**Reviewer's report**

**Title:** A realistic evaluation: The case of protocol-based care

**Version:** 3  **Date:** 15 February 2010

**Reviewer:** Debbie Tolson

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This manuscript sets out to describe the use of realistic evaluation strategies in research designed to explore the use of protocol-based health care. As the authors state, the increasing popularity of realistic evaluation makes this timely in terms of international interest in RE methodological advancement.

The paper draws upon two complimentary studies, the first study is framed around a documentary review which sought to identify propositions and theoretical underpinnings within protocol based care and protocols. The second study involved the testing of the identified propositions through case studies. As such the authors have a sound basis to achieve their intended ambition of describing how they applied the realistic evaluation approach in their work. The idea is sound and with some minor editing to bring the realistic evaluation methodological and operational challenges into the foreground this will make a valuable contribution to the methods literature.

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

None

**-Minor Essential Revisions**

A tension inevitably exists between reporting of primary research findings related to protocol based care and the declared focus of the paper. This tension needs to be addressed and in part can be resolved through better signposting and shedding the numerous sub headings within the reporting of what is currently described as Phase 1.

'Phase 1 Findings' are currently a blend of methods and findings for the evidence review. This section is, in parts, difficult to follow and it would be helpful to either re-present as a briefer overview of this phase or to signpost the material better so that readers can easily follow the evidence review methods and see the influence of realistic evaluation. On first read it also appears illogical to explain the study’s theoretical framework at the end of this section. Consideration could be given to deleting Figure 1 which displays the theoretical framework as it does not serve to add clarity in the context of this paper.
Reporting of 'Phase 2' is clearer but again it would be helpful to look carefully at signposting to make a better distinction between methods and findings.

Reporting two studies in tandem is always challenging and in this paper it is essential that a distinction is made between describing the methods, procedures and findings for the two parent studies and the subsequent analysis and reporting related to the application of realistic evaluation strategies. This point can be addressed by a combination of the minor sign posting changes outlined above and through modification to the final discussion. In the final discussion, greater attention should be afforded to the critique of using realistic evaluation within the evidence review and case study phases. A couple of sentences on both aspects could suffice. It would also be helpful to look at how the lessons learned and the identified pitfalls of realistic evaluation -both in an operational and methodological sense could be drawn together and summarised within the discussion.

- Discretionary Revisions

The introduction makes it clear that the study was undertaken within the UK and accordingly cites what is described as UK policy. It would be helpful to clarify where this policy is UK or country specific (e.g. England & Wales).

There is opportunity to frame the research problem within an international context both within the introductory section and final discussion.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.