Author's response to reviews

Title: Deliberative Dialogues Focussed on Healthy Public Policy

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Version: 2
Date: 17 July 2014

Author's response to reviews: see over
15 July 2014

Dear BMC Public Health Editors,

Please find attached the revised manuscript “Deliberative Dialogues Focussed on Healthy Public Policy”. The manuscript has been strengthened by the reviewers’ helpful feedback. A point-by-point response to the reviewers’ comments and how we addressed them is below. In general, we provided more conceptual detail and clarified the meaning of our data in light of our population (i.e., key policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers).

Thank you for considering our revised manuscript. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at jboyko@uwo.ca.

We look forward to your response,

Sincerely,

Jennifer A. Boyko

[On behalf of the other study authors]
Reviewer 1 (Hilary Thomson)

1. Until today I had never come across the term “deliberative dialogue”. To help other readers new to this phrase and approach there needs to be some, albeit brief, description about what deliberative dialogues involve. The authors describe what they might achieve and possible mechanisms for this but it would be useful to know how they should be operationalised, and what are the key components of a deliberative dialogue. In the methods section some more detail about how the dialogues being evaluated here reflected with these key components, as well as a summary of the format, content and timing of each of the three deliberative dialogues.
   - We added some additional detail in the background (p.3) about what is known about key deliberative dialogue features, and we added detail in the methods (p.5) to reflect how the dialogues we evaluated reflected these key features.

2. It is not clear but it appears that the 29 participants completed Questionnaire 1 after each of the three deliberative dialogues - this needs to be clarified, and if so did all 29 participants return completed questionnaires for each dialogue. There are no reports of missing data in table 1, 3, or 4.
   - We added information about the total number of participants who responded to each question in Table 1 (p.15). We also clarified on (p.5) that each dialogue participant only completed the questionnaire once.

3. It also needs to be clarified whether data on the questions around theories of planned behaviour for all three deliberative dialogues were included in the regression analysis. I am not a statistician but I am unclear if a) a sample of 29 participants is sufficient to support a complex regression analysis; b) sub-group analysis is appropriate; and c) if including three responses on highly related variables for each participant but treating the variables as if they were independent is not at risk of triple counting and over reporting. The numbers reported to describe the written comments on the usefulness of the dialogues are not very useful (in particular see p8 para 1). Rather than try to quantify qualitative data it would be more useful to know to what extent the comments were similar for each of the three dialogues and to what extent comments were similar and consistent. There is no report of the number of participants who recorded comments.
   - We clarified that the 29 participants in the deliberative dialogues we studied comprised our study population (not sample) (p.5). They comprise all key policymakers, stakeholders and researchers identified by the dialogue organizers as likely to be actively involved in or significantly affected by decisions on the topic. While it would have been ideal to have had a greater number of participants in our study, deliberative dialogues are by nature small. We consider the use of our chosen statistical techniques to be appropriate for a study population (and we are not trying to make generalizations based on a sample drawn from that population). We can remove the regressions if the reviewers and editors feel this is essential.
   - We carefully considered whether our effort to quantify some of the qualitative data was useful and decided to maintain the numbers that describe the qualitative data. However, we strengthened the qualitative dimension of the
results by clarifying that there was no difference in the nature of the comments arising from the three dialogues (p.8).

4. I cannot see the appendix with the questionnaire, which is unfortunate.
   • We are sorry about this. We hope it is visible to you at this review stage.

5. The sample size and distribution across the three groups (policymaker, stakeholder, researcher) should be reported in the abstract.
   • Thank-you for this suggestion. We inserted the (N) for the initial and follow-up questionnaires to provide more detail about the population. We also added the distribution across the three groups for the initial survey that was used for statistical analysis.

6. The country of the study should appear in the abstract.
   • We have specified that the study took place in Canada.

7. The abstract should be revised to reflect any substantive changes to the analysis following peer review.
   • We have done so.

Reviewer 2 (Patrick Harris)

Reviewer’s report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? Yes although ‘Public Health Policies’ should be better defined. More writing about the points of deliberative dialogues as an intervention could be better described – policy analysis approaches suggest that the point of change is policy actors because of the different frames they often bring to a problem (as opposed to more structurally oriented interventions for intersectoral engagement like memorandums of understanding, capacity building, creation of organisational units and so on). This is not set up in the introduction but would add depth for the reader, particularly as the need to shift from individuals to systems is highlighted as a weakness in the discussion.
   • We have added some context in the background (p.4) about the intended effects/outcomes of deliberative dialogues, and how our study measures a short-term individual-level effect.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? The methods are well described. I am not a statistician but would question the use of linear regression / descriptive statistics on such a small and clearly not homogenous (policy makers, managers and others and researchers) sample because the results are in reality meaningless in terms of generisable significance. The sample is well described but it would be interesting to have an idea of which sectors the participants came from (even disciplinary backgrounds)
   • Thank-you for this helpful comment, which has helped us recognize that we need to acknowledge in the manuscript that our study focusses on a population not a sample drawn from a population. We made changes throughout the manuscript to reflect this aspect of our study. Our aim in doing a regression analysis was not to generalize to a broader population, but to learn about how the independent variables varied across the sub-groups in our population. Unfortunately, we cannot add detail about the sectors or disciplines from which the participants were from as we did not gather this
information from participants. Doing would also jeopardize anonymity due to the small sample size of our population.

3. Are the data sound? Also while acceptable reporting percentages against a sample of 31 without the N seems to distort the findings. The qualitative reporting to reflect what participants felt is good, as is the reporting of content of written responses. Mean ratings of constructs is appropriate but again variance and p values is distorted by the small N.
   - Thank-you. We appreciate that population is a limitation of this study (even as it’s a hallmark of the dialogues that we are studying) and we have made a more deliberate attempt to address this in the limitations section (p.11).

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

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Yes the discussion is excellent.
   - Thank-you.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Yes - I particularly like the risk of bias toward those who are already interested in evidence transfer. The small sample should be highlighted as a weakness in terms of generalisability.
   - Done. See comment #3.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes although more, but brief, unpacking the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative methods would be interesting in the introduction.
   - We added additional detail in the background (p.3) about what is known from the literature about key deliberative dialogue features. We hope this additional detail provides sufficient unpacking of the concept.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes although ‘healthy public policy’ and ‘public health policy’ could be better introduced to set up the study.
   - Thank-you for pointing this out. We tried to clarify the difference between these two concepts in the background (p.3).

9. Is the writing acceptable? The writing is excellent.
   - Thank-you.

Reviewer 3 (Marek Brabec)

2. The theme of the paper is certainly interesting. It is also difficult to grasp, both conceptually and technically (statistically). The sample size of 31 together with the substantial chance of the sample being quite systematic and non-randomly drawn from the population of interest certainly gives a little chance of the inferences being capable of generalization. The authors should state clearly in the text limitations of this approach and their view of how broadly/narrowly the results of their inferential procedures can be used. In particular, questions like: What a particular sentence in the Results section means in practical sense should be answered carefully.
   - Thank-you for your helpful comments. We added detail about the limitations of our study (p.11). We also hope that clarifying our aim in doing a regression
analysis was not to generalize to a broader population, but to learn about how the independent variables varied across the sub-groups in our population will help readers grasp technical aspects of the paper. Nevertheless, we can remove the regressions if the reviewers and editors feel this is essential.

3. If we look at the sentence “Attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control predicted 67% of the variance in the intention to use research evidence (p<0.05) among dialogue participants.” as an example, it is not clear whether the authors want to generalize this finding beyond the very limited set of dialogue participants (the group will probably never convene again in exactly same composition) or not. On one side, the generalization is problematic and on the other side, if the generalization is not attempted, what exactly is the point of the study?

• Thank-you for pointing this out. It is not our intent to generalize our findings to all other deliberative dialogues. Rather, we wanted to characterize the key features and intended effects of these specific deliberative dialogues focussed on healthy public policy, so that other similar (albeit never identical) dialogues can glean lessons about design considerations or what might be expected in terms of outcomes.

4. Perhaps, the methodological approach should be more interesting in the case of this paper. Nevertheless, the statistical methods used in the paper belong to the most standard ones, used in a very simplistic mode.

• See above.

5. Taken overall, the text reads more like a report for a funding agency than as a scientific paper. The paper should be substantially rewritten and shortened prior to a publication. Perhaps, the revised text should emphasize the conceptual side (e.g. the structure of questions asked etc.) and not to try to use rudiments of a formalized analysis where the conditions are not suitable for it.

• We hope that the changes that have been made provide a more meaningful focus for the paper. More specifically, we hope it is clear that this study is about a specific population of key policymakers, stakeholders and researchers, not a sample of them. Thus, we feel using regression to understand the relationship between independent and dependent variables remains appropriate.