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: Wayne Skinner

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I found this to be a worthy and engaging manuscript. The methodology employed is not commonly seen in the addictions literature. This manuscript demonstrates its potency and potential. Its use in exploring published literature on the targeted topic (psychosocial health and employment outcomes of people in methadone maintenance treatment) from 1980 to 2011 results in a novel exploration of issues that otherwise have developed a clichéd status among people working in the field. This study re-investigates familiar terrain in novel ways that open it up for fresh reconsideration, with a focus on practical applications and evidence-guided heuristic modeling through “realistic synthesis.”

The authors’ analysis lead to a synthesis that points to the importance of three contextual factors in shaping psycho-social and employment outcomes for people in methadone treatment. The authors identify “engagement” as a key concept and find the literature under review points to three contexts in which it best able to be optimized: those that are client-centred, those that respond to the socio-economic needs of clients, and those with positive counsellor-client and peer client relationships. Additionally, they note that clients can do well without having to abstinent. They provide advice and suggestions about the practical implications of these findings.

While I do not have a problem with the length of the paper, I suspect that some economies of size can be found through a careful editing. Key points are repeated several times as the text proceeds, and a careful edit could improve that repetitive sense the reader gets at points.

I could opine more on why I think this manuscript deserves publication because of the “orthogonal” way it invites and challenges policy makers, service providers, clinicians and clients to realize the importance of context in the treatment of addiction, so that we give equal attention to what is done in treatment, but how, when and where. But give the purpose this review, I will resist amplifying these comments.

I will organize my comments following the 9 questions you ask reviewers to consider

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Indeed, the question the authors hold to is well defined, and required the careful
editing of the significant literature on methadone treatment over the past three decades. Starting with over 1500 articles, they distill the sample that meets the eligibility criteria for the review down to 31 articles that were subjected to close review. The authors emphasize that kept an almost exclusive focus on reports that keyed on improving psychosocial and employment outcomes among methadone patients, considering other factors only when they were relevant to the focal themes.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

Realist synthesis, the methodology employed, is a fairly new method of analysis that anticipates complexity in human problems and the research approaches that are taken to understand them, especially when subject to meta-analysis. It seeks to go beyond simple conclusions to explore the contexts in which interventions are or are not effective. It is able to tolerate and work with the inevitable variations in study design, procedures, ecology and findings, and beyond that challenges itself to evoke the theoretical presumptions, often more implicit than overt, that underlie therapeutic intervention. The “realist” aspect of the model does not presume to find definitive answers, but aims to details the circumstances in which particular approaches are more or less effective (or as the authors more bluntly put it, “appear to work (or not)” (l. 109).

The diversity of the investigator team deserves special acknowledgement.

3. Are the data sound?

The authors acknowledge in their discussion of limitations that there is fallibility in the model, but more than adequately describe the efforts they employ to reduce the possibility of mis-reading of materials and of errors in interpretation. The rather disciplined rules of parsimonious selection that they employed left me wondering what other evidence might have been found in a less selective and more inclusion search strategy. Yet the findings that the work under review produced are quite significant and point to the usefulness of the model, the rigor of the analysis in the context of diverse approaches among the 31 articles they examined closely.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

The authors have been very careful and painstaking to describe their approach, leaving me satisfied that reporting and data deposition standards have been met.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The discussion and conclusions are consonant with the findings that the authors report appear consonant with the data they report. In fact, one of the powerful effects in the approach they take is to shift the way information that has been conventionally presented about treatment effectiveness and outcome, with a focus on client characteristics and treatment methods, into a deeper
conceptualization, giving much more salience to context. This leads to a re-theorization of how to be effective in psychosocial and employment outcomes with people in methadone treatment, in this particular instance, in ways that have much more practical implications for policy makers and service providers than the usual approach to knowledge transfer.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

Yes. The authors give thoughtful and open consideration to factors that could mitigate the accuracy and merit of the analysis they develop and conclusions they reach.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

The manuscript is well referenced, both in terms of methodological sources and the methadone literature that they identify as being in scope of the area of study.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Yes. In the abstract the phrase “contexts that are response to clients’ socio-economic lives” (l. 23-4) is a bit cryptic, in my view, and could enhanced by saying “contexts that recognize and address the socio-economic conditions and needs” (as the author say on l. 444).

9. Is the writing acceptable?

Yes.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest 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 work at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and have an appointment in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto.
I have no competing interests that I am aware of, financial or otherwise