Reviewer's report

Title: Towards greater understanding of implementation during systematic reviews of complex healthcare interventions: the Framework for Implementation Transferability Applicability Reporting (FITAR)

Version: 1 Date: 24 Oct 2018

Reviewer: Craig Lockwood

Reviewer's report:

Feedback

The key areas of feedback which I consider major relate to the description of the methods, and the presentation of data in support of the results. My first comment below about using dated literature to support a novel development can be taken as a more minor comment, but it would strengthen the paper, and the review team clearly includes sufficient expertise to readily update the references in the background.

The first 8 references are all more than 5 years old. Only 4-5 references throughout the manuscript are more recent than 2013, I accept some older papers are considered seminal, but out of 29 references, 24 can not be considered 'older seminal works'. This is an issue in a fast moving field and because if the 'case' for the instrument is based on old literature, the relevance of the instrument has not been established. Updating the background with recent literature would strengthen the basis of the paper and its application to contemporary systematic review methods.

To further illustrate the above point, Line 69 - states that current concerns are with internal validity - and cites a paper from 2006. The statement lacks relevant supporting evidence, and seems to have been made without consideration of changes in method and methodology, further illustrating the above problem with using dated literature to position the argument for a new framework.

Methods

review of existing literature

'scan of literature' …' This is one third of the methods, but no details, including dates, databases and conceptual/theoretical representativeness are reported. Nor is it clear how the authors determined agreed definitions for the key concepts being sought, the data/concepts being specifically sought for or how the scan contributed to the project ('structures is unclear as a description of contribution to the concepts applicability and transferability). Can the choice to 'scan' be explained/justified (recent, supporting citations) and described as an approach? That would be a helpful addition to the methods.
empirical data from our exemplar review

line 142-3 are indicative of the need for increased clarity of reporting in the published literature. What characteristics did the review team agree to use for identifying applicability?

How did you plan for the literature scan, and data from the exemplar review interact?

Line 145 states there was a recommendation to use PICOC, the background is vague on this, and there is no evidence presented that PICOC was more highly recommended than PICO, which makes this wording seem out of place. PICOC was obviously a strategic choice, but the reason seems unclear in the current wording, can you please review and revise.

Line 147 - 'Drawing on conventional content analysis..' with reference to a paper that describes three related yet different approaches. What was the decision? Was it to blend all three, choose one or something else?

How did that process contribute to extending the framework?

Resolving what approach to content analysis was taken would help with conceptualising the results. As they currently read, the 'results' (i.e. level of severity, rural versus urban etc) appear unsupported. Without data there is no opportunity for a reader to understand how a particular conclusion (i.e. 'we found that some authors…') was reached.

Results:

Sequence clarity is difficult to establish. The development and evaluation were the same project conducted at the same time. Reading lines 195-197 it states that the new framework informed how data was extracted. It may well be that i am unclear as a reader, so perhaps other readers will have similar needs for further clarity as to teh sequence and how sequence impacted the developing framework and its evaluation.

Discussion,

The issue of developing and evaluating a framework at the same time in the same project should be discussed, how did the framework assist the review given the review informed the development of the framework, and how did the review help evaluate the framework since the framework was developed though the conduct of the review?

The discussion extends beyond the scope of the data by suggesting it could be used for stakeholder engagement by providing structure for stakeholder feedback when it was not evaluated for this application.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?  
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?  
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?  
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?  
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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