Author’s response to reviews

Title: Understanding contexts: how explanatory theories can help

Authors:
Frank Davidoff (fdavidoff34@gmail.com)

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1010 Waltham Street, Apt 594
Lexington, MA 02421, USA
781-538-5734 (home)
860-712-8896 (cell)
e-mail: fdavidoff34@gmail.com

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Re: Manuscript IMPS-D-18-00507, titled “Understanding contexts: How explanatory theories can help”

To the Editors

Implementation Science:

This letter accompanies the above-referenced manuscript which I’m resubmitting to Implementation Science after making the changes suggested in your e-mail of August 9.

As requested, the letter summarizes here my responses to the Editors’ Comments that were included in the above e-mail.

1) Editorial Comment:

“It is essential to make it clear to the reader what the relationship between these two approaches is [improvement science vs. implementation science]…and possibly more broadly describing the range of different perspectives on how these fields are related.”

Response:

Although the differences between these two disciplines are without doubt important, I’ve chosen not to spell them out explicitly in this narrative review. Doing so would require a lengthy essay (Cf for example, the monograph by AF Chalmers AF, titled “What Is This Thing Called Science?”) which would distract from the sharp focus of my relatively brief paper. I’ve chosen
instead to pinpoint several areas where implementation science intersects importantly with context.

Links between context and implementation science appear in the following places in the manuscript:

• ABSTRACT
  o page 2, line 18: Results
  o page 3, line 3: Conclusions

• INTRODUCTION
  o page 4, lines 5 and lines 12-15 (making sense of environments helps improvers solve implementation problems from first principles)

• RESULTS
  o Page 10, lines 12-17 (value of bracketing and naming key environmental elements)
  o page 14, lines 1-2 and Table 2 (use of a specific explanatory theory to guide implementation of an innovative electronic medical order system)
  o page 15, lines 6-16 and Table 3 (types of data needed to implement improvement interventions effectively)
  o page 17, lines 2-5 and page 18, lines 20-21 (leveraging complexity in implementing improvement interventions)

2) Editorial Comment: “It is important to be clear about the methods used…and the sources of information.”

Response:

In the Methods section I’ve listed six major publications that served as both the initial stimulus to explore the nature and role of context, and the principal continuing sources of content regarding context. These publications also provided important referencing that I used to expand my iterative and cumulative search of the relevant literature (as noted in the manuscript on page 5, lines 10-13).
I recognize and respect the importance of systematic reviews for establishing causality in science. However, I see the goal and study method of the present review as different from those of systematic reviews: i.e., my narrative review is analogous to published studies (including those identified on Page 4, lines 23-27) in which authors have synthesized enduring explanatory theories largely or entirely on the basis of narrative rather than systematic reviews.

For these reasons, I submit that the interest and value of narrative reviews needs to be judged on the basis of their inherent merits (e.g., coherence, clarity, logic, etc.) and importantly in relation to their declared goals, which differ inherently from the goals of systematic reviews.

NOTE: I hadn't been aware of the ongoing study of Squire et al on the domains of context until you brought the protocol of that study to my attention. I was encouraged to learn from that protocol that the study will use improved methods to create a new and, presumably, more rigorously constructed "static" model of context; accordingly, I’ve now cite the Squire et al study in the resubmitted version of my review, in the section on static models (page 11, reference 37, cited in lines 6-7).

However, judging from the content and structure of other existing static models (see the section on static models in my review, on p. 11, lines 3 through 18), it’s unlikely that the new Squires model will include the dynamic properties of context among its domains. Because such an omission would in my view seriously distort the fundamental concept of context (and because the Squires project is not yet finished), I have not considered it further in my review.

I look forward to your editorial decision on the acceptability of my revised and resubmitted manuscript.

Sincerely,

Frank Davidoff, MD, MACP

Editor emeritus, Annals of Internal Medicine