Reviewer's report

Title: Time to rethink the systematic review catechism? Six challenges for systematic reviewers

Version: 1 Date: 26 August 2014

Reviewer: Hilary Thomson

Reviewer's report:

'Time to rethink the systematic review catechism? Six challenges for systematic reviewers'

Thank you for asking me to referee this paper. The paper presents valuable thought to stimulate discussion about some key tenets of systematic review methods. The paper challenges some of these with respect to their usefulness in the pursuit of producing systematic reviews which can be rigorous, affordable, and useful for decision makers. The paper does not overturn the longstanding standards for systematic reviews but does question their blanket, unquestioned, application for all reviews, and by implication questions reporting standards currently used as a marker of review quality. Currently I think there may be a risk that the paper is used as a sanction for the previous principles to be disregarded; I am not sure that is the author’s intention. My main comments relate to how useful it is to recommend reviews without some degree of a focussed question or purpose. These comments should be responded to at the discretion of the author.

Minor essential revisions

I thought it was Sandelowski (see reference below) who first coined the term “configurative” review, not Gough.


There are a couple of typos which need edited on page 6 para 2 (“become more ever important”; “when to stopping”)

Bracketed text of the translation of “nulla in verba” would help those of us who do not speak latin.

Discretionary revisions

Challenge 1

Although broad reviews can be useful, they are not without their risks, by not focussing the review question the value of review efforts may be jeopardised. Broad reviews can be overwhelming for both authors and users, and take many years to complete or are never finished at all. It is extremely useful for broad reviews to go through a process of focussing the initial broad question with
respect to interventions, outcomes, etc to prioritise what is likely to result in a
review which is useful and meaningful, as well as enable the review to be
manageable within resource constraints. It may be that this breadth is a matter of
perspective, and it would be helpful if some clarification to this could be included.

Challenge 3
For review questions where there is very little research evidence available, it will
be very difficult to achieve saturation, and for these cases it may be useful to
attempt to identify all that is available. If nothing else this can strengthen the
review findings that the question has not been addressed adequately by
researchers.

Challenge 4
I have similar concerns about challenge 4 as challenge 1: that advocating
reviews with no focus risks reviews being unmanageable or unreadable. It is
enormously helpful to prioritise inclusion of studies by outcomes, and to include
secondary outcomes to distinguish pathways to primary outcomes. I am unsure
about what is meant by “the entire range of outcomes” and I think it is unlikely
that where this approach is used, that outcomes would not be grouped into
domains. Again (as in my comments re challenge 1) it may simply be a matter of
perspective and this be all that needs clarified.

Challenge 6
I am not that convinced that this is a new challenge, the reference to the need for
“enhancement” dates from 2003 and since then there have been reviews which
have included qualitative research to report on the nature and direction of effects,
or reviews that have only included qualitative data, including a Cochrane review
published last year.
Barriers and facilitators to the implementation of lay health worker programmes
to improve access to maternal and child health: qualitative evidence synthesis.
Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013;10:CD010414.
dx.doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD010414.pub2

Discussion
This could be more useful if it presented some brief thoughts on what might be
non-negotiable principles of systematic review. Transparency is essential, but as
the author points out that is not the distinguishing mark of a review. Would it be
worth adding some thoughts on what are distinguishing marks of a systematic
review, for example synthesis of outcomes (and interventions) which is
conceptually appropriate (meaningful & useful), and (as the author points out
earlier in the paper) synthesis findings should reflect the weight of evidence or
confidence that can be placed in it (whether it is precision or certainty).

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no financial conflicts of interest to declare. I should declare that although I have no formal professional links with Mark Petticrew currently, I have in the past worked closely with him and he was my line manager for 8 years.