Reviewer's report

Title: Integration of Existing Systematic Reviews

Version: 2 Date: 17 March 2014

Reviewer: Kelly Dickson

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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.

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 purposively omit organisations such as Campbell, Social Care Institute of Excellence, etc, or did they not find guidance?

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,

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.

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.

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?
-What is an informal evidence base?
-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?

-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?

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-Unbiased methods? Or transparent methods?

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- are we touching on the issue of double counting here? And how to deal with that?

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'