Reviewer's report

Title: RAMESES Publication standards: realist syntheses

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Reviewer: Jos Kleijnen

Reviewer's report:

This paper presents a realist synthesis reporting guideline. It should be of interest to a wide audience.

I used the following guidance for assessing these reporting guidelines: Moher D, Schulz KF, Simera I, Altman DG. Guidance for developers of health research reporting guidelines. PLoS Med. 2010 Feb 16;7(2):e1000217. Steps 1 and 2 only have been partly followed, or at least I can’t see the relevant information in the manuscript. Some of the comments below reflect this further.

A range of guidelines for reporting of qualitative research exist, see http://www.equator-network.org/resource-centre/library-of-health-research-reporting/reporting-guidelines/qualitative-research/. It would be useful if the authors explain how their publication standard fits in. It would also be useful to make clear whether the authors searched for any existing reporting standards and whether any were found. If none exist, please state so. I am a bit surprised that the Equator network is not mentioned at all.

I feel the in the first parts of the paper the authors mix up reporting guidance and quality assessment checklists, for example in the introduction of the Abstract: “However, the quality of realist syntheses can be difficult to assess. This publication standard was developed as part of the RAMESES (Realist And MEta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards) Project. And in the section “Why are publication standards needed?” the authors state that “Publication standards have two main (and overlapping) purposes: they can help researchers design and undertake more robust studies; and they can also help reviewers and potential users to assess the quality and rigour of research outputs.” I suggest the authors should make very clear what the purpose of this guidance is: how to report realist synthesis is not the same as a quality assessment tool of realist syntheses. Having looked at the proposed reporting standards I conclude that these are certainly not suitable as a quality assessment (risk of bias) tool. In the section “Scope of the publication standards” and also in the “Discussion” this seems to be much better represented.

The guidance items themselves and their supporting texts read well, and they largely make good sense. I have refrained from giving my opinion about these items, given that they come from a Delphi process, I think they should not be changed because this peer reviewer has different opinions. However, it would have been good if the authors gave an indication which items of PRISMA do apply and which ones don’t.
Questions by the journal to be answered by the peer reviewer:

- Have the guidelines been presented and explained in a way that the community can fully understand and implement these?
  
  I think they are clearly presented.

- How well have reporting standards been adhered to?

  Not sure what is meant here; the guidance by Moher et al mentioned above has only been partly followed.

- Are all claims and statements fully supported with either new data or references to previous publications?

  This is a weak point of this manuscript. The explanations of the items have not been referenced, references would give a further scientific justification, now it is purely the Delphi panel that we have to put our trust in.

- How useful will these guidelines be to authors and editors?

  They should be very useful, and hopefully result in better reported studies.

- Have similar guidelines been published previously?

  Not that I am aware of, however as commented above, their place within reporting guidance of qualitative studies should be discussed.

- Do the authors have the required expertise and knowledge to design these guidelines?

  Yes, an excellent group of authors and Delphi panel members.

Jos Kleijnen

**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 interest. But to be clear: I am an author of PRISMA; I am not a member of the Equator Network.