Reviewer's report

Title: Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: A realist evaluation of a capacity building programme for district managers

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Reviewer: Sumit Kane

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In the introduction, one Page 4, you say that “From a realist perspective, it is not programmes, but people who change things”. In fact from a Realist perspective, while agents through the exercise of agency, can change things, change occurs through the interaction of the context (the structure - to put simplistically) and the agents, and may occur, without agents exercising their agency. Frankly, in other parts of the paper this understanding is generally clear – perhaps, this statement and the parts that follow have been overlooked, and need further thinking.

Similarly, I suggest that you revisit the statement on Page 6 “In the realist view, people display behavioural tendencies innate to human beings, which manifest (or not) under specific conditions”. The phrase ‘behavioural tendencies innate to human beings’ is insufficient in capturing the Realist perspective, and is neither complete, nor accurate.

2. In the methods section, page 10: Initial PT is what as you rightly point out, the explanatory pathway connecting the intervention to the expected outcomes. It is initial, and derived from the initial programme logic of the designers, literature, and actual design of the program. This is what you seek to test and refine in your evaluation. The refined PT is the product of your evaluation.

While your articulation of this idea is generally clear and consistent with how Pawson & Tilley explain it (Fig 1), the following sentences do not reflect this “Out initial PT aimed at explaining the differences in taluka outputs, accounting for differences in the individual characteristics of the health managers, institutional factors within the two taluka health services and the differing socio-political and other environmental factors. The refined programme theory of the intervention that guided the choice of data and the analysis is shown in figure 3.”

In these sentences it appears that you use the initial PT as an explanatory tool to explain the differences in ...... When in fact, you use a Realist Approach to explain, not the differences in the individual characteristics of the health managers, institutional factors, but how the differences in these characteristics/factors and their antecedents collude with the intervention to produce different effects/outputs, in similar or different contexts (Talukas).
To put simplistically, this is what a realist evaluation seeks to do. Intial PT #Realist Evaluation # Refined PT. Somewhere in the quest for articulatory sophistication, and I refer not just to the Methods section, this logic gets buried in the jargon, and the reader gets a bit lost. The ‘non realist’ reader will benefit from a more accessible articulation. I suggest that the authors attend to this.

3. Section ‘Study Settings’, Page 8: I would hesitate to make such a sweeping claims that Karnataka, like rest of India, lacks a professional management cadre within the health services. Depends who you ask. The claim has a very regressive connotation; it is unnecessary. Same is the case for ‘in service training’.

4. Page 12 Data Collection, Para 3: It is not clear how all the metrics mentioned for assessment of ‘distal outputs’ of the intervention were used. Later in the Outcomes Section, it seems you used only 2 of these - ‘Utilisation Rate’ and ‘Stillbirth Rate’. This needs to be clarified.

5. It is also not clear why you choose to use Still Birth Rate as an Outcome measure when in fact you yourself rightly point out that SBR is determined by a whole range of factors. It will be good to clarify this/ reflect upon this choice better.

6. On Pages 17-18, you say you purposively select 2 cases to ‘illustrate how the plausible intermediate factors related to mechanisms of human, agency such as organisational commitment and self-efficacy could have contributed to the observed outcomes’. Two things here: A. This sentence, as it stands now, is not particularly meaningful to me. Please make it more accessible. B. This intent is insufficient, and neither does it capture what all you illustrate (or could illustrate) in/using these case studies. C. If however you disagree with my reading – and indeed your intent is restricted to illustrating how only these 2 sets of mechanisms could have contributed to the observed outcomes – then I suggest you make it more explicit early on in the paper.

7. More generally, and related to the central concept of your paper ‘capacity building’, it will be good if you unpack the concept better. As you know well, this concept has been extensively studied. For instance – if you look at how Potter and Brough (2004) look at Capacity Building, your intervention only intervenes with certain elements of the capacity pyramid. It will be good to reflect upon this situation; furthermore you might want to consider other elements as being contextual factors, more systematically and explicitly.

I think it is important to include this consideration in your analysis - irrespective of which framework you use to unpack the concept of ‘Capacity Building’.

8. Similarly, at the analytical level – on Page 13 you say that you use Sicotte’s Multipolar Framework as a heuristic to explain organisational change – in your discussion section you discuss/explain your findings using this framework .

However, I would expect the Results section (pages 18 – 22 in particular) to clearly demonstrate to the reader the basis of the claims that you eventually
make points that you discuss, in the discussion section. The reader cannot clearly see the links between what you present in the Results section, the considerations in Fig 8, and the analytical claims in the discussion section. Perhaps this is clear in your mind; perhaps it is the proverbial black-box that you as the realist evaluator can see inside. What needs to happen though is that the reader should also be able to see inside this black-box too, as clearly as you as the researcher is able to do so, and arrive at the same analytical inferences. This is a common criticism that we as realist researchers must address diligently in our work, the reader shouldn’t be left to or be expected to take a leap of faith; he should on his own also be able to see clearly inside the black-box, and clearly see the empirical basis of the realist analytical claims.

- Minor Essential Revisions

9. The use of the word ‘insights’. Insight is a non-countable ‘noun’.

10. Page 11: “In a second step, cases are selected purposively”. Please ensure that you consistently use the same tense throughout the paper.

11. Page 17: the phrase ‘negligent change’ is wrong, perhaps you meant ‘negligible change’.

- Discretionary Revisions

12. It will be good if the Figures are made snappier. Some consistency in style and form should help.

These are recommendations for improvement which the author can choose to ignore. For example clarifications, data that would be useful but not essential.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance 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 declare that I have no competing interests