Reviewer's report

Title: Conflicts of Interest and Critiques of the use of Systematic Reviews in Policymaking: An Analysis of Opinion Articles

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Reviewer: Kaelan Moat

Reviewer's report:

General comments:
Overall, I think this is a very well written and an extremely interesting paper that will be of broad interest to anyone following and/or contributing to the discussion about the use of systematic reviews in health policymaking. Given the difficulty in assessing and analyzing conflict of interest (and particularly undisclosed conflict of interest), the authors likely had to overcome significant difficulties during the design stages of the study, and I feel that they were able to develop a compelling approach, given these challenges. While I have one major point of feedback which can easily be addressed with some additions to the text, the majority of my concerns outlined below relate to points that require clarification within text.

• Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1) While the authors have provided a very detailed and extensive description of the study design and methods adopted, there isn’t a section that explicitly discusses their analysis approaches. As such, it wasn’t clear whether and how the quantitative data were analyzed (and I believe it was just a simple observation of trends in descriptive statistics), or the approach taken to analyze qualitative data, either. It isn’t until the conclusion section that the authors state why they decided not to use inferential statistical methods (which is a valid point) but this type of information ought to be discussed in the methods section, as well. I think an additional section needs to be added in the methods that clearly outlines the analysis stages.

2) While I believe there is merit in trying to separate out methodologically focused arguments from arguments about the utility of reviews more broadly, I struggled with these particular terms and the definitions used by the authors given there seems to be a lot of overlap between the two (i.e. it wasn’t always clear to me whether and how these two categories of arguments/discussions were mutually exclusive). Two related issues stem from this:

a. Given the focus in this paper on analyzing arguments for/against the use of reviews to inform policymaking processes external to the conduct of the review itself, wouldn’t all included studies, by definition, be relevant to discussions of reviews’ utility as an input into these processes?

b. In papers that currently fall into the authors’ ‘methods arguments’ grouping, is
it the case that systematic review methods are discussed in isolation of how they relate to their potential input into the policymaking process? Isn’t it the case that internal validity and methodological rigor was discussed in these papers as they related their utility as an input into the policy process? I find it difficult to parse out how methods-focused papers weren’t also utility-focused papers.

I believe that this is likely a language issue. Perhaps the authors would consider using more appropriate names for these categories to address this conceptual ambiguity (e.g. internal reliability and validity arguments vs. external validity arguments).

• Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1) It would be helpful if the authors provided some additional information to clarify their process for assessing retrieved papers for inclusion. In particular, I struggled on pages 5 and 6 where the authors describe a title review (“Two researchers screened search result titles”), but also state that:

- “Research articles, including studies, reviews and case examples were included if the authors expressed an opinion on the use of systematic reviews in policymaking within the body of the article” (page 5)
- “Included articles that contained significant arguments for or against this…We considered arguments to be significant if they did not focus solely on a single systematic review, but rather commented on whether systematic reviews did or did not have a role in policymaking” (page 6)

It strikes me as quite a difficult task to use titles when trying to determine whether “significant arguments” were made. It is important that the authors clarify this.

2) On page 11, the authors mention that “The number of individual articles that a single paper contained ranged from one to twelve”. However, the authors also separated articles into groups that argued in support of reviews from those that criticized reviews. In the case of articles containing more than one argument, isn’t it the case that some would have described arguments for AND arguments against? If so, how did the authors overcome this in order to categorize into the “supportive” and “critical” categories? I think this warrants discussion in either the methods or results section. The issue comes up again on pages 15-16, but the authors haven’t described how these were grouped into two discrete categories, despite having potential relevance to both.

3) The use of “off-topic” as an exclusion criterion makes sense, but it would help the reader if the authors could provide a definition of what is meant by this, as well as a brief illustrative example of how this was operationalized during the inclusion/exclusion phase (e.g. could be a bracketed description of the types of articles that were excluded given they were “off-topic”).

4) On page 10 the authors describe a process in which they used their own personal files/databases to identify an additional ten articles. I think that this
needs to be included in the methods section in their search strategy as well.

5) On page 12 in the results section the authors state “critical articles were twice as likely…”. Given inferential statistics weren’t used, I’d use this type of phrase with caution (particularly in light of the arguments being considered in this manuscript!). Could the authors consider another term?

6) On page 18 the authors use the term ‘utility’ (see: “accurately judge an article’s accuracy or utility”) in a slightly different way than in the rest of the paper, where it is used as a conceptual category within the analysis of arguments. As such, I think it would be best, to ensure no confusion arises, to consider a different term here.

7) On the bottom of page 18, the authors state that “…our findings are important because they demonstrate that industry ties may influence opinions…”. I would encourage the authors to reconsider the use of the term “influence”, given their study design lends itself to assertions of association (although only very loosely), rather than direct influence, which can imply causation to some. Semantics, yes, but something that may jump out at a certain type of reader.

- Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1) On page 4, the authors describe many of the characteristics of reviews, which is likely going to be helpful for readers not entirely familiar with reviews, but for whom this paper is particularly relevant (i.e. policymakers). While it is discussed in the results section to some extent, I was wondering if it would also be helpful to provide readers with some sense of the major arguments in favour of reviews vs. single studies in policymaking—which I would argue are now quite well established in the field and can be found in some of the Lavis papers cited in the study (e.g. can save time, reduce bias, etc.). I don’t think this would interfere with the results, which are much more focused on how COI intersects with the range of arguments, so it could be provided as additional background.

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 that I have no competing interests