Reviewer's report

Title: Using Participatory Learning & Action (PLA) research techniques for inter-stakeholder dialogue in primary healthcare: An analysis of stakeholders' experiences

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Reviewer: Tina Cook

Reviewer's report:

This is a really interesting paper that puts to the test, in a range of European countries, participatory approaches to researching with people. The 'test' as articulated by the researchers is to understand whether the application of PLA leads to meaningful engagements of all stakeholders and to learn about which elements of PLA contribute to positive and productive stakeholder dialogue.

I would suggest that there are a number of issues that need to be addressed in the body of the paper to help with clarity of terminology and conceptually underpinnings and to allow the reader to understand what occurred, (what actually happened - the methods/process of the research) and how it led to stakeholders being able to engage in a positive/meaningful way.

Clarity issues

To make sense of the whole paper the authors need to consider what they mean by the term 'meaningful' in their question. What would be indicators of 'meaningful' engagement in the context of PLA? This is needed to understand how the authors came to the 'Optimal components of a PLA inter-stakeholder dialogue' discussed on p 14.

The terms methodology and method are used somewhat interchangeably yet they have very particular meanings in relation to the positioning of participation in health research (for instance, see the Position Paper on Participatory Health Research written by members of the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research www.icphr.org - of which I am a member and I can see there are members amongst the authors). In the Plain English Summary the term participatory methods is clearly used. Participatory methods can be set within a research design that does not have a central participatory methodology. As such I remain unsure how PLA was positioned in this research. My sense from what is there is that it was more of a method, even if a widespread method) than a methodology (I struggled to see the participatory element of the approach to data analysis for instance). If so, that needs to be articulated (or of course the converse!) and that would strengthen the papers claims for knowledge.
The term PLA is described conceptually but the design process is not clearly articulated in a way that enables the readers to understand what happened. What did the inter-stakeholder dialogue look like? What was it about the various methods, the participatory evaluations, interviews and researchers' fieldwork reports that merited the term participatory rather than qualitative research with stakeholders. Without knowing more about the practice the pathway to the findings is hard to see and the results section is not well grounded. To understand what people are saying about inter-stakeholder dialogue it is necessary to understand what they have been part of. What is it? For instance, that AUST, SH 01 GP so appreciated, what is the 'this' that they have never done before and what is the way they have done it now? Whilst the authors note that each research site implemented the dialogue in different ways, the underpinning factors/shapings/principles that link the practices, that make it PLA, need to be articulated.

To help know what PLA looked like I wondered if Figure 1 could be worked a lot harder - Perhaps being used to provide a more detailed representation of the project as a whole. I also struggled with Box 2 and how to interpret its content back to the context of the research being undertaken. What 'inter-stakeholder dialogue' might look like in various projects was not clear.

More information is needed about NPT - what it looks like in practice - to help the reader understand what it means to combine NPT and PLA. The authors state that NPT provided the theoretical framework underpinning the research, and as such it must have played a central role in the underpinnings for this work and making meaning from its findings, so more indication of what that looked like and how it operated is needed.

The authors state that the paper focusses on patient and public involvement or engagement in primary healthcare research partnerships. There are two aspects of this that the authors need to consider making explicit - firstly, that is a very general focus and yet the work does appear to have been undertaken with migrant populations. The migrant element is touched on very lightly within the paper, in fact I had almost missed it (it is not mentioned in the abstract for instance). Coming across it in the middle of the paper had to go back and check. On page 5 people with aphasia were also mentioned. I presume this would have had a very particular impact on the methods used within the PLA approach, yet it is not discussed. The authors need to consider whether migrant/aphasia is an important factor or not in relation to their work and address its reporting accordingly. Secondly there needs to be some discussion around PPI and the notion of participatory methodology. As noted above, participatory methods may not sit in a participatory methodology, and neither may be seen in some forms of PPI where participants are co-opted to projects to engage in other forms of involvement. On page 5 the authors make a statement about participatory approaches and where active stakeholder engagement takes places in such approaches but this statement is not fully discussed, particularly what is meant by engagement. These different understandings of PPI, and how they relate to the process of PLA, need some elucidation. The concept is described as being rooted in interpretive and emancipatory paradigms.
but what a PLA 'mode of engagement' (p5) actually means needs clarification - what does it mean to produce maps, charts and diagrams in a participatory way - what are these maps/charts/diagrams about? - who decided on the focus for this – this would help a reader understand the participatory positioning within PLA. This point is also relevant to the description of the Evaluation of stakeholders’ experiences. What is a Qualitative speed evaluation - what does it offer – was it participatory or academic researcher led? Could you give an example of the 'explicit questions' p9 that were designed to evoke the rich data you allude to.

The data analysis section would also benefit from some examples of what is being described. For instance, at the top of page 10 it is stated that 'Six codes containing negative data coalesced into three themes'. The simple addition of the names of these codes and themes would act as pointers to the readers and aid understanding. Throughout the paper the inclusion of examples in this way would be helpful to set the point being made by the authors back into the actuality of the research. It will help with understanding the PLA process, the analysis of the process and the results.

The section on 'Optimal components of PLA…' is well placed and the vital element to the paper. Again, however, the essence of the work is not sufficiently articulated. Only three countries reported experiences of transformative moments - this is not discussed. Did this hold really important information about how differences in PLA, as carried out in the different country contexts, affected the shaping of spaces for transformative moments? If the authors looked at this, what did they find? If they did not, was there a reason why not?

The finding that an element of the processes that facilitated the transformative moment was the space offered for collaborative challenge seems to be a key and would benefit from clearer discussion - and set back into the current literature on critical enquiry and the place of disruption. At the moment its vitality is almost lost within the text.

In summary, I was pleased to see the work that had been done by RESTORE. This paper certainly has the possibility to contribute to understandings of the workings of PLA as a space for transformative moments. I suspect that, with the benefit of some time away from this paper when the authors go back to it with a critical eye, they will be able to see more clearly what might be proffered to enable their conceptual and theoretical pathway to be clearly articulated and then contextualised within the research process, and hence develop this paper more fully for publication. I hope my comments are helpful for the authors.
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