Author’s response to reviews

Title: Teasing apart 'the tangled web' of influence of policy dialogues: Lessons from a case study of dialogues about healthcare reform options for Canada

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Author’s response to reviews:
Reviewer 1 Responses:

ABSTRACT:

Comment: "Results: The results suggest the intended capacities suggested in the literature were developed among the participants at these dialogues". This is unclear; what do you mean by "intended capacities in the literature"? I think you mean to say that the potential benefits of dialogues discussed in the literature were evident among the participants.

Response: Thank you very much for this suggestion that makes the statement much clearer. We have revised the text accordingly as follows:

Page 2, line 44

The results suggest the potential benefits of policy dialogues suggested in the literature were developed among the participants at these dialogues.

Comment: "Conclusion: We present an enhanced conceptual framework that further explicated the potential influence of policy dialogues on the content and mechanisms of policy development
at various stages of the policy cycle." In this sentence, it is unclear what is meant by 'further'; further than what? Do you mean to say it adds to our understanding of?

Response: Thank you for pointing this out. Indeed we meant to say it adds to our understanding of. The sentence has been rephrased to:

Page 3, line 64

We present an enhanced conceptual framework that furthers our understanding of the potential influence of policy dialogues on the content and mechanisms of policy development at various stages of the policy cycle.

INTRODUCTION:

Comment: Line 58 - change to 'that have been used'… because you're talking about dialogues; or change to "As an approach to KT, policy dialogues have been used in ….”

Response: Page 4, line 76

Thank you for identifying this, we have replace “has been used” with “have been used”.

Comment: Line 96 - would be useful to define what you mean by 'capacity', as in the ability or power to do, experience, or understand something?

Response: Thank you for this suggestion. We decided to be more explicit about what we mean by ‘capacity’ the first time we mention the term which occurs at Page 4, line 91. We have made the following revision.

With the right mix of participants, appropriate use of evidence, and a conducive dialogue setting, Boyko and colleagues suggest dialogue participants may enhance their capacities (knowledge, abilities, skills and actions to meet goals)[8] to use evidence in policy-making in the short-term.
METHOD:

Comment: Did the same participants attend all dialogues?

Response: Thank you for this inquiry. In the methods section we have provided some more detail about the types of participants at the different dialogues and reasons for the differences across events. In addition we refer the reader to Table 1 which presents the participant numbers by type and we have added a new Figure 1 that illustrates differences in interview informant mix at each dialogue and in our purposive sample for the follow up interviews.

Please see page 8, lines 265-284, which now reads:

Data sources in this study included: (i) eight video recordings that were compilations of participants’ perspectives at the events; (ii) 10 follow-up key informant telephone interviews with policy-makers and other stakeholders (such as individuals who may be representative of interest groups, non-governmental organizations); and (iii) a follow-up telephone focus group interview involving five researchers who had presented policy options at the dialogues. Interviews were held between May and June 2015. We purposively sampled the lists of attendees of the dialogues to capture diverse government, stakeholder and researcher perspectives. Most research attendees were presenting policy options for other participants to respond to. As can be seen from Figure 1, the numbers of participants by type varied by dialogue event. In the first three dialogues participation was by invitation. The first dialogue focused on pharmaceutical pricing and health technology assessment at the national level, and so had more national stakeholders compared to other dialogues. The second dialogue focused on hospital funding and physician payment and so included relatively greater provincial participation. The third dialogue on healthcare financing had relatively high national representation because of the joint federal-provincial role in healthcare financing in Canada. The iHEA symposium was a larger international event open to attendees of a research conference and so drew a larger proportion of researchers and national stakeholders. For the analysis of video data, we used commentary from 27 dialogue participants who volunteered to share their perspectives on video interview immediately after the initial events.
Comment: How many people were in attendance at each dialogue? Without this knowledge, it is unclear whether the sampling is sufficient.

Response: Thank you for your comment. We refer the reviewer to Table 1 that lists the number of attendees at each dialogue event by stakeholder type. We also have added a figure and described within the methods section attendance at the dialogues. See previous comment.

Comment: Also, please say more about the dialogue participants. It's not clear how 'participants who presented policy options at the dialogues' differ from the other participants who did not.

Response: Thank you for your comment. To clarify, the participants who presented the options where researchers who had prepared evidence briefs that were discussed at the dialogues.

As included in the above revisions to the methods section we now state more clearly:

Page 8, lines 268-270

and (iii) a follow-up telephone focus group interview involving five researchers who had presented policy options at the dialogues.

Comment: Lines 145-147 - please include # of video recordings here; it appears later but would be best stated upfront.

Response: We appreciate your comment and have added the number of video recordings which were compilations of many participants’ commentaries and the number of participants who’s perspectives were captured on video.

Page 8, line 265-268:

Data sources in this study included: (i) eight video recordings that were compilations of participants’ perspectives at the events
For the analysis of video data, we used commentary from 27 dialogue participants who volunteered to share their perspectives on video interview immediately after the initial events.

RESULTS:
Comment: Lines 208-218 - how many of the respondents shared these views? In fact, this comment applies throughout the results section. The reader needs a better sense of how pervasive these themes were, and as mentioned, the size of the sample from which they were culled. It would also be important to know if the comments/themes stemmed from researcher, government or other stakeholders. Indeed, what other stakeholders (care recipients? the public?) were in attendance and were sampled?

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have now included a statement to be clear. See page 9 line 316-317: We included any sub-themes that were mentioned by a minimum of two participants.

As stated in response to the above comments we have provided more detail as to the sample size and dialogue participant in the methods section, Table 1 and Figure 1.

In the Abbreviations section, we list the informant codes. These codes appear in square brackets at the end of each quote and indicate the type of informant and the participant number (assigned in order of interview completion). To make this clearer to the reader we have added the following statements:

Page 10, lines 367-371:

We indicate the informant type abbreviation (see details in abbreviation section) and number in square brackets following each quote. For example R02 refers to the second researcher informant that we interviewed, and PPM1 refers to the first provincial policy maker that we interviewed.
Comment: It's not clear what the themes are; are these captured by the headings? When you report "one participant" is this an illustration of a theme? Would be helpful to name your themes, even within subheadings, which I believe are overarching themes.

Response: Thank you for sharing this important point. We had listed our themes as headings in the text and our subthemes as elements in the boxes in the Figure (now Figure 2). In order to draw those out for the reader we have bolded and italicized the subthemes in the text (pages 11-20) and introduced an explanatory paragraph that reads (page 13, lines 365 to 395):

We first describe the coded data in terms of dialogue features and influence on capacity development consistent with the themes and subthemes of the Boyko framework [8]. We then discuss emergent sub-themes about how the capacities that were developed influenced subsequent activities in the policy domain. We indicate the informant type abbreviation (see details in abbreviation section) and number in square brackets following each quote. For example R02 refers to the second researcher informant that we interviewed, and PPM1 refers to the first provincial policy maker that we interviewed. The sub-themes are presented in the text below in bold italics and are listed in the boxes of Figure 2.

Comment: How do you define 'powerful stakeholders' in a manner that would make your results replicable?

Response: Page 14 line 576

Thank you for point this out. We have removed the work “powerful” without the loss of meaning and in order to avoid confusion of what was meant.

Comment: Line 316 - typo in title

Response: Thank you, a correction has been made.

Comment: Line 357 - deeper engagement compared to what?
Response: Thank you for bringing this up. We have removed the word engagement from this sentence.

Comment: In a practical sense, who pays for the dialogue (venue, food, travel, etc)? What are the costs associated, and the related implications for this strategy?

Response: Thank you for bringing this up and while we recognize that costs associated with organizing, executing, and attending a dialogue(s) are important constructs per se, this study aims to examine how dialogues impact subsequent policy-making and thus we do not put emphasis on the costs associated with a dialogue.

Comment: Lines 404-406 - are you sure you want to single out this ONE comment; pretty controversial.

Response: Thank you for your comment, we agree that it is controversial and have removed this comment from the manuscript. We have made a softer statement about the importance of management skills, consistent with the CFIR model.

Page 23, lines 1008-1012:

Consistent with the CFIR model, in the third column, features of the organizational context, such as management skills, the presence of effective change champions and staff stability can influence implementation of options, as can the external environment in either creating impetus for reform, or removing external pressure for example with the decision not to pursue a Health Accord.

Comment: Lines 413-417 - how do these themes tie in to implementation of evidence frameworks; specifically, factors related to success change/implementation of evidence? Can you tie this literature in somehow? You use the Boyko framework in relation to short, medium, and long term capacities, but a conceptual framework pertaining to factors associated with
implementation of evidence would be useful here as well, and would improve the interpretation of findings (i.e., Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research).

Response: Thank you for bringing our attention to tying in our work to the implementation of evidence framework. As a result, we re-visited our data and re-examined its relationship to the CFIR model in the findings (Page 18, lines 798 – 801) and discussion (page 23, lines1008–1012).

Comment: Lines 422-427 - so what then are the necessary preconditions for a successful dialogue?

Response: Thank you for your question. We recognize that this is an important question and feature of a dialogue, however, the current study does not set out to examine successfulness of dialogues. The question of whether a dialogue has been a success and preconditions for a successful dialogue may be useful to answer in another study.

DISCUSSION:
Comment: Line 458 - citations needed in reference to 'the literature'

Response: Thank you for your comment. We have addressed this by adding references. (page 21 line 898)

CONCLUSION:
Comment: Line 537; I think your findings suggest the benefits of policy dialogues, but given the limitations you've noted in the paper, I think it too strong to say 'important role'. They are one strategy, often combined with others in a multifaceted manner, to move towards or inform policy change. What you have described is what those involved experience, insofar as their recall and bias, about the experience and its potential impact.
If you tie in your organizational context factors to the CFIR framework, this will strengthen your paper because it will provide stronger support for how this strategy links to key contextual variables that are associated with successful implementation of evidence.
Response: Thank you for this suggestion. We have modified the text to read (page 21/2, lines 896 to 933) as follows:

Our findings support the role that policy dialogues can play in developing individual, organizational and system level capacities for policy reform, as has been discussed in the literature [8, 9, 31, 32] and provide additional detail on how this occurs. In addition, they suggest a ‘tangled web’ of mechanisms by which these capacities have the potential to influence policy-making often incrementally over time, in combination with other strategies and subject to contextual factors that can act as barriers and facilitators. By teasing apart these mechanisms, the findings point to considerations that designers of policy dialogues may want to target in order to meet specific objectives related to the stage of the policy cycle, and that can inform evaluation of their success in doing so.

--REVIEWER 2--
Comment: To elaborate, the first sentence of your discussion doesn't do your good work justice, in my opinion. You say your findings "support the important role that policy dialogues play in …" and also that they "suggest a 'tangled web' of mechanisms…" but these by your own admission are not new. I think your addition to the literature would be how what you have learned (or confirmed) would be used going forward. It would be great if you made more of your claim that the findings "further our understanding of how [capacity development] may influence the content and process of policy making…”

Response: We thank the reviewer for this encouraging comment. Please see our response to the last comment of reviewer 1:

page 21/2, lines 896 to 933

Our findings support the role that policy dialogues can play in developing individual, organizational and system level capacities for policy reform, as has been discussed in the literature [8, 9, 31, 32] and provide additional detail on how this occurs. In addition, they suggest a ‘tangled web’ of mechanisms by which these capacities have the potential to influence policy-making often incrementally over time, in combination with other strategies and subject to
contextual factors that can act as barriers and facilitators. By teasing apart these mechanisms, the findings point to considerations that designers of policy dialogues may want to target in order to meet specific objectives related to the stage of the policy cycle, and that can inform evaluation of their success in doing so.

Comment: I would suggest reframing the paper to focus on what is really new and can be acted on in policy dialogues, and how

Response: Thank you for this suggestion and your following suggestions to do this – they are greatly appreciated. In addition to the previous response, we also believe that pages 22 to 24 lines 935 and 1070 of the discussion section spell out more clearly our contribution and some important implications for design of policy dialogues and subsequent activities to influence policymaking depending on the dialogue purpose with respect to the stage of the policy cycle.

Comment: It would be helpful to define policy and explain the stages of the policy cycle that you refer to.

Response: Thank you for your comment. Although there are many different definitions of policy for our purpose we have added the following statement: lines 118 – 121 page 5

By policy development process, we mean the process by which public and organizational policy decisions are made, where policy refers to statements of collective decisions, actions, processes or goals by governments or organizations.

We have made this change within the manuscript page 5 lines 131-134 in addition to adding the stages of the policy cycle to the figure as well:

Better understanding is also needed of how capacities gained through attending policy dialogues can contribute to evidence use at different stages of the policy cycle[16], for example in framing policy problems [17, 18], agenda-setting [19], policy formulation, implementation and evaluation [20].
Comment: On page seven, similarly there is a reference to the effectiveness criteria. Although they are mentioned elsewhere, it would be helpful to mention them here.

Response: Thank you for pointing this out, we have included a reference that describes the effectiveness criteria in detail and refer the reader to that source.

Comment: Who are the "other stakeholders" who are referenced several times?

Response: Thank you for pointing this out. In the methods section where we first describe participants of telephone interviews we provide a short description of who “other stakeholders” are comprised of.

Page 8 lines 266 - 268
… (ii) 10 follow-up key informant telephone interviews with policy-makers and other stakeholders (such as individuals who may be representative of interest groups, non-governmental organizations);…

Comment: Could you say a bit more about the thematic analysis? I think it's good to realize that themes don't reveal themselves but rather are revealed by researchers, so explicitness about how this happens is appreciated.

Response: Thank you for your suggestions. We have added more content about the thematic analysis in the methods section. Please see lines Page 9, Lines 307-361.

All members of the team initially reviewed the data in their entirety to obtain an overall impression of the findings. Each transcript was then thoroughly reviewed by two researchers to reveal common themes. There was a very high level of agreement across coders (85%) based on an initial sample of 10 percent of coded content. The resulting codebook was then used to analyze the remaining transcripts. Two overarching themes emerged: (i) dialogue influence on lessons learned, actions taken and influence on subsequent policy-making and; (ii) views on policy options under discussion at the dialogues (reported elsewhere [27]).
A number of related sub-themes were identified within the overarching theme of dialogue influence. We included any sub-themes that were mentioned by a minimum of two participants. Related themes were then assembled under the broader, organizing themes consistent with the main elements of the Boyko framework. At this stage, the literature was again reviewed to obtain further support or clarification for the identified themes (capacities developed, mechanisms of influence on policy-making) and sub-themes within each theme. We found that most sub-themes corresponded to the problem definition, agenda-setting and formulation stages of the policy cycle, which is consistent with the Boyko model. In order to understand influence on implementation, we compared themes identified with elements of the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) model which captures many contextual factors that influence the implementation stage of the policy cycle [28]. We developed a conceptual framework to understand the relationships among the sub-theme categories that had emerged: capacities developed, mechanisms of influence on policy-making, contextual factors and potential impact of policy dialogues on stages of the policy cycle. The lead author developed an initial version of the framework, which was discussed and refined based on input from the co-authors. Participants had an opportunity to review relevant portions of the analysis and quotes attributed to them to ensure their accuracy.

Comment: On page 23, you say that when designing policy dialogues it may be helpful to think beyond capacity development to the intended influences on policy. I would have thought policy dialogues were aimed at influencing policy in the first place, not at developing capacity. Perhaps explain that a bit more?

Response: We agree and have removed the statement.

Lines 1027 to 1070 on page 23/24 now focus on the contribution of the paper with respect to lessons learned for policy dialogue design with respect to objectives for policymaking.

Comment: On a more minor note, there are quite a few typos and grammatical errors to be corrected
Response: Thank you for pointing this out. We have reviewed the manuscript in detail and corrected typos and grammatical errors.