Author’s response to reviews

Title: Alpha test results for a Housing First eLearning strategy: the value of multiple qualitative methods for intervention design

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Dr. Belo Diniz:

In response to reviews of our manuscript, entitled Alpha test results for a Housing First eLearning strategy: the value of multiple qualitative methods for intervention design, we have made modifications which we respectfully submit for your consideration. In the text which follows, we respond to reviews in italicized text. In many cases, we took reviewer suggestions and used them to make changes to the manuscript. In cases where we disagreed with a comment, we offer our explanation below.

In all, we believe that consideration of reviewer comments improved the manuscript. We hope you will now find it suitable for publication in Pilot and Feasibility Studies.

Most sincerely,

Dennis Watson on behalf of the authors
Reviewer #1: Thank you for allowing me to review this work. The authors do a very nice job at describing their multi-modal methods used during alpha testing of an eLearning module. Readers not savvy in these methods would appreciate the level of detail offered in the manuscript.

Response: We appreciate this viewpoint, as it was our goal when developing this manuscript. As we planned our research, we could not find any current detailed examples of this phase of research outside of marketing or technology literature, and this literature was difficult to apply to an implementation strategy rooted in social and behavioral principles. We hope our manuscript will make it easier for others embarking on early-stage development activities for similar types of interventions.

I do, however, have a few minor suggestions regarding the manuscript:

1) Line 84 "real world" --> "practical application"

Response: We have taken the reviewer recommendation and changed the text.

2) Lines 96-101: Would like to have seen more details regarding participating providers beyond education and experience..eg. role in practice, type of community served, attitude toward computer-based learning...

Response: As is consistent with qualitative research, we purposefully selected our participants based on factors we identified as most relevant to the goals of the study. Regarding the communities served, as described, they were all located in large cities and worked in housing services. We have added some information to describe the types of positions these individuals worked in: “five participants were program directors and five were staff”. We did not collect any information regarding attitudes toward computer-based learning, so it is not possible to include these data.

3) Continuing same point...reviewing rating or thematic differences amongst participating groups could help with generalizability, or at a minimum, help ID specific differences for specific targeted communities.
Response: This is an excellent point. We did originally plan to look at differences by community (this is one reason we purposefully selected from the communities we did). However, there was virtually no difference in scores or discussions to warrant this.

4) LINE 122: You tell the reader the Training Satisfaction Rating Scale has demonstrated validity and reliability but fail to add context. Please add the setting/context/application in which validity evidence was supported.

Response: We have modified the sentence to include additional information regarding the instrument: “The questionnaire comprised 12 Likert-type items (1 = “totally disagree”, 5 = “totally agree”) from the Training Satisfaction Rating Scale (some items were slightly reworded to better fit the context of the study), which has demonstrated construct validity and reliability established across 78 different training activities encompassing a wide variety of content areas...”

5) LINE 138: Did you check for normal distribution to justify use of Mean? If so, state that. If distribution was nonparametric, would consider reporting median and not mean.

Response: Good point; We have modified the table to include median scores.

6) LINE 182: "lukewarm" perhaps "ambivalent"

Response: We have taken the reviewer recommendation and changed the text.

7) LINE 281- "attenuated" Not sure this is the correct word you're looking for. Please review.

Response: You’re right – we meant “attentive”, and the text has been changed accordingly.

8) LINE 362: "enhance validity of the data": Archaic language. New Standards (AERA, NCME, APA, 2014) would suggest you use the language "better support validity evidence" or some sort. Semantics, but not trivial to validity researchers.
Response: We have reviewed the referenced standards and understand the reviewer’s point. We modified language in the text to read, “Additionally, the common themes identified across sources (see Table 2) demonstrate trustworthiness and strengthen evidence contributing to validity”.

Reviewer #2: In the manuscript entitled "Alpha test results for a Housing First eLearning strategy: the value of multiple qualitative methods for intervention design" the authors describe the initial stage of a testing procedure for a new eLearning strategy.

Strengths

This study can be regarded as a feasibility trial and, therefore, is adequate for this journal. The manuscript is well written and requires no language revision. The Housing First proposal is exceptionally well planned and of interest to a broad audience. In this specific manuscript, authors address the specific issue of resistance to harm reduction, which is a timely contribution to the field.

Weaknesses and issues

Major issue

1) Authors advocate that because such an early stage procedure is rarely described in detail, it is of high interest for the researchers in the field to have access to their results. However, I wonder if it makes sense to describe initial results from alpha testing in a separate manuscript. As alpha results provide guidance for the planning of beta testing, wouldn't it be more logical to publish alpha testing results at the same manuscript as beta testing results?

Response: We appreciate Reviewer 2’s suggestion, and we had a detailed discussion regarding it. We chose to submit this manuscript as a methodology article, rather than a research article, to provide a detailed account of our alpha testing process that could address the dearth of information related to this stage of intervention development. This is a barrier we personally encountered when developing our study, as we could find no guidance on this early development
in the current literature. Including the beta testing results would significantly hinder our ability to adequately describe the alpha phase in enough detail to be helpful to others, as we employed a very different approach that would require a significant expansion of the methods section. We feel our choices are supported by Reviewer 1 who pointed to a strength of the manuscript being the level of detail it provides for other researchers: “Readers not savvy in these methods would appreciate the level of detail offered in the manuscript”.

2) In addition, the study protocol has been previously published elsewhere and contains the description of the alpha testing phase procedures (Watson DP, Young J, Ahonen E, Xu H, Henderson M, Shuman V, et al. Development and testing of an implementation strategy for a complex housing intervention: protocol for a mixed methods study. Implement Sci. 2014;9:138). Authors should describe how this manuscript differs from the original published protocol and why the current results shouldn't be published later with beta stage results.

Response: We have included the following statement in the manuscript: “We present our methods and findings separate from those of the subsequent beta testing phase to provide detailed guidance related to alpha testing that is currently missing from the intervention development literature. The methods described below provide a more robust description of the instruments (including the addition of an online questionnaire), protocols, and analysis approach employed the alpha testing phase of the HFTAT than were provided in the previously published protocol article”.

3) It is also unclear how alpha testing was superior to beta testing and if it is really a necessary step prior to larger scale beta testing.

Response: We do not feel alpha testing is a superior in any way to beta testing, and we are not attempting to convey this in the manuscript. It is possible that alpha testing is not necessary for all interventions, but it was extremely helpful in the development of ours, which relied on digital technology. It was necessary for us to identify bugs and technical issues prior to roll-out in a beta/pilot phase because any difficulties interacting with the intervention were likely to impact our pilot outcomes. Additionally, it would have been extremely distracting and time consuming to fix these types of issues in real time during the pilot phase. We have attempted to clarify this in the manuscript: “Technical errors such as these could have negatively impacted pilot results through their effect on the participant experience. Maintenance required to correct these errors
such as these might also negatively impact participants’ experiences if they are unable to access modules when maintenance is being performed.”

Response: We have also added the following statement in the conclusion: “Alpha testing of this sort may not be a necessary or appropriate stage all interventions, and the decision whether or not to employ it is up to the developers. That said, our results demonstrate it is a useful process to go through for any intervention that relies on technology that can suffer from technical issues or bugs.”

Minor issues

The link on page 3 line 56 is not working properly because de ending parentheses was included as part of the web address.

Response: We have fixed the link.

In methods, authors should explain why the chosen sample size was set at 10 individuals. As well, authors should describe what percentage of the total number of centers that could be reached for the alpha testing represents the 5 centers chosen.

Response: We utilized a qualitative, purposeful sampling logic, which was based on the desired objectives to obtain people with a range of familiarity and openness to HF practice. The number of available centers was not a factor in this approach, as it would be more appropriate to report if we were using a statistical approach to sampling. Additionally, our participants were not from centers per se, but came from a wide range of positions across the housing services field. We have modified the paragraph describing the sample to provide more detail: “In order to collect the most informative data in a relatively short time window, we employed a purposeful sampling approach to select a small number of participants with a breadth of HF understanding and experience. We selected five providers from each of two large cities (n = 10), one with a high degree of successful HF implementation across its homeless service system and one without, to participate in the alpha test. We identified individuals with assistance of community partners in
each of the cities. Regarding other pertinent characteristics of our sample, five participants were program directors and five were staff. Formal education was divided equally with five having a bachelor’s and five having a master’s degree. There was a range of experience providing housing services, with two participants having less than one year, two between one and five years, and the rest having more than five years of experience.”

For such a small sample size and considering the objective of the alpha testing, it seems odd to use means and standard deviations. Why did the authors not simply use the raw results from the 10 individuals?

Response: We included the table to provide a summary to demonstrate to readers that satisfaction was high overall. Per the suggestion of Reviewer 1, we included the medians instead of the means and standard deviations. We debated summarizing the results in text, but felt it was useful to the reader to have the table so they could see all of the questions reflected in the training satisfaction instrument. We are happy to remove the table and summarize the information in text if the editor feels it is appropriate.

In the discussion, authors state that "Alpha testing also helped us identify and fix a number of problems with the modules that would have been more difficult to deal with had they not been noticed until the subsequent pilot" but do not prove their point. Why would it be more difficult to deal with during beta testing?

Response: Many of the problems we were able to identify and fix in the alpha phase related to technical glitches and functionality of the eLearning module, as well as to places where the information provided was unclear. Fixing them prior to the beta phase meant that users in the beta phase were experiencing the eLearning modules as they were designed and envisioned. If we had waited to find and fix these problems during the beta testing phase, users’ experiences would have been disrupted, possibly affecting their views and experiences of Housing First in their agencies. Please see additional clarification under in our response to point #3 above.

The later statement also seems to contradict a prior statement that "Despite identified problems, we decided to keep the CoP and digital badges for the subsequent pilot, as we did not feel the findings warranted their removal based on the small alpha test sample size." If alpha testing
sample size was not sufficient to justify significant modifications in the protocol why should we alpha test before beta testing?

Response: This is an excellent observation that requires clarification on our part. A point we neglected to make in the manuscript was that we did make modifications to these aspects of the training based on alpha test results. We have revised this area of the manuscript to read: “Despite identified problems, we decided to keep the CoP and digital badges for the subsequent pilot. However, we did make modifications to encourage greater engagement with these aspects including privatizing the CoP forums so they can only be accessed by trainees and providing more detailed description of the badges.”

Authors declare no conflicts of interest. Are the authors not related to the Housing First Initiative? If so, it should be described as a non-financial conflict of interest.

Response: While collaborators on the larger project are active Housing First practitioners, none of the authors of this manuscript have a relation to the HF model outside of our research. To that end, we are no more part of the Housing First initiative than any researcher is part of any topical area they study. We are happy to revise the COI statement if we are misunderstanding this comment in some way.