Reviewer's report

Title: Never the Twain Shall Meet? A Comparison of Implementation Science and Policy Implementation Research

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Reviewer: Ewan Ferlie

Reviewer's report:

I found this an interesting paper in an important area. Nevertheless, it needs some more work in a number of areas – in terms of your guidelines for referees, these are I suppose all Major Compulsory Revisions (i.e. a revise and resubmit). To respond to your standard questions:

1. This is a discursive review paper in an important and intriguing area which has not so far been well explored: the differences/similarities between a newer body of knowledge around implementation science (often associated with HSR) and an older body of knowledge around policy implementation research (often coming out of political science or organizational studies). This is a researchable question which could do with more critical exploration. So in principle the paper is very much in scope.

2. In terms of overall research design, this is in essence a critical literature review. However, the methods section needs to be much better developed. How were these key texts chosen for review? How were they read and analysed? Did the team discuss them and the draft paper as a group? Were there internal differences of opinion and if so, how were they resolved? This paper is of course not a systematic review but more of a narrative review (see Greenhalgh etc). But all this needs to be made clear and defended much more tightly.

3. The data they draw on are in essence these key texts, which are 'uncontrollable' in RCT terms and have a life of their own!

4. I am not sure what the standards for reporting and data deposition might be in this sort of article.

5. The discussion and conclusion need further work to make them sharper and more interesting. So the critical element in the critical literature review needs to be more evident.

6. In the discussion of policy implementation research, it is correctly claimed that it comes from social science (political science or org studies). What are the implications for the preferred theoretical framing (political science has strong theory about the nature of the state) and methods (often case studies)? It is correctly argued that a 'bottom up' wave hit policy implementation research in the 1970s and 1980s. This is in part because of large implementation deficits evident in health policy, as in other public sector settings. A changing political economy
tried to reduce these deficits by New Public Management reforms from the 1980s onwards (e.g. performance management systems). These are quite different from network governance reforms which came in later (Rod Rhodes and Janet Newman are important authors here). The discussion was confused at this point. Have these reform efforts increased the steering capacity of the centre and reduced the viability of the bottom up view or not? How has the policy implementation research base moved over the last ten years – many of the texts reviewed are dated, if still classics? I was not convinced there was enough clarity in the handling of underlying theory.

7. Implementation science is also seen here as a social science. But in what sense is it? Or it is an outgrowth of ‘scientific’ HSR into larger scale arenas?. Again a sharper discussion of its theory in use (hypotheses? Social psychology and behaviour change models?) and its preferred methods (is there an explicit or implicit hierarchy of evidence? How are case studies judged?) would help. My own view is that it is more centred on the design of effective interventions and somewhat less interested in outer context which it finds difficult to ‘control for’. But it may be more effective in developing micro level change models.

8. The concluding discussion begins to draw out some potential lessons from policy implementation research for implementation science (good). But more substantiation is needed – how might Punctuated Equilibrium Theory be useful, for example? Theoretical perspectives such as Institutional Theory are briefly brought in but not really developed fully. Perhaps a discussion which focussed down on three possible contributions and explored each one in depth – both theoretically and giving a brief example. But it could also raise the question of possible paradigm wars – are they trying to mix oil and water?

Overall, this is a high potential paper in an important field. I had some questions about methods and the handling of theory. Most importantly, the discussion needs to be less descriptive, sharper and more critical.

9. The title and abstract are fine.

The writing is acceptable but there is a tendency for more description than critical analysis at times and the handling of social science theory needs to be clearer at times.

**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 i have no competing interests