Author’s response to reviews

Title: Use of programme theory to understand the differential effects of interventions across socioeconomic groups in systematic reviews - a systematic methodology review

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Sir(s),

Thank you for considering my paper for publication in Systematic Reviews. I am pleased that you consider it suitable for publication in this journal and I have addressed the reviewer’s comments as noted below.

Amendments can be viewed as inserted text using the review function, please accept all amendments when reviewed.

Yours faithfully,

Michelle Maden
Reviewer reports:

Reviewer #1: Congratulations to the authors on a very interesting and well-structured manuscript relating to a much neglected topic - i.e. the use of programme theory and its application in relation to SES in systematic reviews.

Thank you.

While the manuscript is well-written, I would recommend the authors consider the following comments for improvement.

1) Major comments:

In its current format the paper is extensive and overly discursive - indeed, at times it reads more like work submitted for examination during a postgraduate degree rather than an academic paper. Extensive presentations is of course not 'wrong', however in this case I do believe it is detrimental to the message you wish to get across.

I would suggest shortening and editing the paper to enhance its clarity, while adhering to the same structure. For example, pages 6-11 and the Discussion are overly extensive and would benefit from substantial editing: not all concepts must be explained in detail and indeed, previously explained issues do not need to be repeatedly explained. Make better use of the references, tables and ideas already clearly explained during the introductory, methods and results sections. Should this be done, it would then also be easier to edit out repetitive passages (e.g. you allude to the aims of the review frequently - this is not necessary as you already have a very good section on Aims)

Amended as requested, thank you.

2) Minor comments:

Page 5:

Line 86 - "for systematic reviewers" is repetitive - please cut.

Amended, thank you.
Line 88 - What do you mean by such 'a priori' knowledge - is it necessary that such knowledge is a priori? I do not understand how this would have been established.

If reviewers are aware of how the effectiveness of interventions may be moderated by socio-economic health inequalities when formulating their review questions, then they are better placed to hypothesise whether it is likely that the intervention they have chosen to review has the potential to widen or narrow the health inequality gap. This would hopefully then influence a reviewers decision to incorporate SES health inequality considerations into systematic reviews. Amended text to make this clearer.

Line 93 - I would cut "on health inequalities" - it is not only review questions on health inequalities that traditional approaches do not help with and further explanations could apply to other types of questions

Amended, thank you.

Line 107 - what does 'rationalising' mean here? Do you simply mean 'deciding'?

Yes, amended, thank you.

Page 6:

Explain why you are excluding 'theory of action' from your definition of programme theory.

Theory of action is in the box definition but omitted from the narrative. Amended the narrative to read ‘terms relating to programme theory’ and signposted to box of programme theory definitions.

Page 8:

Box on perceived value of programme theory to inform systematic reviews: the issues listed here follow no logical order. I.e. do we not apply program theory first in order to gain understanding of how a definition might work? Transparency is a by-product. I would suggest re-ordering.

Change "in gaining" to "to gain"

Re-ordered and amended, thank you.
Page 13: In table, please explain what is meant by "studies were inaccessible at time of data collection"?

Unable to obtain the fulltext of the reference.

Page 17 and flowchart: Why do the numbers not add up?

Error possibly due to uploading of a flowchart from a different paper. Correct flowchart now uploaded. Thank you.

Page 20: Section "proportion of systematic reviews operationalising..." - why is this commentary not included at the start of Results re: characteristics of included studies? Please review the placement of this section and as per usual in the paper, try to shorten paragraphs.

Amended.

Pages 20-22 (lines 387-412) - these sections do not read well without examples to illustrate your points. Please consider adding such examples.

Examples added in, thank you

Page 27: Lines 537-539 - I understand what MacLure alludes to but is this sentence well phrased?

Rephrased.

Reviewer #2: Interesting and intriguing manuscript.

Thank you.