Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Building a Theory of Audit and Feedback: A 'Menu of Constructs' Approach

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**Reviewer:** Benjamin Gardner

**Reviewer’s report:**

This paper proposes an approach to interventions which falls halfway between the top-down imposition of generic theory and the bottom-up development of context-specific 'mini-theories', and seeks to apply this approach to an analysis of audit and feedback (A&F) interventions.

**Major compulsory revisions**

1. The main purpose of this paper is unclear; is this primarily a methodology piece that seeks to outline the new 'menu of constructs' (MoC) approach, or an attempt to develop a new account of A&F? The title is ambiguous in this regard, and the main text rather disjointed, because while the Background speaks to the need for a new approach, the narrative then moves to the deconstruction of A&F, before shifting back to a discussion of how the new approach benefits knowledge translation. The MoC approach itself is not described.

2a. Indeed, no detail is provided of what the MoC approach entails, how it proceeds, and how it may be applied. Without this information, the reader cannot evaluate how rigorous, systematic, or novel is the approach (or the application to audit and feedback), and cannot apply the approach to other domains.

2b. Perhaps consequently, the analysis of A&F does not appear rigorous or systematic, being seemingly based on preconceptions and expectations rather than an assessment of all available and relevant constructs. Examples are presented of ‘theory-derived, contextually relevant constructs that may need to be incorporated into a constructed theory of A&F’ (p13) – but by what criteria is relevance judged, and how reliable are judgements of relevance? Similarly, on p14: ‘one needs to ask what mechanisms might help determine whether or not the feedback is effective. One lens we can apply to this problem is the notion of cognitive dissonance’. Are constructs other than cognitive dissonance not relevant here too? The authors claim that the MoC approaches involves ‘consider[ation of] the entire menu [of constructs]’ (p6) – so what determines which constructs are applied, and from which theories ‘relevant’ constructs are drawn? This is particularly important: the authors rightly point out that ‘the number of theories potentially available for study is enormous’ (p5), and hence so too is the number of constructs. Who, or what, provides the ‘menu’ in the MoC?

2c. The MoC approach purports to bridge the gap between theory and context-specific evidence, but no primary empirical evidence is presented here.
The A&F analysis is thus asymmetrical, being weighted much more heavily towards theory-derived hypotheses about the mechanics of A&F than to contextual empirical evidence about ground-level experiences of A&F among stakeholders. This also begs the question: from where comes the context-specific evidence that informs the MoC approach?

3a. Notwithstanding points 2a-2c, the MoC approach does not presently appear to offer any real advance on existing methods. The authors imply that theirs is the only approach to marry the top-down imposition of theory with bottom-up contextual evidence. However, Michie et al’s ‘theory domains framework’ (TDF) approach can do this (see Michie et al, 2005 [ref 13 in this paper], and Francis et al, 2009 [ref 58]). The TDF offers a fairly exhaustive set of domains into which theory-derived constructs can be sorted, and so imposes order on the many existing theoretical constructs. The TDF was developed to inform clinical practice so that, for any applied problem requiring intervention, a context-specific analysis of the problem can be undertaken by interviewing key stakeholders to reveal which of the domains are likely to be important targets for intervention. This can then inform the use of theory-based behaviour change techniques (Michie et al, 2005), and the identification of a theoretical framework for conceptualising the problem (Francis et al, 2009). The existence of the TDF therefore reduces the novelty of the MoC approach.

3b. I found the authors’ treatment of the TDF on pp21-22 rather unfair. Michie et al proposed that the TDF be used to identify intervention techniques, and Francis et al showed that the TDF could also be used to identify theoretical explanations of clinical problems. Yet the authors present Michie et al and Francis et al’s work as examples of conceptually distinct approaches to intervention development, respectively based on context-specific data generation and theory transportation. The implication of this depiction is that there remains a gap between these approaches, which can be filled by the MoC. However, as stated above, Francis et al’s approach is complementary to, and derived from, Michie et al’s TDF, and so such an apparently wide gap does not exist.

3c. Given that the TDF adequately bridges the top-down/theory vs bottom-up/context gap, the TDF offers a benchmark to which the MoC approach must be compared. The authors must present a convincing argument that the MoC confers advantages above the TDF, and the criteria by which the MoC is judged to offer the ‘best combination of context-specific information while still making use of previous theoretical work’ (p20) need to be clear.

4a. The critique of existing ‘theory transportation’ methods is unconvincing. The arguments presented on pp10-11 do not refer to theory transportation, but rather to limitations of specific theories (e.g. an emphasis on intention, lack of theory-linked behaviour change techniques), or the methods used to assess theories (over-reliance on correlational data). A more compelling argument must be presented for the limitations of the theory transportation approach.

4b. My own 2010 paper (Gardner et al, 2010, Soc Sci & Med) was the first to apply to A&F the type of ‘theory transportation’ approach described by the
authors here, but is not mentioned. The authors should engage with this work and use it to evaluate the extent to which their MoC approach offers greater insight into A&F than does ‘theory transportation’.

Minor essential revisions

5. On p10, the words ‘such theories’ are used in several places. Please clarify the type of theory being alluded to here (i.e. theories such as what?).

6. Please clarify the term ‘mechanistically-oriented theoretical constructs’ (p12).

Discretionary revisions

None

**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