Reviewer's report

Title: Exploring the use of research evidence in health enhancing physical activity policies

Version: 1 Date: 24 February 2015

Reviewer: Catherine Woods

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HARPS Review criteria

Review:

Abstract. All Major compulsory revisions.

1. This sentence is unclear: ‘They can choose to take into consideration research evidence and other types of evidence in interaction between researchers, policymakers and stakeholders.’ You need to distinguish between your understanding of i) research evidence and ii) other types of evidence, before stating that the purpose of the article is to explore the extent to which each is used in HEPA policies.

Suggest you use the sentence in your introduction where you explain briefly the existence of different types of evidence (see just before reference 10) as explaining the need for this type of a research paper.

2. HEPA – in full first citation (Health Enhancing Physical Activity?).

3. Methods: Reference to ‘use of research evidence and other kinds of evidence’ is repeated from introduction.

4. ‘Qualitative content analysis of 21 HEPA policies and 86 interviews with key policymakers was conducted ‘to explore and analyse what types of evidence was used in the selected HEPA policies’ the section in ‘ ‘ is repeated for the third time in the abstract. You need to restructure, and use the word count here to explain exactly what you did with the content analysis, for example did you theme your results?

5. Results: Is research evidence different to citable research evidence? Unclear what is meant here. Evidence was split into following categories… was this as a result of thematic analysis from the content analysis? Unclear.

6. Discussion is unclear.

Background

1. Unclear: The gaps seen between research and policy have reported to include the different ways of using research evidence in policymaking between researchers and actual policymakers [11], Minor Essential Revision
2. Unclear: Nevertheless institutional structures and mechanisms are something missing perhaps to ensure effective and appropriate use of evidence in health policy and practice

[16] Minor Essential Revision

3. Unclear: The research in HEPA policies aims to involve systematic assessment... Are you referring to this paper, other papers in this area or the need for research in this area to tackle this problem? Minor Essential Revision

4. You need a reference for this statement: Previous international research on HEPA policies which research? has leaned towards country-specific descriptive case studies or decontextualized systematic reviews of HEPA policies (reference), neither of which yield a firm conclusion about how research evidence and other types of evidence were used to influence policy approaches and foreseen outcomes. Minor Essential Revision

5. Based on earlier research conducted [8, 18]... delete ‘conducted’ not necessary. Minor Essential Revision

6. Need a reference for the following statement: For the policy development phase, researchers (which researchers?) suggested three interrelated factors, which influence the development, implementation and outcomes of PA policy: (1) the knowledge base (e.g. use of research evidence), (2) social strategy (effective interventions as solutions) and (3) political will. Minor Essential Revision

7. This sentence is too long, needs restructuring: This study is part of the EU-funded project Research into POlicy to enhance Physical Activity (www.repopa.eu), where the overall aim is to integrate scientific research knowledge, expert know-how and real world policy making process to increase synergy and sustainability in promoting health and preventing disease, and to promote physical activity in structural policy making through different research and networking activities. Minor Essential Revision

8. Grammar: The aims of the article is (are) to... Minor Essential Revision

9. Identify when research evidence was used as well as patterns for this... Unclear what you mean in referring to ‘patterns for this’. Explain more concretely, why would you expect to find a pattern or are you trying to identify best practice in...? and the factors that influence this? Minor Essential Revision

10. The results of this study ‘may’ not are as you have yet to present the methods and results. Minor Essential Revision

Method:

This section needs to be rewritten as it is confusing and unclear. Major Compulsory Revision (numbers 1-20 in Methods section).

1) How did you identify the policy documents for content analysis? Was this systematic? How did you define a HEPA policy... as opposed to other policies?
2) You are justifying your methods as well as explaining what they are in one sentence. You need to separate both and make each clearer.

3) What do you mean by a content analysis? Explain, why was this the most appropriate method used?

4) Semi-structured interviews, why semi-structured as opposed to structured or indepth?

5) Were interviews and content analysis conducted simultaneously?

6) The following section is interesting, but it is not explaining the method by which you conducted your study. I suggest this is moved to the introduction as it is a justification for why a combination of content analysis and interviews were used by the research team. It does not however, tell us anything about how you conducted the interviews in terms of recruitment, script development, recording or analysis of data.

‘Institutions, interest groups and networks interact with individuals and their ideas at different times and places during the process of making policy [23]. In policymaking, institutions form structures and norms of policy making [24]. The institutions usually base their choices on rationality, organizational structures or historical background, which open a possibility to individual actors to influence on policymaking [25]. If ideas lead the policymaking, the salience of argumentation, discourse, and advocacy become important in the policy process [26]. Therefore networks of stakeholders in policy making create political associations and links between issues, which may explain policy stability and variations in time [23].’

7) Similar to the last point the justification for a particular approach to methodology and results are presented together leading to confusion.

The process of policymaking consists of various stages of problem identification and issue recognition, policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation [27]. Policy development is described as a continuous process of initiation, adoption, implementation, evaluation, and reformulation, but not necessarily a linear social and political process [28]. Therefore, research evidence or other types of evidence can enter policymaking processes at any point, which should be considered when undertaking policy development and analysis. The previous section should be in your background/introduction as it is making the case for needing to understand policy making. However in this study it was found that the most countries (most out of how many, no countries have yet been identified) did not have routine reporting mechanisms for policy decisions during policymaking processes accessible for researchers. (What was the method employed in order to determine this?) Some countries had records available in the form of media communications, list of members of the various
committees, working groups or legislative commissions, and report databases. What method was employed to search and find this information, you have reported results here without your researcher knowing what it is you actually did.

8) Reference for this sentence, unclear where the concept of splitting the policymaking into two phases: In principle, in the agenda setting phase priorities are set out for the policymaking process and in actual policymaking development phase the research evidence should support the issues to be considered, chosen and selected as a part for the policy. From this your rationale for splitting the HEPA policy process is unclear.

Content analysis of policy documents
9) Based on the literature review… which review, explain how this was carried out.

The following wording is a better explanation of the purpose of this paper in comparison to the final paragraph in the introduction. However, both need to match up. The challenge in this study was to find how tacit (unspoken), implicit and indirect knowledge and opinions shaped the policymaking process and how more explicit and particular use of research evidence was integrated into policymaking processes. And in the background… The aims of the article is to look at the use of research evidence in HEPA policies, identify when research evidence was used as well as patterns for this and finally find what other types of evidence were used in HEPA policymaking.

10) From six European countries were selected (what process was used for selection) 21 recent (years published, give ranges to allow reader to determine ‘recent’) HEPA national, regional, and local level policies (were these PA policies specifically, or policies that resulted in PA increases but were actually designed for other purposes e.g. infrastructure?) in total for the content analysis of policy documents. Need more detail on policy identification procedure adhered to, some of this is given in the following paragraph, but this is difficult to understand… for example ‘topics of the sample policies included’ is explained, this is very useful… but should it not be in the results section. The methods should only refer to the procedure adhered to in order to find the documents from which to conduct your CA.

11) We prepared common guidelines for all partners for the content analysis of policy documents and what to look for among the selected policy documents Can you give more detail on this methodology, share the common guidelines developed?

Semi-structured interviews
12) Did one country lead on development of generic interview guide? Please explain procedure and where the original questions derived from, e.g. rationale for agenda setting and policy development phase. This ties into earlier suggestions, but the rationale for this in the introduction needs to be strengthened.
13) Procedure of pre-interview preparation required by 86 interviewees (is this all or only some of final number of interviewees). How many of the 86 actually carried out this task? Did they prepare a written document to explain the policy making process or was this covered as part of the interview?

14) In most cases (more detail), the policy changes were described (were policies new, or modifications to existing documents), their significance, the use of research evidence and other types of evidence in bringing the content and change into policy, the factors influencing how and why the issues appeared on the policy agenda and the factors influencing how the policy developed. This reads like a content analysis of responses given by the interviewees to the general discussion on the process… if yes, this should be represented in the results, … if no, was this thematic structure part of the interview questions, i.e. prompted by the interviewer for comment?

15) Was coding completed by one interviewer or were there several, also one team member?

15) What was the contribution of ‘additional documents', it appears they were asked for, but were not used in the final analysis? How did they enrich the policy document analysis… unclear. May be useful to give actual numbers to allow the reader to determine quantity of ‘additional documents’ used in the analysis.

Analysis of research evidence in policy documents

16) Reference to guiding questions… unclear, did this inform the process below?

17) Who read the HEPA policy and transcribed interview and coded, sifted, charted etc. How was standardization across countries controlled for?

18) Policies and interviews were further analysed … by whom? Might be worth introducing the analysis section with a clear explanation of the research team, their training, strandardisation procedures etc.

19) The evidence was considered as: Demographic etc. and below ‘identify explicit use of research evidence'. Please explain how these two sections are related/different from each other, e.g. ‘knowledge derived from community consultations, in bullet points and then ‘interacting with peers or stakeholders' in paragraph text.

20) Framework… can you give an example in a Table format?

Results

1) Major Compulsory Revision: In order to evaluate the contribution of this article to the overall literature on policymaking in HEPA, there is a need to know the final policies referred to in the analysis, the countries they are from and the title of these policies. A brief description of the data collected for analysis, particularly in relation to the content analysis is required. This information could be added via a supplemental file to the article. In this description the age of policies would be informative, i.e. when the policies were written. Without knowing the quality of the policy documents referred to it is very difficult to judge the quality of your results, for example when you refer to ‘In most cases, where paragraphs in the policy
document suggested to be informed by scientific knowledge, explicit research evidence was seldom referenced to p (11), is this statement equally valid for national policies, regional policies and local policies. It is unclear what you mean by HEPA polices in your results.

2) Major Compulsory Revision: Similarly, summary statistics on the number of interviews, the range of areas/specialisms and affiliations (i.e. academic, public body, NGO etc.), gender and if available years working in this area to give an idea of the experience or level of the interviewees would be very useful in terms of interpreting the results.

3) Minor Essential Revision: Was there any link between the policies reviewed (N=21) and the policies referred to in the interviews (N=86) interviewees, i.e. were those interviewed discussing the policies in the content analysis only or were other policies also referred to in the interviews? What level of matching was evident.

4) Minor Essential Revision: Figure 1. This should be redrawn as a Figure rather than a computer graphic.

5) Major Compulsory Revision: What do each of the broad categories mean? ‘Societal frameworks’, ‘Media’, ‘Everyday knowledge and intuition’ etc. These need to be explained in the text of your article, and how they were derived form the content anlaysis and qualitative interviews.

6) Minor Essential Revision: The following sentence is interesting: ‘The continuation of the former policy processes made policies to some extent path-dependent. Seldom were lessons learnt from other projects or interventions used for policymaking as evidence.’ But how this was derived is unclear… was it specifically mentioned in the interviews that lessons were not learned by previous policy attempts?

7) Minor Essential Revision: Peer reviewed research … were rarely used? Again, how was this determined… did 5% of documents use it? 15% of interviewees use it… or was this a repeated theme? The translation of anlaysis to results is unclear.

8) Minor Essential Revision: Any possibility of getting examples of what is meant by the other types of evidence referred to here (p. 12) ‘but other types of evidence was also used to accommodate contextually salient factors such as culture, community and organizational values, resources and political priorities, which defined the usefulness of evidence for HEPA policymaking and implementation.’

Discussion
P 14. As shown in a study. [Remove full stop].

General
References all need to be updated.
Suggest replacing reference 2 with articles from the LANCET 2012 series on physical activity.

**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