Reviewer’s report

Title: Using narratives to impact health policymaking: A systematic review

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Reviewer: Eve Worrall

Reviewer’s report:

This is a well written article that meets the required standards of systematic review. I am not very familiar with the use of narrative-based interventions in health policy making so this was an interesting new field of research for me.

You have clearly captured the formal state of the art for this relatively novel approach in your review. However, I'm not sure that the objective (review evidence on the impact of narrative-based interventions on the health policy making process) has been fully met. I'm not sure that this could be met, since I cannot imagine a situation where narrative based interventions are ever the only factor that influences the health policy making process. As we know policy making is a complex and messy process, with many factors playing a role. I would imagine that narrative based evidence/interventions are used in almost every policy making process at the very least during informal discussions, and yet this is often not captured formally and it's hard to imagine how one might design a study to track the impact of narrative-based interventions alone. Hence, I'm not surprised you were unable to answer this question. However you don't give much insight into how you might tackle this differently now that you are much more familiar with the literature.

The Second point I would like to make is that as somebody working in the field of health policy I would really like to know more about how narratives can be useful, how to use them and how to study their impact. Eg. If one is conducting a retrospective policy analysis, how can we capture narratives especially informal ones? Is this something for example we should include in semi-structured interview guide with key informants?

Regarding your conclusion - I think that the final sentence (until such research is conducted, narratives should only be used to advocate for policies supported by convincing research evidence base) needs to be altered. Surely, regardless of whether narratives are impactful, we should only ever make policies based on convincing research evidence base.

I have three main suggestions:

1. Could you ever meet the objectives of this study and could they be met with a systematic lit review? I would like to see you discuss this more in your paper and with the benefit of your understanding of the literature, suggest how you might get a richer understanding of narratives outside of the confines of a systematic review.
2. Could you give some guidance to researchers on how they can use narratives, and how they can study them and ensure their impact is captured in the literature going forward.

3. Can you alter the conclusion to avoid endorsing non-evidence based policy making.

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