Defining Implementation - A process or an outcome?

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Defining Implementation - a process or an outcome? – A systematic literature review of preventive intervention studies

The term implementation is widely used, not only in stress interventions, but also in related fields. Particular with the emergence of a rather new research field, implementation science, the popularity of the term increased. Within implementation science there is a clear definition of implementation research: the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice, and, hence, to improve the quality and effectiveness of health services and care (Eccles & Mittman, 2006). With this definition, the underlying assumption about implementation is that it is about the methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice.

However, the definition is challenged by the claim that: implementation is defined as a purposefully designed set of actions for the application of a purposefully designed program or intervention to cause change (Palinkas & Soydan, 2012: p. 10). Bridging the fields of implementation science with clinical interventions, there has been a need to clarify the differences between clinical interventions and implementation interventions and also grey areas in between (Eldh et al., 2017).

However, in stress preventive interventions, the term implementation is continuously used without a clear definition and there appears to be several distinct meanings in the literature. Whereas the discussion of concepts and theory is indeed at the heart of science the term implementation is used instrumentally seemingly without reflection. This causes problems for the scientific discussion as meanings which differ in both scope and content are used interchangeably. Not only is this limiting the development of the field; it may also hide a deeper more concerning problem: a general lack of understanding of implementation in preventive intervention. There is therefore a need for clarification and definition.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the use of the term implementation in preventive workplace interventions studies and how it is being defined, and if that is not the case what interpretation the paper applies to implementation. Further, this paper proposes a definition of implementation in preventive interventions.

The systematic study collated, summarized and reviewed preventive worksite intervention studies that used the term implementation, in order to investigate the different meanings of the term and propose a definition. The study reviewed literature from 1990 until now, and started with 9379 articles, of which 2624 were duplicates. After screening 6755 titles we found 2682 to still be relevant. Screening abstracts reduced the number of relevant papers to 43, which were read in detail further excluding 15 papers. The review therefore builds on 28 papers. The 33 papers report on studies from various context although most studies are within healthcare and service work, but there are also studies within manufacturing, knowledge work and education. All the papers present findings from primary interventions. The majority only focus on primary interventions. Some, however, also apply secondary and/or tertiary approaches to the interventions.

The literature review shows that only three papers (11%) have a clear definition of implementation. These papers build upon either the RE-AIM evaluation framework (Glasgow, Vogt, & Boles, 1999) or Goldenhar and colleagues’ intervention phase framework (Goldenhar, Lamontagne, Katz, Heaney, & Landsbergis, 2001). Further 7 % (2 papers) refers to the intervention phase framework defined in the review by Nielsen ad colleagues (Nielsen, Randall, Holten, & Gonzalez, 2010), where implementation is the fourth phase which, however, does not provide a clear definition.
Since there is still a lack of answers to what works in interventions and under which conditions, it is important to determine the concept of implementation to ensure that identified affecting factors are relevant, that the "right" implementation process is evaluated and participants know when an intervention is successful i.e. implemented. In our coming analysis, we derive the papers’ perceptions of implementation and define the construct of implementation.

Brief summary

The term implementation is widely used, not only in stress interventions, but also in related fields. Particular with the emergence of implementation science, the popularity of the term increased. However, in stress preventive interventions, the term implementation is continuously used without a clear definition and there appears to be several distinct meanings in the literature. Whereas the discussion of concepts and theory is indeed at the heart of science the term implementation is used instrumentally seemingly without reflection.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the use of the term implementation in preventive workplace interventions studies and how it is being defined, and if that is not the case what interpretation the paper applies to implementation. Further, this paper proposes a definition of implementation in preventive interventions.

The systematic study collated, summarized and reviewed 6755 preventive worksite intervention studies that used the term implementation, in order to investigate the different meanings of the term and propose a definition. The literature review shows that only three papers (11%) have a clear definition of implementation where the rest does not provide a clear definition. Based on the findings so far, defining Implementation is a question of being either a process and/or an outcome.