Reviewer's report

Title: HIV among immigrants living in high-income countries: a realist review of evidence to guide targeted approaches to behavioural HIV prevention

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Reviewer: David Gough

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MAJOR REVISIONS ON CLARITY OF METHOD

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

I have no expertise in the topic area of HIV prevention but I found this a fascinating review which seems to have many important practical implications. My comments are more about the clarity of the methods of review in the paper. The comments are simply to raise issues to assist the authors in any re-drafting. Please accept my apologies for any errors or misinterpretations on my part about the paper.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

7. Is the writing acceptable?

(i) Realist review and review components and methods

The paper states that it is reporting on a realist review. Realist reviews tend to unpack possible mechanisms that could account for the effect of some policy or more specific intervention and then assess the evidence for or against the effects or relevance of these mechanisms (Pawson et al 2005). I believe realist reviews to be a very important development in response to the rather theory light 'black box' hypothesis testing by some systematic reviews.

Many people describe their reviews as realist reviews but there is not total clarity about what is or is not a realist review. There are plans to create methods standards for realist reviews (Greenhalgh et al 2011) so this may clarify things. In addition, there are many reviews that are theory driven complex reviews that do not use the realist review terminology. We therefore cannot assume the specific methods from the stated type of review and so it is important that the particular
methods are specified in any reporting. I think this is most easily done by considering the aims, components and methods of those components (Gough et al 2012). In the current review, the aim is to assess approaches to behavioural HIV prevention with immigrants. The main components of this review is: (i) a conceptual (configuring) synthesis of the theories (proposed mechanisms) for why an intervention might or might not be effective; followed by (ii) a series of seven sub-reviews testing (aggregating) the empirical evidence for these mechanisms to work in practice. My comments are mainly about the clarity and in a few places, the fitness for purpose of these methods.

(ii) Searching for studies in the conceptual synthesis

Clarity of reporting of searches:
It seems that the review developed a search strategy to identify studies for all stages of the review that was predominantly a priori but involved some iteration. The PRISMA statement attached to the paper says that the search strategy is reported but this seems to be only referring to the topic area, type of study methods (intervention and views studies), main database sources and the controlled terms (within the bibliographic databases) of the included studies. The actual search terms or the way that iteration was applied in practice does not seem that clear. The accompanying files does have a PRISMA diagram of the filtering of studies through the review process but this only shows numbers rather than the judgements that were being made at each stage.

Fitness for purpose of searching (page 11 onwards):
The aim of the conceptual synthesis was to locate mechanisms by which HIV prevention for immigrants are effective (and threats to their effectiveness). It is not clear to me why the search strategy would be just for intervention or views studies or that views studies are better with more than 15 participants (page 15). Surely, other conceptual qualitative studies would be equally if not more relevant? Later the paper also says this: “Pawson [66] asserts that as the prime focus is to explore underlying theories of programs (rather than the programs themselves), a wider range of primary studies may be relevant to the analysis and synthesis.” (page 15).

The search strategy was developed by identifying the controlled terms (in databases) of some studies known to fit the inclusion criteria (page 11). Although I can understand the logic (and the reference to support this approach is by one of my ex colleagues!), there are surely dangers that you will only find studies like the ones you know and the search strategy is unlikely to surprise you with unknown types of studies that meet the inclusion criteria.

The review also states that searching of databases “... was supplemented by a Google Scholar search to enhance the possibility of picking up ‘grey’ literature.” (page 11). But surely, Google Scholar is focused on academic publications. Grey literature might be best found by a wider standard Google search?

A suggestion is made to ...” urge others undertaking a review of this kind to
consider expanding the search terms and to carry out a single search on each database for intervention and views studies.”. This could be described as undertaking a broad systematic map from which two synthesis reviews are undertaken.

(ii) Conceptual synthesis

Clarity of reporting of conceptual synthesis:
The synthesis identified seven activities by which HIV prevention interventions more aimed to be more ‘culturally appropriate’ (‘staffing’, ‘language’, ‘content’, ‘ethnic diversity’, ‘settings’, ‘community consultation’ and ‘priority setting’) and seven theorised mechanisms (‘authenticity’, ‘understanding’, ‘consonance’, ‘specificity’, ‘embeddedness’, ‘endorsement’ and ‘framing’). The lists of these activities and mechanisms are repeated several times throughout the report. The aim of this repetition may have been to enable clarity, but for me as a reader, I found the repetition confusing.

Fitness for purpose of conceptual synthesis:
I understand that the identification of these activities and mechanisms is an iterative interpretative process yet I would have liked more information on contrasting or alternative conceptions.

(iii) Quality appraisal and testing of evidence for mechanisms

Clarity of reporting:
Reference is made in the text to frameworks of quality appraisal but few details are given. Also, tables are given for basic data coding from studies and judgements as to the extent of evidence in support of each mechanism from each study. I understand that the process is interpretative and interpretative but as a reader I had little idea of how this was done in practice to lead to statements such as: “The strong evidence to support this theorised mechanism was consistent across the intervention studies and the views studies indicating the pivotal role of this mechanism in behavioural HIV prevention at group and community levels with a focus on ‘shared values’ to deepen the symbolic understanding of the intervention.”. It is clear that many studies referred directly or indirectly to the mechanisms but what was the nature of the evidence that supports the review authors’ conclusions about these?

(iv) Conclusion

In sum, my main feedback on the review methods is that they are difficult to appraise them due to a lack of detail or clarity in the paper. I can see three possible reasons for this.

First, as the review is a broad multi component review examining both causative mechanisms and empirical evidence for their relevance or impact, it is not surprising that the review is complex and difficult to clearly describe in a paper. I sympathize with the authors but I think that it could be much clearer.
Second, the review took an inclusive approach and so contained a breadth of studies covering many activities, mechanisms and contexts. This can be difficult to summarize except in very broad ways.

Third, the review contains eight sub-reviews. As reviews are limited by the resources available, it would not be surprising if the breadth and multiple components of this review had resulted in stretched resources. The effect would be much less resource for each sub-review than you would normally have available for a single review. Congratulations for the authors for achieving so much but if there was limited resource for each sub-component then maybe this should be clearer.

Whatever the reasons, my overall view is that this is an important review that will make a significant contribution but that it requires more clarity over the specifics of the method. This is not in any way a criticism of the overall strategy, simply the reporting (plus maybe some aspects of the detail of implementation).

REFERENCES

Gough D, Thomas J, Oliver S (2012) Clarifying differences between review designs and methods, Systematic Reviews, 1:28


Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no known competing interests