Author's response to reviews

Title: Measuring capacity building in communities: a review of the literature

Authors:

Selma C Liberato (selma.liberato@menzies.edu.au)
Julie Brimblecombe (Julie.brimblecombe@menzies.edu.au)
Jan Ritchie (j.ritchie@unsw.edu.au)
Megan Ferguson (megan.ferguson@menzies.edu.au)
John Coveney (john.coveney@flinders.edu.au)

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Cover letter giving a point-by-point response to the concerns

Addressing comments from Reviewer: Helen M Keleher

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
The research question driving the systematic review is not clearly stated. In the Introduction, the question is better defined than in the abstract which would be more relevant to readers if a sense of problem was stated in the abstract. And a clear research question would overcome the problems highlighted below.
It is not clear whether the authors think that the review is only useful for people working in Indigenous contexts (p6) or more broadly.

Thanks for your comment. The research question has been modified in the abstract indicating the problem to be addressed (p4) and it is now clear that the review aims “to support successful project implementation in any area” (p6).

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
What is the difference between ‘existing’ and ‘newly developed’ (p 9)? Newly developed frameworks still exist…
Reading through the models from the so-called Group 1, I can’t see how some of them were not also developed for specific projects.
So, what I think the authors are saying is that some models were developed a-priori and applied to a project (Group 1) and others were emergent from the implementation and evaluation of a particular project (Group 2). Whether or not I am right, the explanatory description of Group 1 and Group 2 needs to be more easily distinguished for the reader.

Yes, you are right. Some models were developed a-priori and applied to a project (Group 1) and others were emergent from the implementation and evaluation of a particular project (Group 2). I have changed the definition of group 1 and group 2 (p9, 10 and 14).

P 16. ‘Multiple domains were used to assess CB’. Are these multiple domains from both Groups or just Group 2?

Yes, these multiple domains are from both groups and this has been made clear in text (p17).

I realize the Tables make this clear but the text also has to be clear.

P 17 The language of previous models is confusing. What does previous mean here? Is it those a-priori models?
Yes, the term has been better explained

Then, don’t both Group 1 and Group 2 look almost identical? Shouldn’t you make some comment about that?

Yes, that is right. Group 1 and 2 look almost identical and a comment has been made about that. However because of the difference in starting points, we believe it has been important to keep the two groups separate in our analysis (p17).
Some of the discussion that follows is not rocket-science. It is well documented (and common-sense) that communication is essential and how it can be improved. Ditto for needs assessment, dissemination and shared visions, process and outcome monitoring and so on. These aspects of community work are very well documented and it’s not clear how this systematic review is adding anything new to well documented processes. At this point, readers will be lost because they (like me) don’t see the point all these sections.

We understand that some of the some aspects of community work including communication, needs assessment, dissemination and shared vision are well documented. However, there are multiple domains defined by many authors and each author has its own definition for each domain in a diverse range of contexts. There are also commonalities and we found it important to synthetise these. We have rewritten our aim to make this clear.

I thought the point of the review was in how these domains are measured/assessed. So this whole section needs to be rewritten.

We have reworded our two objectives to make clearer that the purpose of the review is to reveal the different domains these authors believed were important to be included when assessing community capacity building and then to synthesise these into a comprehension compilation.

3. Are the data sound?
Yes, with the proviso of my comments above in point 2. The data is sound to a point but the discussion from pp 17-24 loses its way.

The results and discussion have both been restructured to better meet our reworded objectives.

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

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
As per point 2 above, the discussion needs to be rewritten to focus on how the various domains are measured/assessed.

The review is about how to measure capacity building, which domains are used to measure it. As above, the discussion has been rewritten.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? N/A
Yes, there are two paragraphs at the end of the discussion commenting on limitations.

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

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The first paragraph of the abstract could be better framed around the sense of problem that the authors set out to examine.

The first paragraph of the abstract has been modified and the aim of the review is more clearly worded.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
Mostly but some sentences are very long and/or unclear. For example:
The sentence (p6) beginning “To our knowledge…” is convoluted and needs editing to make it less wordy/repetitive and clearer. There are similar sentences. Maybe this is a result of multiple author contributions. I suggest the authors read out aloud to edit for smoothing of the writing styles.

We have carefully worked on the entire paper and corrected many sentences including the one referred to (p.6) for clarity and conciseness.
Addressing comments from Reviewer: Jennie Popay

This paper aims to identify the domains of models of community capacity building for health and social improvements and to examine the application of these models in context. It is therefore addressing an issue of considerable interest to public health policy makers and practitioners concerned to improve the way they work with disadvantaged communities. A systematic and robust review of the ‘active’ ingredients identified in the field as making up successful processes of community capacity-building and the outcomes that can be expected would therefore be of value. However, I believe there are significant problems with this paper and would not recommend publication until these have been addressed. These include:

1. The use of a confusing array of contested terms without an adequate discussion of how they are being used in this context, why they are being included and how the authors understand the relationship between them e.g. Community capacity building, community development, community participation, community action, community involvement, participatory decision making, etc. For example, at an early point in the paper the reader is told that the community development is different from community capacity building but this claim is no elaborated.

Contested terms without an adequate discussion have been removed from the text.

2. An inadequate description of the search and review process. There are many shortcomings to the description of the review methods of which the following are particularly noteworthy:
   a. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are never made clear – were only papers reporting on empirical studies included or theoretical papers also?

Details on the search and review process have now been provided and the two appraisal frameworks have been combined.

b. Reference is made to the realist approach to evidence synthesis developed by Pawson but there is nothing in this review that suggests the application of Pawson’s methods. For example, Pawson argues for a systematic approach to identifying relevant evidence to be included in a review but he is also clear that the potential insights offered by a ‘piece of evidence’ (which could include, for instance, both journal and newspaper articles) rather than methodological quality should be the primary inclusion criteria. Yet the authors appear to have excluded a large number of ‘papers’ on that grounds that they were methodologically weak.

We realise that our approach differs from Pawson’s approach in some points. We have now corrected the manuscript to say we have been strongly influenced by Pawson (p. 7) but that we differ in a few ways, and these are itemised. We have particularly modified our discussion to follow Pawson’s approach better.

c. There is no final listing of the papers included with details of authors, dates, ‘methods’/focus etc. These are simply included in the longer list of references at the end of the paper so the reader is never clear what the body of evidence being reviewed looks like.

Details of the included papers are now listedTables 1 and 2 and referred to better in the body text.

3. A particularly disappointing analytically ‘thin’ review product which in many ways could be described as ‘unfinished’. Tables describe the domains and sub-domains extracted from the
included papers/studies that the authors claim to be constituents of community capacity building models in the literature and quantifying the frequency with which these domains and sub-domains were found. The detail provided in these tables provide the beginnings of a more robust synthesis of the data extracted from the included studies/papers. However, to do this properly the tables should be embedded in text that clearly explains what these domains and sub-domains mean, why and how they relate to community capacity building and the relationships between them. Instead, the body of the paper is taken up with a somewhat rambling series of ‘thin’ textual description of included papers/studies which provide inconsistent information, do not appear to have been produced using a common template (as would be good practice in narrative reviews of this type) and add little to our understanding. As a result we are left with a ill-sorted and puzzling list of overlapping concepts that could variously be referring to aspect of the process of community capacity building and/or to the outcomes of such a process, An adequate review would have engaged with these concepts/domains/sub-domains in a more critical manner, considering and commenting on the overlap between them, justifying their categorisation as domains and/or sub-domains and perhaps even attempting to theorise the relationship between them. A paper that attempted to do this would be a very useful addition to the literature – as it stands I feel it makes little in the way of an original contribution.

The text has been modified to clearly explain the meaning of the domains and sub-domains, the overlapping between them and their categorisation. Tables have been far more clearly linked with the body text.

The discussion was heavily restructured to meet the requirements of both reviewers. This approach suggests that the search process should be as tight and systematic as in conventional systematic reviews but Pawson makes clear the primary purpose of the effort is to contribute to the building of explanatory theory through a process of synthesis. Whereas conventional systematic reviews try to answer the question ‘Does it work?’, a realist synthesis approach attempts to investigate ‘Why does it work?’ and ‘How does it work?’ In the case of this review, the aim has been to synthesise what others have found in the practice of assessing community capacity, particularly investigating what are the various domains deemed important, how are they developed and how have they been applied. The process to undertake this review differs from Pawson’s approach in some ways. The synthesis or product arising is more than the sum of its parts, i.e. not just a list of findings but an integrated and related set that supports fresh thinking which is not the type of finding found in this review. The process in Pawson’s approach is iterative rather than set from the beginning and can move with new data while our process is more set. The overall subject matter identification in this review does not include constructing an embryonic theory like in identification described by Pawson. Lastly, the kind of findings from this review does not allow for conclusions to take the form of how to navigate through the findings when applying Pawson. However there are lots of similarities. Similar to the approach undertaken in this review, Pawson acknowledges that realist synthesis has explanation building as its primary ambition; the approach accepts complexity and does not try to simplify and the process must be transparent. Similarly to Pawson’s approach, the process begins by identifying its overall subject matter, defines precisely the key question to be pursued, collects primary data and finally adjudicates or critically judges.

We have modified the text to better explain the differences and similarities between Pawson and our approach