Reviewer's report

Title: Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: South African examples of a leadership of sensemaking for PHC

Version: 1
Date: 20 January 2014

Reviewer: Maria Stuttaford

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to read this insightful paper on the complexities of health systems change in PHC. The research question about how manager’s sensemaking and discretionary power impact on PHC change management is clearly stated and the methods used are appropriate. The data and analysis adheres to rigorous standards. The paper is well structured and clearly written. The Discussion needs to be strengthened in terms of being more explicit about how sensemaking and discretionary power work together.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. First time use acronyms, write in full.
2. Background, 2nd sentence - use ‘better’ twice. Perhaps change first to ‘improved’?
3. Background, 2nd sentence – could add a quote here from policy to be more specific about what is trying to be achieved.
4. Background, 3rd para, 3rd sentence – it comes across as if sensemaking is going to be the ‘magic pill’ to solve all other PHC issues. Perhaps just rephrase this sentence to say that it is a vital contributing factor.
5. Methods, 2nd para – the study design of iterative cycles should be referenced as this builds on other's work e.g. Roy Bhaskar, Pieter de Vries and others so please add relevant references that you have drawn on.
6. In sub section titled Sensemaking and Resistance to Centrally-led PHC Improvement Targets: The setting of targets is controversial. It might be useful to refer to international literature documenting other instances where targets have impacted on wider agenda of change
7. The discussion needs strengthening. Most importantly, more needs to be made of the role of discretionary power and the intersection with sensemaking. This is the main contribution of the paper and while addressed in findings, is not discussed robustly in the Discussion section. Is it possible to combine Findings and Discussion?
8. Discussion or conclusions - What are the plans for future work? For example: Is there any plan to involve service users in exploring the intersection of sensemaking and discretionary power? High staff turnover is mentioned – are there any plans to track individuals to see if they take new way of working with
them to new facility when they move? Given your own acknowledgement of the positive impact of this action research programme, are there issues of sustainability once the DIAHLS project finishes and how are these being addressed?

9. Table 1, right hand col, 2nd to last row – ‘x’ reflective meetings – say how many

10. Figure 2, 2013 activities, point 2 – ‘tacit knowledge’ - this concept should be referred to in the text

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing interests