Reviewer’s report

Title: The Organisational and Human Resource Challenges Facing Primary Care Trusts

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Reviewer: Dr Rod Sheaff

Level of interest: A paper whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Advice on publication: Accept without revision

The Organisational and Human Resource Challenges Facing Primary Care Trusts

As 'The Organisational and Human Resource Challenges Facing Primary Care Trusts' is a research proposal not a paper reporting research findings, this review considers:
. Does the proposal present coherent, conceptually well-grounded research questions, the answers to which would make a worthwhile addition to knowledge in this field of study?
. Is proposed study design capable of producing answers to these research questions?
. Are the techniques proposed for gathering and analysing data likely to produce valid answers to the research questions?

In addition the review considers whether the proposal has any other merits or shortcomings, whether it is sufficiently detailed and intelligibly written.

Research Questions

Four research questions are posed, concerning the organisational structures, organisational development strategies and human resource strategies which NHS Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) will use to 'in fulfilling the role envisaged in government and local policy'.

These three questions can be ranked in descending order of likelihood to generate new knowledge by the time the research is completed. Most promising is the investigation of the human resource strategies that PCTs will develop. So far as I am aware, no substantial existing research project is directly looking into this. What a study of organisational development (OD) will add depends upon what aspects of OD are studied. Various researchers (e.g Marshall et al (forthcoming)) are already examining the OD activity involved in clinical governance, although mainly with a focus on OD activities for doctors. Factors influencing GP recruitment have also been researched in depth (e.g. by Sibbald et al since the early 1990s). So, the most promising new territory would be to research OD among PCT managerial staff and, to a lesser extent, nurses and other community health services staff. Organisational structures are being still more widely researched, using both survey and case study methods (e.g. Wilkin et al (2001); Dowsell et al. (2001)). Any new contribution in this field is likely to come not so much from
unearthing surprising new data, but from offering new ways to analyse and conceptualise accounts of how PCT organisational structures develop.

The proposed literature review (stage 1 of the proposal) rightly concentrates more on the human resources, organisational learning and OD questions. Insofar as organisational structures are covered, the emphasis is rightly on networking structures, although how far large corporations provide a model that is desirable for PCTs, or even relevant to them, might be questioned, especially in light of the authors’ intention to make ‘fulfilling the role envisaged in government and local policy’ their criterion of success in matters of PCT human resource management, OD and organisational learning.

Research Design and Technique

The discussion of research design (stage 2) implies that the research design is one of analytic generalisation from case studies (cp. Yin 1986). For this purpose it is necessary, as the proposers argue, to select study sites which instantiate particularly clearly the factors hypothesised to assist or impede OD, organisational learning and the management of human resources in PCTs. The first set of bullet points implies that these factors are: the PCT’s recent organisational history; their environment (character of neighbouring PCG/Ts and other organisations); and their organisational memberships (in particular, what mix of general practices the PCT contains). The second set implies that the factors hypothesised to explain differences in OD, organisational learning and the management of human resources in PCTs are PCT organisational structure, and what human resources and organisational learning problems the PCTs face; in all, five factors to investigate (six if one insists on distinguishing organisational learning from HR problems). A case study design is suitable for testing these hypotheses, and thereby answering the original research questions. Indeed, case studies would allow the researchers to narrate - where the data allowed - how any or all of these factors operated in each site. The decision to limit the investigation to three topics per site is therefore unnecessarily restrictive in research terms, although keeping data collection and analysis manageable, and preventing research fatigue in the sites are possible practical justifications. Using a reference group as a comparator is a good idea. Insofar as the data there allow it, the National Database on PCTs and Tracker Study data could be used in a similar way to check the generalisability of the case study findings.

At the analytic stage the proposers intend to formulate ‘key messages for policy makers’ to ‘encourage ... good OD and HR practice in PCTs’, and to identify practices which have ‘worked well’. This makes the large assumption that ‘good’ practice can be identified unambivalently. Yet the value judgements involved are often contestable in the field of HR (for example, about the merits of casualisation and of ‘performance management’). For that reason, it would also be desirable for the analysis to consider what intellectual work the studies might make to the theoretical side of HR and OD studies, for instance about motivation, incentives, learning and HR management in networks. With those caveats, the techniques proposed for gathering and analysing data are likely to produce valid answers to the research questions.

Other remarks

1. At this stage there are no conclusions, making premature any questions about any shortcomings in the relationships between data and conclusions.

2. The proposal as it stands does would have to be very much more detailed to enable other researchers to replicate the work. As yet there are no results or analyses to compare other, related analyses.
3. Similarly, questions of whether the manuscript adheres to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition are also premature.

4. The writing of the proposal is acceptably clear.

**Competing interests:**

None declared.