Author's response to reviews

Title: Can programme theory be used as a 'translational tool' to optimise health service delivery in a national early years' initiative in Scotland: a case study.

Authors:

Jennifer Eaves (jennifer.eaves@nhs.net)
Wendy Gnich (wendy.gnich@glasgow.ac.uk)

Version: 2 Date: 23 July 2013

Author's response to reviews: see over
Authors’ response to reviewer’s report

The reviewer’s report (below) has been fully considered and changes made to the manuscript to take account of the advice given. Two versions of the revised manuscript have been uploaded- the first with tracked changes visible and a second with tracked changes accepted. A detailed response to each of the reviewer’s points, including an account of the changes made in response, is given below. The response is in bold font type for ease of reading.

The changes strengthen our manuscript and, we hope sufficiently address the reviewer’s points. We would like to thank Emma for her informed and helpful review and look forward to hearing from you.

Reviewer’s report and response

I found this a clearly written paper that provides a useful contribution to the literature on the use of evaluation in service improvements and delivery. Three key major revisions are suggested below (1) setting out known limitations/challenges of using programme theory in evaluation of complex interventions (2) more detail on nature of complex interventions and what key aspects of complexity is evident in the Childsmile ‘intervention’ (3) clarifying lack of involvement of service users in evaluation/intervention. Some discretionary revisions are also offered.

Response

Major revisions
(1) Background, 3rd paragraph:
The authors should draw attention to the key aspects of complexity that are often present in ‘nature’ of social interventions and implications of this for evaluation. As the authors describe later on in the paper, such complexity may arise from Childsmile being designed as a national programme, but implemented at the local level across multiple sites/systems (e.g. both horizontal and vertical complexity). In this respect, it may be useful to look at reading by Hawe and Shiell (who discuss nature of complex interventions and complex systems) as well as Patricia Rogers (2008) paper on using programme theory in Evaluation journal.
As suggested, we have now added an overview of commonly defined characteristics (or key aspects) of ‘complex interventions’ (as found within the evaluation literature) and a brief explanation of the challenges that these characteristics pose for evaluation to the background section. The specific features of complexity exhibited by the Childsmile programme have also been added to the programme description within the background. Patricia Rogers’ discussion of aspects of complexity and their implications for evaluation was helpful and this paper is now cited at relevant points throughout our paper.

(2) Background, Paragraph 10:
Can the authors say a bit more about the methods used for the literature search (e.g. search terms / databases searched?) given the American bias in search results.

We have added an overview of our search strategy, including which electronic databases were searched to our paper. Since this was not a systematic review (though searching within the parameters of the search strategy described was undertaken systematically), we hope the scope of the review is now clear.

Additionally, in response to the suggestion that there was an American bias in search results we re-considered the papers retrieved through our search. We have now clarified that a few papers did report on UK based evaluations with a stated formative remit, however these had not been mentioned in the first draft of our paper since they did not describe the process through which formative feedback was provided or the extent to which it was acted upon. These papers are now referenced, and we hope the extent to which UK evaluations were found to report the use of TBE for programme improvement is more explicit.

(3) Discussion, Paragraph 1-2
In recent years evaluators have also highlighted the limitations/challenges of using programme theory in evaluation of interventions with complex aspects. The limitations of TBE could be highlighted in the discussion. See for example, Rogers (referenced above).

Since the focus of this paper is on the formative use of TBE, it is not thought appropriate to focus too heavily on the limitations and challenges of using TBE more generally (much of this literature focusses on the early stages of PT development). There is a substantive literature on this topic published elsewhere and we do not want to detract from the main aim of our paper- to explore formative use of TBE, once programme theory has been developed and agreed. As discussed in the paper, it is this later stage of TBE to which very limited attention has been paid within published literature.

Nonetheless, we accept the first draft of our paper did not sufficiently acknowledge that challenges and limitations are widely acknowledged within the evaluation literature. We have now acknowledged that TBE is not without its critics, that challenges to implementing TBE’s exist, and have given a brief overview of the key challenges discussed within the evaluation literature, within our background section. Each of these points is now referenced. We
have also confirmed that these potential difficulties did not impact negatively on the formative utility of TBE in our case example in our discussion.

(4) Discussion, paragraph 9
Can the authors clarify why service users weren’t involved in the process evaluation more generally (given that there are growing expectations for their involvement in health research).

The first draft of our paper, acknowledged that not yet involving service users was a potential limitation of the methodology, and that user-consultation was intended as a next-step in Childsmile’s ongoing process evaluation. This has been clarified and the reasons for not including users up until now, constraints of research team capacity, is now clearly stated within our discussion section.

(5) Discussion, paragraph 9
More specifically, in the context of understanding programme theory, involving service users may also have surfaced important learning from their knowledge and experience about how models of delivery were working in relation to accessibility and acceptability (e.g. for children and their families). Some of the findings suggest that aspects of the Childsmile model are shaped by the needs and voice of practitioners rather than the intended users, with service users expected to ‘fit’ with the existing system/services.

Please see our response to point 4 above. In addition, we have elaborated on the potential benefits of involving service users in the process of developing and iteratively testing programme theory within the paper.

(6) Discussion, Paragraph 11

That prior research has uncovered differences between implementation of TBE in the American and UK context has now been outlined within the paper and Sullivan and Stewart(2006) has been referenced.

Discretionary revisions
Some sub headings would be helpful in the background section given its length.

Sub-headings have been added.

(7) Background, 2nd paragraph:
It would be helpful to clarify why stakeholder involvement in developing logic models/explicating programme theory is important given involvement is an important aspect of the process in supporting learning from evaluation.
An explanation of the hypothesised benefits of stakeholder involvement and its centrality to TBE has been added to the background section.

(8) Background, 2nd paragraph:
Suggest clarifying what a 'logic model' in case this is an unfamiliar term for some readers.

The term 'logic model' has now been defined and referenced.

(9) Background, Final paragraph:
Can a link be included to direct the reader to the overall evaluation framework/plan?

Childsmile's national evaluation strategy is published online. A link has been provided.

(10) Methods, Paragraph 1
The paper would benefit from a figure setting out a simplified version of the key Childsmile LM/programme theory

Rather than present an over-simplified model, which has not been agreed by all key stakeholders a link to Childsmile’s nationally agreed logic models, used in the programme’s TBE, has been provided. This could be include in an additional file if preferred.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests