³⁹ See Hoynes and Rothstein (2019) for further information on the limitations of these micro-trials.

⁴⁰ Gwilym and Beck, 2023.

⁴¹ See Khan, 2023

⁴² Johnson et al, 2023.

⁴³ Reed et al, 2023.

⁴⁴ Johnson et al, 2021.

⁴⁵ This has been noted by Hoynes and Rothstein (2019), who argue that: "Unfortunately, the planned and ongoing pilots are not well suited to answer these questions [of effectiveness]. Experimentation aimed at identifying parameters and mechanisms... would be more useful than evaluations of small UBI pilots" (p. 24, my own bracketing).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Fitzpatrick, 2022; Jaimovich et al, 2022.

Given the public interest in the proposed health⁴⁷ and economic benefits⁴⁸ of UBI, there is a clear need for more confidence in the effectiveness of UBI as a policy intervention, as well as greater accountability and understanding. While larger and more diverse trials are desirable, obtaining mechanistic evidence is more cost-effective and less risky in this case, and EP provides a practical method for integrating quantitative and qualitative mechanistic evidence in the evaluation of UBI.

8. Example: awarding gaps in higher education

In the UK in 2020-2021, the gap between the percentage of white students and the percentage of black students receiving a first or 2:1 degree was 18.5%. The gap between white students and Asian students was 6.1% and the gap between white students and students from all other ethnicities was 9%.⁴⁹

Addressing these inequalities requires understanding their causes. According to EP, this requires evidence of correlation and evidence of mechanisms.

Large quantitative studies provide evidence of a correlation between ethnicity and degree outcomes, conditional on potential confounders including prior qualifications, social class, and other demographics.⁵⁰

Qualitative research has identified several underlying factors that might explain the correlation between ethnicity and degree outcomes, including previous educational experience, curriculum design and content, teaching, learning and assessment approaches, educational environment, and direct and indirect racism.⁵¹

However, as Sabri has argued, these findings are not sufficiently discriminating. To enable effective change, more nuanced analysis is needed of the strength of different causes and their interaction in different contexts.⁵² This requires explicitly formulating and assessing mechanism hypotheses.

As Sabri notes, there is an assumption in public discourse that greater representation of Black and minority ethnic staff among academics will reduce the inequality in degree outcomes. We should not assume, however, that greater representation among staff would have a simple, positive causal effect on degree outcomes. A plausible mechanism hypothesis that Sabri identifies as embedded in the literature is that under-representation of Black and ethnic minority staff limits diversity in expertise which limits diversity in curricula design.⁵³ This, in turn, leads to a gap between curricula content and the interests of an increasingly diverse student population which affects student degree outcomes. The inequality in degree outcomes perpetuates the under-representation of Black and ethnic minority staff. The under-representation of Black and ethnic minority students with ‘good degrees’ results in a disproportionately white population of students from which a small number are recruited to undertake PhDs and train for an academic career. An additional mechanism hypothesis discussed by Sabri is that high staff-student ratios facilitate greater engagement with students and provision of

⁴⁷ See, for example, Ruckert et al, 2017; Johnson et al, 2023.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Srnicek & Williams, 2015; Harrop & Tait, 2017; Lowrey, 2018.

⁴⁹ Advance HE (2022).

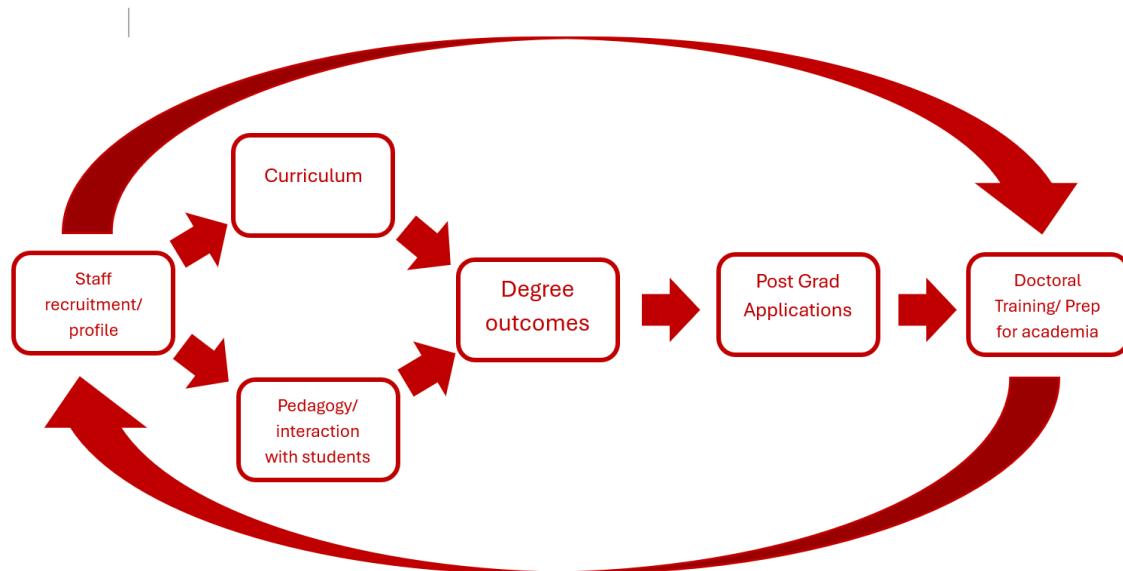
⁵⁰ See, for example, Connor et al. (2004); Richardson (2015); HEFCE (2015).

⁵¹ Brunce et al. (2021); Singh (2011).

⁵² Sabri (2023). Sabri provides a full exploration of the benefits of applying Evidential Pluralism to understanding and addressing inequalities in degree outcomes.

⁵³ Sabri (2023).

formative feedback, which in turn enable students to fulfil their potential. These mechanisms and their interactions are captured in the following diagram.



Both quantitative and qualitative studies can provide evidence of the extent of the contribution of these hypothesized mechanisms. For example, quantitative studies could assess the relationship between staff diversity and student degree outcomes. Qualitative studies could assess other stages of the mechanism. For example, analysis of survey results suggest that non-white staff are more likely to include diversity related content in their curricula.⁵⁴

Systematically assessing evidence of correlation from quantitative studies and evidence of mechanisms from quantitative and qualitative studies will enable greater understanding of the causes of inequality in degree outcomes. This, in turn, will enable the identification of potentially effective interventions that can in turn be evaluated by providing both evidence of correlation and evidence of mechanisms.

9. Further resources

Introductory material on Evidential Pluralism can be found at: blogs.kent.ac.uk/evidential-pluralism/

For more details on the evaluation methodology and face-masks example, see Trofimov, A & Williamson, J. (2025), Applying Evidential Pluralism to evidence-based law: EBL+, *Jurisprudence*. Open access at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00611-0>

For a general account of the application of Evidential Pluralism to the social sciences, see: Shan, Y. and Williamson, J. (2023). *Evidential Pluralism in the Social Sciences*. Routledge, Abingdon. Open-access at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003143000/>

⁵⁴ See, for example, Mayhew and Grunwald (2006).

10. Glossary

Evidential Pluralism. A theory of how to evaluate interventions and other causal relationships. According to this approach, it is important to assess mechanistic studies alongside experimental and observational studies of the covariation between the putative cause and effect. Evidential Pluralism provides general guidance as to exactly how to do this.

Impact evaluation. An evaluation of whether a particular intervention is effective in achieving certain goals. An impact evaluation may also try to estimate exactly how effective the intervention is.

Mechanistic study. This kind of study provides information about the ways in which a cause produces its effects. A mechanistic study of an intervention may shed light on the process by which the intervention works, or on other processes that can interact to change the results of the intervention. Mechanistic studies shed light on key features of mechanisms, such as mediating variables, entities or activities involved in the mechanism, or the structure or spatiotemporal organisation of the mechanism.

Observational and experimental studies. This kind of study tests whether a putative cause and effect are probabilistically dependent, conditional on a set of potential confounders. Typically, such a study will also attempt to estimate the extent of this dependence. Observational and experimental studies include studies such as RCTs as well as observational studies such as cohort studies. In the literature on Evidential Pluralism, these studies are often classified as ‘association studies’, because they are principally measuring the association between putative cause and effect, conditional on potential confounders.

Process evaluation. An evaluation of whether a particular intervention has been implemented as intended.

RCT. Randomised Controlled Trial. A trial that randomly allocates participants to the intervention. Those who are not given the intervention are usually given an alternative intervention, which will ideally be indistinguishable from the intervention but include none of the features of the intervention that are likely to cause the outcome of interest.

Realist evaluation. Realist evaluation looks at mechanisms of an intervention to ask for whom the intervention works and in which contexts it works. While Evidential Pluralism, in common with standard impact evaluation methods, asks whether there is an average effect across a whole population, realist evaluation can be thought of as focussing on variability in effect. For this reason, realist evaluation explores the fine-grained details of intervention mechanisms, while Evidential Pluralism looks for key features of a mechanism, and thus appeals to more coarse-grained mechanism hypotheses.

Theory-based evaluation. This approach to evaluation focuses on the importance of theories to evaluation. Interventions are often represented using ‘theories of change’ or ‘logic models’, in order to structure an evaluation. These representations are viewed as kinds of specific mechanism hypothesis by Evidential Pluralism. Evidential Pluralism has a different emphasis: it views theories as having no evidential value on their own—only when confirmed by evidence can a theory be relevant to an evaluation. Thus Evidential Pluralism focuses on evidence, rather than theory.

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