Questions for SR panel: What works, why and how do we know?

1. Nate Silver achieved fame by correctly predicting the winner of 49 of the 50 states in the 2008 US Presidential election. The only state he missed was Indiana, which went for Barack Obama by one percentage point. He correctly predicted the winner of all 35 U.S. Senate races that year. Silver does not conduct any surveys of his own. He systematically aggregates multiple state-level surveys in ways that reduce the effect of bias in each.
   1. Do you see a similarity with SRs?
   2. In both cases the screening and selection of eligible surveys is critical. Is the bias in SR hidden in the screens?
2. The biggest criticism of SRs is that they exclude qualitative studies.
   1. Do you share this concern?
   2. Is it practical to bring qualitative studies into the same SR as quantitative studies?
   3. How can one assess the “quality” of qualitative studies? Are there objective criteria such as “was this a representative sample” that can be used by screeners? Will it be necessary to use software for screening?
3. In the classic medical SR, the final step is also quantitative. The completed SR that was reported on here by Christoph did not include that step. The end result was a narrative. Can you explain why?
4. Yesterday, a question was asked of Christoph about the generalizability of the studies showing positive economic impact of mobiles. My recollection is that he answered that the conclusions are generalizable for those countries but not necessarily for other countries. Does this not point to the central problem of SRs? They tell us some intervention had a specific effect under specified circumstances. It is not necessarily true that those interventions will work under different circumstances.
   1. For example, if the buyers of fish are a cartel in a region different to where Jensen conducted his study, all the mobile phone use in the world may not change prices. How would you react? [SPACE]
   2. Humans are not inert atoms. They learn, react and change. What if the behavior reported in Jensen causes a change in the behavior of the buyers on shore, causing them to form a cartel to extract rent from the transactions? [TIME]
5. Much academic work occurs within disciplinary or field silos. Work within one silo does not address or build upon work done in a different silo. Many claims to originality are actually claims that are valid only within a disciplinary silo. Are SRs a solution to this problem?
6. Is it possible for similar outcomes could be achieved by different causal mechanisms? SRs may tell us what works, but do they tell us why?
7. If everyone does SR, who will do original studies?
8. SRs privilege RCTs. But the completed study relied almost totally on natural experiments and the only RCTs that were included yielded no useful results. Are RCTs possible when there are no “treatments” and when it is almost impossible to keep the treatment and control groups separate?
9. Lishan Adam asked Sujata on the 10th what could be done with SRs.
   1. Will you answer the question now, with specific examples?
   2. Nilusha has already made presentations based on SRs in Myanmar. What did you achieve? Was it successful? Was it any better than just giving a talk based on Jensen’s Kerala study?
10. Can you talk us through the challenges of
    1. Forming the right kinds of teams for SR work
    2. Managing multi-national teams
    3. Dividing up responsibilities
    4. Assigning authorship credit
    5. Other issues