Author’s response to reviews

Title: The impact of income support systems on healthcare quality and functional capacity in workers with low back pain: a realist review protocol

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Author’s response to reviews:

REVIEWER #1

Comment:
1. Thank you for adding more detail around the definition of the 'healthcare quality' outcome, which I think is a useful pointer for the reader as to what you will expect to find in relation to this outcome in the relevant literature. It is also useful to understand that the review will not focus on exploration of the link between healthcare quality and functional capacity, but I think you are selling yourselves short here, and this review does still have potential to shed light on this link via its theorising mechanisms with an "indirect" influence on functional capacity (as described in lines 152-3) (acknowledging that the extent to which it is able to do so will be limited by available data).

Response:
We hope that our review is able to shed some light on the indirect influence of healthcare quality on functional capacity. Based on your comment we have left this section (lines 147-153) as is.

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Comment:
2. There are some minor grammatical errors in the new explanation of realist philosophy (lines 110-113), which I think are just hangovers from edits to the previous sentence structure.

Response:
Some of this section has been removed based on comments from Reviewer #2, which covers these grammatical errors (lines 109-111).
Comment:
3. I think these explanations have been improved, and appreciate the new distinction between policies and mechanisms in Figures 1 and 2. Although other "context" features are at the moment "unconfigured" (i.e. not linked to Ms and Os), I think this is fine at this stage. I am unsure about the use of the word "construct" to describe mechanisms in line 142. Although I think I understand your meaning, the assertion that mechanisms ARE "non-observable constructs" seems to carry an implication that mechanisms are not "real". I think you are drawing perhaps on Westhorp, who uses the term "construct" to describe the various ways in which "mechanisms" have been understood and applied in realist research.[1] Are you adopting one construct in particular, or another way of understanding "mechanism"?

Response:
The reference to Westhorp’s chapter was most useful. We did not originally intend to refer to a specific ‘construct of a mechanism’, at least not in the protocol stage of the review. We have subsequently changed our wording here to reflect both that we do not refer to a specific mechanism construct, and that mechanisms are indeed real (lines 139-140).

Comment:
4. The methods relating to searching are now much clearer. I am not sure what you mean in line 206-7 by "...will first be used to "snowball" search results". "Snowballing" usually refers to identifying additional relevant documents via following up citations in reference lists, and you mention this later (line 209) but it seems to be used in a different sense here. Could you clarify? (My apologies for not picking this up before). I'm pleased to see the inclusion of opinion pieces/letters etc.

Response:
An explanation of the role of snowballing has been added in lines 198-199. We will identify papers from the reference lists of included studies as part of the iterative search strategy.

Comment:
5. Screening and data extraction processes are now much clearer. It might be helpful to include an example to help explain how the "relevance and rigour" criteria might work in practice. For example, how will authors adjudicate between "very", "moderately", and "less" relevant or rigourous? I would recommend referring to [2] for discussion of these concepts and practical examples and advice on how they might be applied.

Response:
We have added more detail regarding relevance and rigour, with reference to the three levels of each in Table 3 and the chapter from Wong (2018) (lines 276-286). We have also pointed to the use of different levels of relevance and rigour during the synthesis stage of the review.
6. and 7. The processes and purpose of identifying policy documents and the interviews (along with the associated limitations of these approaches) are now much clearer.

Response:
Thank you.

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Comment:
A further very minor observation - in line 242, you are missing a reference to Table 1 ("are presented in...").

Response:
A link to Table 1 has been added in the text (line 225).

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REVIEWER #2

Comment:
Lines 110 to 114: Despite the revisions to this section, it is still a little confusing and it may just be best to not go into such detail. As such I would suggest just stating "Realist reviews are based on a realist philosophy of science [36-38]." People may then look up references 36 to 38 if they wish to learn more.

Response:
We have removed the definition of the concept of realism, instead opting for the appropriate citations and the existing explanation of how realism is appropriate for this kind of topic (lines 109-113).

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Comment:
Lines 353 to 354: There is a typo here. Also, you should use the same realist logic of analysis to analyse your interview data. In other words your interview data should be analysed in exactly the same way as the data from your documents. I would suggest that you just treat an interview transcript in the same way you would a document you have decided to include in your review.

Response:
We have altered our stated analysis method to the realist logic of analysis. Having read your suggested citation from the previous revision, this analysis method is more appropriate. Thank you for the insightful and succinct explanation of how we should use the interview analysis method as well.