Realist Literature Searching: Towards Processes and Reporting Standards
‘Finding something which works in practice and wondering how it could work in theory’

Walter Heller
What are we trying to do?

Square Peg

Round Hole

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The last thing Realism needs
is a system,
or a ‘religious’ method to
literature searching

We Have the Freedom
to Do Whatever We Want
1. The Information Need

‘A theory is not like an airline or bus timetable. We are not interested in the accuracy of its predictions. A theory also serves as a base for thinking. It helps us to understand what is going on by enabling our thoughts.’

RH Coase
2. Transparency

‘What was done and how this can be believed.’

David Gough
The ICRR Handbook

Or

Some early thoughts on Processes
The Review’s Aims

To produce a conceptual framework and summary of the evidence of initiatives that have been designed to provide care closer to home in order to reduce reliance on acute care hospital beds.

1. To synthesise relevant documentary evidence, using realist and conventional systematic review methods, in order to develop a conceptual framework for describing and explaining community-based alternatives to acute inpatient care.

2. To draw some provisional conclusions about the likely circumstances in which different types of scheme are likely to be effective, cost-effective, and feasible in the NHS.
The ICRR Handbook: First Search Ideas

Idea #1

1. Identify RCTs/SRs as a method to finding interventions

2. Pull these interventions apart

1. The team’s searches would then become entirely responsive to any theoretical direction of travel

1. Unknown Unknowns. Because you know, who knows?
The ICRR Handbook: a Review of Reviews

The Review

1. Unlike ‘traditional’, clinical effectiveness searches, methodological or topic search filters/hedges were not commonly used: the right piece of grey literature is as valuable as a beautiful SR

2. Some of the reviews did not limit their searches by language: this seemed wise

3. The searches need not be exhaustive

4. Second, Third and Fourth searches are all good
The ICRR Handbook

Idea #2 and what we did

1. An initial, working definition of IC was found. This served the purpose of defining our scoping searches

2. Focused, pragmatic and un-filtered literature searches. These searches were phrased searches and included various synonyms

   (i.e. “intermediate care” v (intermediate adj3 (car$)).ti,ab.)

3. This created a database of studies which were purposively screened

4. We used citation analysis to look at links between studies

5. Brief secondary searches were conducted following meetings with stakeholders

   Step 1. was key: it defined the information need of the searches
The Process: Understanding Information Needs

Matching information needs to search methods
The Process

Matching information needs to search methods

Information Need: I’m on an intervention hunt = MEDLINE/EMBASE deal in peer-reviewed, secondary literature

Information Need: I need data on young people = educational databases are a proxy for this population

Search methods are basically biased but that’s fine!

Information Need: I want more studies like this one = Citation chasing/Related Article Searching

Information Need: I wonder if = twitter...

Information Need: I need grey literature = Social Policy and Practice

Information Need: Are there any SRs on this? = search filters via ISSG Search Filters Resource

We can turn traditional search techniques around and use them whenever we like in Realism.
Transparency
It has a lot to do with Victoria Beckham
‘People can say they don’’t like it but they can’t say it’s bad’

Victoria Beckham
This is not science

RAMESES says:

name of database, search terms, dates of coverage and date last searched

I would suggest laying this out as*

Database: MEDLINE
Database platform: OVID
Source (if nondatabase): Database
Search date: 16/07/12
Timeframe of search: 1946 to October Week 2 2014
Search strategy: (“intermediate care” or “hospital at home”).ti,ab,kw.
Number of records retrieved: 53
Notes: N/A
File Name: MEDLINE52.txt

Narrative
Conclusions

• The importance of a team approach and discussion;

• Matching information needs (what are we trying to do) to pragmatic search methods (what do we hope to find): think Cole Porter (as in ‘anything goes’);

• Exhaustive searches are NOT required; and

• Transparency brings legitimacy to the review process.

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