Reviewer's report

Title: Improving psychosocial health and employment outcomes for individuals receiving methadone treatment: A realist synthesis of what makes interventions work

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Reviewer: Justin Jagosh

Reviewer's report:

The article presents a realist review of psychosocial and health outcomes for individuals receiving methadone treatment. The review is well written with good organization and description of protocol used. There is more than one way to do a realist review and usually this involves emphasizing some aspects of the primary literature over others. In this particular review, the authors have identified a single overarching mechanism, engagement, which is then configured with three categories of contextual factors. While I believe the article needs some revision, it may not be far from publication.

Major Compulsory Revisions

There are a number of nuanced points made throughout the findings section. It would strengthen the paper to extract all these points in terms of the insights about engagement and client centeredness. A table with bullet points of the findings would strengthen the overall organization of the findings.

Minor Compulsory Revisions:

1. The review emphasized the determining factors of the context, rather than the inner workings of the interventions themselves. As such, the ‘mechanism’ was identified as engagement, which can be seen as an overarching mechanism. In the discussion section, I suggest mentioning that future studies could be designed to unpack this notion of ‘engagement’ as it unfolds in different methadone treatment interventions.
3. Line 28: what is meant by ‘formal interventions’? perhaps remove formal.
4. Line 88: the word ‘description’ could be changed to ‘assessment’
5. Line 100: ‘across primary studies and evaluations’
6. Line 109: about the contexts and mechanisms which explain how, for whom, in what circumstances the interviews works’
7. The review does not use CMO configurations in an overt way and the reader would expect to see this in a realist review. The authors need to address this in the methodology section and clarify that the focus of the review was on understanding the contextual conditions that support success of intervention
goals

8. Line 354: how is it that both the control and experimental arm received the intervention? Was it a delayed intervention design?

9. Line 649: should the word ‘reaction’ be changed to ‘investment’ or is a negative reaction (leading to attrition for example) also a form of engagement?

Discretionary revisions:

The following is just food for thought and is not suggested as mandatory revisions:

Could one argue that ‘engagement’ as the mechanism does not uncover the inner workings of the programs that can answer the question of how they work to produce outcomes. Engagement is broad. To play devil’s advocate here: aren’t most interventions that target individuals to enhance health promotion needing forms of genuine engagement? And if so, should something more specific to methadone treatment programs be said, or is this all that policy planners need to know?

Line 396: ‘lack of engagement appears to have been because the intervention context did not support the clients in articulating/addressing a needed ... issue.’ But what about the intervention itself? Did the intervention also not provide a deliberate strategy to ensure that clients articulation of need? Are you categorizing any aspect of the client-centered strategy of the intervention as part of the context? Client-centeredness can be part of the culture of service provision in the setting in which the intervention is placed. In addition, the intervention itself can incorporate strategies to promote client centeredness. These are two separate dimensions. It seems that in your review, you’ve skipped the inner mechanisms of the programs and focussed on outer contexts. I find this aspect of your analysis muddy but I think if you clarify the specific scope if the review in terms of the emphasis on context, you will strengthen the review.

To give an example of what I mean: Line 489 - the example of video feedback techniques shows how mechanisms could be unpacked. If you take the definition of mechanism to mean resource offered through the program strategy and the reaction/response to the resource, then the context + mechanism here could be seen as:

Video feedback techniques are used to help clients see themselves objectively, offering a resource that can lead to behavior change (resource part of the mechanism) –

yet clients with compromised self esteem due to addiction hardship (context) find it too difficult to face themselves on camera (response) - leading to backfire (outcome). So lesson learnt here is that video feedback techniques are effective with certain populations but perhaps not with those who are struggling to perceive their intrinsic self-worth. I’m presenting this as a suggestion that the review (or future review on the topic) could take a more ‘textured’ approach to searching for mechanisms and contexts in the literature.
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing Interests