Author’s response to reviews

Title: Developing content for national population health surveys: an example using a newly developed sedentary behaviour module

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Dr. Yokota,

Reference: Developing content for national population health surveys: an example using a newly developed sedentary behavior module (AOPH-D-19-00147R1)
Thank you once again for your careful consideration of our manuscript. We received your request for Major Revision following feedback from one of your peer reviewers. While we agree that examples of survey questions exist, in the authors' experience these are not particularly helpful in the development of survey modules on national population health surveys. The practice of developing survey content often occurs in the context of an individual research question and study. In these circumstances, factors such as module length and the number of questions are not as central as they are on national surveys. Including content on such surveys may require Research Ethics Board approval or other rigorous approval processes at an academic institution, but in these situations the constraints on the number of questions and the time allocated to questions are different. In particular there is less of a competitive give and take between the module developer and the statistical organization conducting the survey. The goal of our paper was to be more transparent about the particular constraints faced when developing content for national surveys. In our professional experience, these challenges are not unique to Canada and we feel that by providing an example of the efforts needed to adapt a new sedentary behaviour module that was previously published and described (Prince et al., PeerJ, 2017), we would be advancing the scientific literature and public health practice in health surveillance and open up a discussion on this topic.

We recognize that there is a tension between describing the specifics of our module and the generality of the requirements of Statistics Canada, but in our experience there are not many studies that outline the latter. If the reviewer is aware of such studies we would welcome the references to them as they would help in our practice as epidemiologists and we would gratefully cite them in our manuscript; however, we believe that this is a gap in the literature. We are hesitant to make changes to the paper to provide more detail about the sedentary behaviour module itself since we have published on that topic elsewhere (Prince et al., PeerJ 2017). After speaking with you regarding the requested modifications to this work, we are submitting a response to the reviewer and have made changes to the Figure 1 and Table 1 to outline the process for the development of the sedentary module.

All changes have been made using the ‘track changes’ function in MS Word. Please find below our strategies for addressing their concerns in the revised manuscript. We hope that these revisions are acceptable and address the concerns that were raised.
Reviewer #3:

We thank this reviewer for their continued evaluation of this manuscript. We have responded to their commentary and suggestions below.

Comment 1: The authors have taken (most of) the remarks of the reviewers into consideration while revising the manuscript. Yet, the fundamental question “what is the added value of the manuscript?” remains at least partly unanswered. According to the authors, this added value lays in “outlining the development process of a new survey module addressing an emerging area (sedentary behavior) for us in a national survey” (response to the reviewer 1 on the previous version of the manuscript). The content as such new module (sedentary behavior) is –in this perspective- less important than the process of its development. At the same time (response to reviewer 2 on the previous version of the manuscript), the authors state that “the objective of this paper is to both describe the development process of modules for surveys (using the sedentary behavior module as an example), as well as the details of content of the module”.

Compared to the previous version of the manuscript, the main orientation of the manuscript has shifted (slightly) towards the development process, at least this is put forward by the authors: the aim of the manuscript is “to provide an approach for the development of future survey content” (abstract), “The results of this paper describe the process and present a framework for content development”…that may serve as a model for future population survey content development” (abstract).

Yet, although the process applied in the development of the new module on sedentary behavior by PHAC and Statistics Canada is described in detail, the “framework of content development” that could be used in other surveys for other domains is not clear: “thinking about the module in the preplanning phase of the survey; building in flexibility and ranked priorities into the module; and, basing the development and process on the best science and international best practices” (page 15, line 19) are quite general elements to take into consideration when developing modules/questionnaires. Also the content of figure 1/table 1 refers to general processes/recommendations. The link with work done by PHAC and SC is not at all clear to me. It might be that PHAC and SC developed the content of the sedentary module according to the processes/recommendations as presented in figure 1/table 1 – and that’s quite OK – but that is just an example/an illustration of how the presented processes/recommendations were applied, not ‘providing’ a(-n) (new) approach.
This paper could be suited for publication in APH if the authors would elaborate their (new?) approach of development process of modules – with sedentary behavior module as an example. For the moment, it still looks (as this was also the case for the previous version, although announced otherwise) the emphasis lays on the particular ‘history’ of the development of the survey module by PHAC/SC. A stepwise description of the process/conclusion section would broaden the scope and would make the findings/process useful for other modules/other surveys/other contexts.

Response 1: Thank you once again for your careful consideration of our manuscript. The practice of developing survey content often occurs in the context of an individual research question and study. In these circumstances, factors such as module length and the number of questions are not as central as they are on national surveys. Including content on such surveys may require Research Ethics Board approval or other rigorous approval processes at an academic institution, but in these situations the constraints on the number of questions and the time allocated to questions are different. In particular there is less of a competitive give and take between the module developer and the statistical organization conducting the survey. The goal of our paper was to be more transparent about the particular constraints faced when developing content for national surveys. In our professional experience, these challenges are not unique to Canada and we feel that by providing an example of the efforts needed to adapt a new sedentary behaviour module that was previously published and described (Prince et al., PeerJ, 2017), we would be advancing the scientific literature and public health practice in health surveillance and open up a discussion on this topic.

We recognize that there is a tension between describing the specifics of our module and the generality of the requirements of Statistics Canada, but in our experience there are not many studies that outline the latter. If the reviewer is aware of such studies we would welcome the references to them as they would help in our practice as epidemiologists and we would gratefully cite them in our manuscript; however, we believe that this is a gap in the literature. We are hesitant to make changes to the paper to provide more detail about the sedentary behaviour module itself since we have published on that topic elsewhere (Prince et al., PeerJ 2017).

We have made changes to Figure 1 and Table 1 to more specifically reflect the process for the development of the sedentary module.

We look forward to receiving your response and feedback.