Reviewer’s report

Title: Barriers influencing the contributions of a government-commissioned research project: a case study

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Reviewer: marleen bekker

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The focus of the article on a specific application of the contribution mapping procedure is definitively innovative and worth publishing. The article describes and analyses the interactions, contributions, and specific conditions that influence the opportunities and pitfalls for a synthesis of research and supervisory practice between government institutes of the Healthcare Inspectorate and the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment.

On the one hand, it adds to our understanding of more valid evaluation methods that do justice to the complexities and subtleties in the relationship between research and policy or professional practices, and at the same time go beyond process reconstructions. On the other hand, it provides valuable feedback to research commissioners, producers and stakeholders to become more pro-active in exchanging knowledge and tacit experience throughout the research process. Take for instance the finding that the perceptions of the inspectorate and the RIVM to one another diverge as a result of their relationship being (overly) defined by the forced sourcing system. Parties involved may adjust their way of interacting in such projects gaining more contributions with added value, but may also invoke the system director (the Ministry of Health) to open up the system of forced sourcing. Another valuable contribution of this article is the reflection on the interactive feedback session with Inspectorate and researcher participants that turned out to be an alignment effort in itself, with positive valuations on both commissioner and researcher participants.

Nevertheless, the current text raises some major conceptual questions that need reflection and resolution before any decision to publish can be taken. The main issues are summarised here, and elaborated in a review document to the authors.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In the current form of the article, the contribution mapping method and the ‘barriers’ model do not match very well. This is also the case with the descriptions of whether a contribution could be characterised as ‘instrumental, conceptual or strategic use’. In the original work on contribution mapping, ‘use’of ‘utilization’ was replaced by ‘contribution’ specifically because ‘use’ or ‘utilisation’ obscures the many possible ways in which research may induce change, and it cannot be traced back solely to the research itself.
Rather than 'filling' the contribution mapping method in the study framework with a predefined model for analysis, I would suggest to operationalise the contribution mapping method inductively from the case study, which provides sufficient quotes and observations for building theory. An additional suggestion would be to replace the focus on barriers with a focus on alignments (opportunities). Finally, the analysis of the 'organisational environment' and 'historical relationship' could be more focused on the system characteristics that evoke or discourage behaviour, and thus set the boundaries for the actor scenarios.

2. The decision to exclude content descriptions in the case study in order to preserve confidentiality leaves the reader with an empty feeling about the case description. It implies a loss of understanding the complexities and resulting (lack of) interactions and research contributions in the case. There must be some way to describe the substantial issues in generic terms in order to increase the reader's understanding.

Minor Essential Revisions

3. The operationalisation of contribution also includes 'knowledge products' or 'knowledge'. The case however did not concern the creation of knowledge, but tool design. This is rather the synthesis of different knowledge sources (scientific and non-scientific). Either my suggestion would be to describe how the tool, may have produced what kind of knowledge, or to rephrase the operationalisation of 'contribution'.

4. The discussion paragraph provides suggestions and recommendations for managing the relationships between government commissioning and research institutes, which could be more explicitly described as alignment strategies. Yet the findings could also include a more explicit reflection on the methodology and possible revisions of the tool design process in general, such as the risk selection tool in the case. And thirdly, a reflection on the contribution mapping method could be related to the literature on 'responsive evaluation' as an authoritative source of fourth generation evaluation methodology that has been developing since the 1990s.

Concluding, this is potentially a very interesting, relevant article that could add to our scientific as well as professional understanding and practice. However, the study framework needs major revision in order to remove the conceptual confusion arising from the combination of two different perspectives on evaluation practice.

**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.