Author's response to reviews

Title: Systematic synthesis of community-based rehabilitation (CBR) project evaluation reports for evidence-based policy: A proof-of-concept study

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Version: 5 Date: 30 January 2008

Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editor

Thank you for your recent email regarding our article: Systematic synthesis of community-based rehabilitation (CBR) project evaluation reports for evidence-based policy: A proof-of-concept study (MS: 6299567961478922)

We note that a mistake in the editorial office resulted in us not being sent the first and major report written by Reviewer 1. As a result, we did not address the points made in our first revision, and we apologise to Reviewer 1 for this.

We have now been provided with a copy of that report and his second report, and have responded to the relevant points as follows in the attached revised manuscript:

"looking only at the recommendations sections of the project reports ignores issues that have - in the view of the evaluators - been well addressed or have been ignored in the CBR projects. As such the "evidence-based policy" will be a policy on shortcomings and does not include how to sustain the already successful components of the projects."

This is a pertinent and valid observation. While we alluded to this in our discussion of limitations, we have now more fully addressed this point in Background section on page 4 and in detail in the Discussion section (p17-18), noting “Researchers will also recognise that recommendations are an imperfect data source because they typically focus on what can feasibly be done in a project, in a given period of time, often with limited resources – not what should be done (in an ideal world). … Likewise, the focus of evaluation recommendations is typically on shortcomings of projects and emphasises evaluator’s suggestions for improving practice. As such, this or any similar synthesis is likely to be skewed towards issues that need to be addressed, rather than on aspects of CBR projects that are working effectively. While such constraints must be kept in mind, as recognised in the original exploration for this study [7], the inclusion of SWOT analyses in future syntheses will more effectively balance the bias towards ‘weaknesses’ and ‘threats’ with information on ‘strengths’ and ‘opportunities’.”

“to design a check list of relevant issues and to screen every evaluation report using this check list … However, I do see potential of this study to assist in constructing such a check list … but this is not mentioned as an aim of this study”

The development of a checklist was not an original aim of the study. However, as Reviewer 1 has pointed out, it is a potential future goal of this kind of research. In order
to draw out this potential application further, we have added the following paragraph to page 20: “These data provide a fascinating insight into CBR practice from the perspective of multiple evaluators across many projects, in 22 developing countries. The identified themes (Table 1) may also serve as a springboard for further research and comparative evaluation. The list of themes may form a basis for the development of comparative tools for assessing and contrasting the relative emphasis in projects, as a checklist for evaluation reports and other documentation, or as a framework for planning.”

“no insight is provided in the number of recommendations per report and the relative weight of the different recommendations”

As noted in the Methods section on page 5, recommendations were not selectively included in the analysis. All of the recommendation statements were extracted from each of the 37 reports and included. The issue of the relative weights attributed different recommendations is a very important point. This was cause for considerable discussion between the authors and was handled in greater depth in the earlier longer draft. In the actual study there was no weighting attributed to different recommendations – all were taken at face value. For clarity, this has now been more explicitly emphasised in the method section on page 5, and discussed in depth under ‘limitations’ on page 19, as follows: “As noted earlier, in this review we relied on the mitigating influence of multiple reports from a variety of evaluators in different types of projects across many countries. Despite this, we found that aspects of our methodology (primarily those tallying frequencies of themes, etc) could potentially be quite influenced by such bias. Likewise, for consistency and objectivity in our study we were not able to distinguish between major and minor recommendations and weight accordingly, and in cases where multiple recommendations related to one theme, this led to the bias of multiple coded entries. In the current study we sought to address these concerns as far as possible by balancing the quantitative tallying of themes with more qualitative reporting. This proof-of-concept study however has also indicated that other measures can be taken in future applications of the methodology. These would include the extensive consultation with stakeholders originally envisaged [7], including ToR as data, and may extend to including other documents such as project proposals and interim reports in the analysis.”

“one wonders if the type of recommendations from the different projects are indeed comparable. If the general conclusion is that CBR projects need to strengthen their management what type of changes or interventions in the management are we actually looking at? In other words how can policy makers and program implementers use the results of this exercise?”

The potential application of this paper for policy makers is a pertinent issue. We have sought to make this paper as relevant as possible for planners and policy makers by spelling out and underlining a brief summary statement at the end of each theme. We have now included the following sentence on page 20 of the Discussion to highlight these statements “We have noted 31 summary suggestions for policy makers and planners, which are underlined in the previous section.” However, given that this is only a proof-of-concept study, we are reluctant to be too prescriptive or draw potential applications too clearly. We hope to be able to do this more specifically if we have the opportunity to pursue this approach further in future.
“the comment in the Discussion section starting with "This is a striking finding ..." should be rephrased in terms of shortcomings of the research more than in terms of a "cause for further debate and research". Noting the need for further debate and research reflects our desire to record these findings for discussion, regardless of our personal perspectives. We are reluctant to attribute them to an artefact of the methodology. We have however acknowledged this aspect by editing the sentence on page 22 as follows: “This is a striking finding; assuming that the methodology has accurately reflected current CBR practice and concerns, and given that it is somewhat tangential to the emphasis within CBR manuals and texts [16,17,18], it is cause for further debate and research.”

“the focus is - and should be to discuss the method chosen and secondly to present some results. However, this two-fold is not always used consistently. For example, in the abstract the paragraph on 'conclusions' starts with recommendations where it should have started with a conclusion on the suitability of the method. The same applies to the paragraph on 'results'. This should start with something like: "the method allowed us to identify 51 themes in eight categories".” Maintaining the balance of this joint focus is indeed the intent of the article, and to that end the results are presented in such detail to illustrate to the reader the potential richness of the data and value of the methodology. In order to reflect this balance more correctly (in keeping with the suggestion by Reviewer 1), we have changed the order and emphasis of the descriptions noted, and edited accordingly (Abstract, page 1, and Results, page 7). We have also substantially edited the Discussion section, so that it starts with the methodological limitations. These changes highlight the methodology rather than the findings.

“The 'key themes' and the 'major themes' are essential in the manuscript but the elaboration on the 'minor themes' distracts my attention from the purpose of this article. I would recommend to bring this down to 1/3 or less to give examples on some of the minor themes.” It is agreed that the presentation of 22 minor themes is somewhat lengthy (hence our original submission as two articles). In response to this concern, we have reduced the number of minor themes presented in this section from 22 to 6. We have now simply listed the other 16 minor nodes and their corresponding summaries in Table 3. This has reduced the manuscript length by a further seven pages.
“Under 'Discussion' there is a section on 'limitations'. This section starts with "An additional goal ...". But this is the key issue of this manuscript, if I understood it well.

This has now been more clearly acknowledged in the text, and this section more appropriately commences with “A core goal…” As noted above, the limitations section has been moved forward to highlight this aspect of the study.

“I suggest to include the total number of conclusions in the 37 reports (and how these were spread).”

This has been partially addressed in the current version by including an additional column on the right side of Appendix 1 detailing the number of themes evident in each of the 37 reports. This column is referred to in the text on page 8. Because of space limitations and also for confidentiality reasons (those evaluators who provided their reports did not consent to that level of analysis of their work being presented), we feel it is not appropriate to detail the spread of themes across each of the reports.

We trust these changes meet with your approval and we look forward to publication of the attached article.

Regards

Pim Kuipers
(on behalf of Sheila Wirz and Sally Hartley)