Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding evidence 2: a statewide survey to explore evidence-informed public health decision-making in a local government setting

Version: 1
Date: 28 December 2013

Reviewer: Julie Leask

Reviewer's report:

This paper uses a survey and in-depth interviews to describe how people working in local councils use different types of evidence to support decision making. The study had a broadly representative sample from Victorian local governments and the use of mixed methods is to be applauded. However, I found the qualitative analysis to lack the depth and richness possible, to be very generally couched, and needing to do a better job of telling the story that the authors summarise in the discussion and conclusions.

Abstract

The first sentence of the abstract could be improved for interest and comprehension.

I found the background of the abstract needed more specificity - who what and when?

The sentences as follows were very general and fairly non-descript.: “Overall, a mixture of evidence (but more internal than external evidence) was influential in public health decision-making in councils. By comparison, a mixture of evidence (but more external than internal evidence) was deemed to be useful in public health decision-making in local government. Significant relationships were found between core domains; confidence, culture and access to research evidence.”

These don’t particularly draw the reader in. Perhaps some text from the second last paragraph on page 26 could be incorporated, especially about the focus on community views v research evidence.

Introduction

To help orient the reader, the authors should outline why local government was chosen for the study as opposed to say, state or federal government. In addition, there should be a more comprehensive description of how local govt. functions to support public health in Australia so that particularly the international readers can understand the roles and responsibilities more completely and hence be better able to interpret the meaning of the findings.

The paper has an excessive reliance on acronyms, making it harder to read. Some of the acronyms appear unnecessary (eg, KT, LG) when the whole word could be spelled out for ease of reading.

The heading “Theoretical Framework” is used as singular but the authors
describe both EIPPP and Diffusion of Innovations. The inter-relationships between these theories should be discussed.

Methods

A strength of this study is that all local govts in Victoria were asked to participate. Suggest the authors put survey development section before sample section.

How do the survey domains relate to the theories? The authors should spell out the relationships between the theories EIPP and Diffusion of Innovations and the survey and interview questions as currently this is not clear.

The authors analysed separately data from the survey and interviews the compared and integrated.

The description of the quantitative analysis is detailed even though there is already a paper describing this. However, the qualitative analysis description is thin – it refers to no particular methodological tradition and there is insufficient information about the analysis only a reference to emerging themes and issues. This section needs to more explicitly spell out what perspectives were brought to bear on the analysis, how the theories described in the introduction were used, what forms of reflexivity were used and whether individual or team analysis was undertaken.

There is a mention of the survey analysis being undertaken after the interviews were analysed and hence it being ‘objective’. This is an unusual statement in terms of mixed methods research since the findings from one method will inform the analytical approach to the other (quant to qual or vice versa) and that is quite legitimate, even encouraged. Also, to discuss objectivity with regard to qualitative analysis is a misnomer because all qualitative analysis is subjective and is the task of a reflexive researcher to use rigour and refection to acknowledge and account for the ways in which that subjectivity gives rise to a particular perspective in the results.

The author’s choice of examining clustering of responses within organizations is to be applauded as it supports decision making around whether interventions should be organizationally or individually targeted.

Results

There is much discussion on both influence and usefulness in sources of evidence but these terms have not really been teased out in the paper and may not be mutually exclusive in any case.

The presentation of the results I found to be very general and in need of some gritty detail to give it interest and grounding in the data. There could be more specific quotes/mentions in relation to public health specifically, given that this was the intent of the study.

Discussion

The first paragraph talks about ‘effectiveness evidence’ but surely the broader term ‘evidence’ is acceptable (and less confusing) given that some forms of evidence used by local governments revolve around, say, safety (eg, in environmental health).
There is a claim that the paper presents an ‘emerging picture of how decisions are made within local government’ yet I found the results did not really bring together such a story, but rather gave a series of findings from two methods from whom results were insufficiently woven together and where the qualitative analysis described a range of views but lacked a sense of cohesion.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.