Author’s response to reviews

Title: Integration of Existing Systematic Reviews into Reviews: Identification of Guidance Needs

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Author’s response to reviews: see over
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Dear Dr. Rogers:

We are submitting a revision of our manuscript, with new title “Integration of Existing Systematic Reviews into Reviews: Identification of Guidance Needs” to be considered for publication in *Systematic Reviews*.

We appreciate the feedback provided by the handling editor and the two peer reviewers. We include below a point-by-point response to the concerns, per request.

Thank you for considering our revised manuscript.

Sincerely,

Karen A. Robinson, PhD

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**Response to Comments:**

**Handling Editor**

1. Please respond to the issues raised by the peer reviewers. While this is an interesting topic, the current manuscript would benefit from greater clarity on the methods and concepts being presented. Concision is certainly welcome, but not if it leads to ambiguity. For example, in isolation the title is somewhat ambiguous - it is not immediately clear that the paper is concerned with the integration of existing systematic reviews into new systematic reviews. There are several places where ambiguous phrases or abstract concepts could be better illustrated with slight rewording or brief examples.

   *Response: We have revised the title. We have reviewed the text for jargon and revised text throughout for clarity.*

2. Please include a Conclusions section as the last section of the text. This should state clearly the main conclusions of the research and give a clear explanation of their importance and relevance.
Response: The previously titled “Discussion” section provided the conclusions and has thus been renamed as the conclusions section. The section in the Results “Methodological Areas: Assessment of Areas of Need” presents our interpretation of the results and is thus, appropriately we think, now labeled the Discussion.

Reviewer: Mark Newman
The manuscript discusses an important and interesting methodological issue of growing importance into those conducting and using systematic reviews. It is to be hoped that as more systematic reviews become available that these reviews will themselves become important sources of evidence for subsequent reviews that attempt to answer the same or similar research questions. The style of the paper is an expert discussion piece rather than an empirical research report and so I have read in that spirit and these comments reflect that reading. I think the paper would be more helpful to readers if the following style/presentation issues were addressed:

1) The general style reads like a report to funders/and or back to a particular group of specific people rather than an article for a wider audience of journal readers. Some of the comments I make below will I think help in this respect

2) More explanation of the context for example what are Evidence based practice Centre's, why ask these people for their views?

Response: We have added text in the Introduction that provides some context for the Evidence-based Practice Centers, and this workgroup.

3) A clearer articulation of the what is meant by systematic reviews - From the language used and organizations/tools mentioned I am guessing that this article means systematic reviews done to answer effectiveness questions i.e. the impact of an intervention on an outcome in a particular group of people compared to a control group of some kind. There are other kinds of systematic reviews for which the issues about using exiting systematic reviews might be different.

Response: We have clarified that our focus was health-related systematic reviews in the Introduction, Methods and Conclusions.

The paper picks up on most if the issues I could think of but does not explicitly consider the issues(at least I don’t think it did) of what counts as a systematic review? This is of course linked to but not synonymous with quality assessment
Response: This is a good point and is one a subsequent workgroup is taking on in developing criteria for screening for systematic reviews. We have added additional discussion under Locating Existing Systematic Reviews.

The discussion of the views of EPC members makes clear that existing systematic reviews can be used for different purposes. However the discussion of methodological issues does not reflect these different purposes clearly. I think the discussion of methodological discussion reflects the issues of using the results of existing systematic reviews as evidence to answer a research question either solely or as part of a new systematic review. This is fine but I think this should be made clear.

Response: We have added text to Methods to explicitly note the 5 options of determining use — these options are included as the key methodological areas (headers) in the Discussion.

4) There is not explicit consideration/discussion of the context in which use of existing systematic reviews takes place. The question of using existing systematic reviews as a source solely, as well as or not at all is relevant to the discussion. There may well be difficulties with using existing systematic reviews but there are also lots of difficulties with carrying out new systematic reviews from scratch.

Response: The Introduction had some discussion of the context and we have added text to the Conclusion section.

5) I would avoid using latin terms.

Response: We have removed the Latin terms.
Reviewer: Kelly Dickson

Guidelines Comments

Overall
Overall, this is a well thought out piece of work that raises important issues. It is the beginning of what I imagine to be an ongoing discussion and need for methodological guidance regarding how to integrate systematic reviews into new evidence syntheses.

There are some issues regarding the implicit focus on health and effectiveness reviews that I think need to be made explicit.

I agree with the EPC that further examples are needed. It can be sometimes difficult to grasp the points, on solely an abstract level, but I can see that this cannot be avoided at this stage of the work.

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
The authors are asking a pertinent question about the methodological challenges about the integration of existing systematic reviews in new reviews.

What is not clear of made explicit is
- The methodological issues raise appeared to be relevant mostly to systematic reviews asking health related questions on effectiveness.

Response: We have clarified that our focus was on systematic reviews of health care questions.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
The methods are little bit vague. For example;
- Discussions with EPC’s appear to be somewhat informal? Further details may not be required but how the data was collected and methods of analysis are very brief and not written in a way that addresses issues of replicable.
- Was it only handwritten notes or recordings from notes; was consent obtained (even informally) or deemed unnecessary? Where is the data stored?
- Is there overlap with the authors and the workgroup members who identified the major themes?
- Were the themes from the workgroup discussion notes re-interpreted during writing up for the articles? Any such information deemed relevant / important could be provided in an appendix,
- Decision to focus on particular organisations to identify available guidance / comments on the integration of SR’s is not transparent. Again, there appears to be an implicit focus on health, I am aware that this is probably because more reviews have been conducting on health topics making it more of an issue.

However, there is an evidence base in social care, environmental science, and areas such as international development. Did the team purposely ommit organisations such as Campbell, Social Care Institute of Excellence, etc, or did they not find guidance?
Response: We have added details about the interviews. We have clarified in Introduction and Methods that our focus was on systematic reviews of health related questions.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
The data has been handled and presented appropriately. The workgroup discussions provide the basis for the paper. Although direct quotes would provide greater transparency (as you’d expect in formal qualitative research) I think in this case it would detract and not allow for the full methodological issues to emerge.

Response: Thank you. We agree that inclusion of specific quotes may be distracting and prefer to retain our summary of the themes.

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

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? The official discussion is quite brief, with most of the content and discursive content provided throughout the article.

Response: The section of the Results where we provide our summary and interpretation of the results has been renamed the Discussion. The section that was previously labeled Discussion is now the Conclusions.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The title is very brief. It doesn’t completely capture the content of the article. E.g. it could be integration of existing systematic review in primary research, in addition to systematic reviews. This may be obvious when published in systematic review journal, but not outside of this journal. I would consider revising the title to more accurately capture what the article addresses if possible.

Response: We have revised the title to be more descriptive and, we hope, more informative.

7. Is the writing acceptable?
The writing is clear and accessible. The acronyms are sometimes difficult to hold in mind but this is not a big issue.

8. Other
p.8:
-What is meant by well-measured outcomes?

Response: We have revised this as “clearly and specifically measured outcomes”.

-What is an informal evidence base?

Response: We have removed the term “formal” here as it did not add meaning.
The phrase ‘existing reviews’ – in the sentence ‘members most often described qualitative or narrative qualitative incorporation of the existing review – needs clarifying. I am wondering if ‘existing review’ refers exclusively to their experience of conducting quantitative reviews of effectiveness. So they only include any narrative evidence? For example if the new review was qualitative and the team identified existing qualitative reviews – would the methodological challenges posed be the same or different? In addition, it could be that a review on program implementation that draws on qualitative evidence identifies relevant systematic review on the effectiveness of those programs - could/would they potentially include the quantitative synthesis?

Response: We have removed the term ‘qualitative’ from this sentence as it may be confused with qualitative research. We mean qualitative syntheses or narrative synthesis, as opposed to quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis).

- The use of the term risk of bias, again makes implicit that we are talking about effectiveness questions? Rather than using a more generic term such as critical appraisal?

Response: We have revised text in Introduction and Methods to clarify our focus on systematic reviews of health-related questions.

p.10
- Unbiased methods? Or transparent methods?

Response: We used ‘unbiased’ for item 4 and 5 in the list of areas identified as needing additional guidance. We do not think ‘transparent’ conveys the same meaning but take the point that ‘unbiased’ may not appropriate. We have revised each text to note methods to limit potential for bias.

p.22
- Are we touching on the issue of double counting here? And how to deal with that?

Response: We apologise but cannot determine to which text this refers. We think it may be in reference to synthesis (i.e., to be sure to not include individual studies that are also included in the prior systematic reviews). We added following text to that section: “It is also important to not double-count studies, such as through inclusion of primary studies also included in existing systematic reviews or considering as separate evidence systematic reviews with overlapping primary studies.”