Outcome harvesting: piloting a new retrospective methodology for the evaluation of a community development intervention

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Introduction

- Evaluating complex public health interventions can be challenging, particularly where there are multiple stakeholders and service users
- Community development initiatives traditionally involve multiple local partners and social actors, making them particularly complex
- Outcome Harvesting (OH) (Wilson-Grau, 2019) is a process to collect perceived outcomes, to test these claims against chains of evidence, and to assess their coherence, credibility and utility through stakeholder-led review

Methodology

- Retrospective, post-intervention case study of a place-based community project
- Concepts of 'Harvest users', 'Harvesters', 'Change Agents' and 'Social Actors' operationalised (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2013)
- Six iterative steps and over seven weeks of fieldwork led to outcome statements assessed through content analysis of project-linked documents, focus groups and interviews with ten diverse stakeholders
- OH process was reviewed through reflective logs, and interviews with commissioners, partners and project staff

Aim of the evaluation

To assess the suitability of Outcome Harvesting (OH) as a methodology for evaluating small scale community development interventions

Background and aim of the community development initiative

- The co-location of a GP surgery and a social housing facility in the same building had led to some tensions in the community and reports of some anti-social behaviour
- Community centre opposite revived and a wellbeing worker put in place in order to engage residents and build community cohesion

Image: Google maps

Outcome harvesting (Wilson-Grau, 2019) Six iterative steps	Iterative steps in our outcome harvest, adapted to fit aims and availability of evidence
1. Design the outcome harvest	1. Harvest designed in collaboration with stakeholders, potential outcomes agreed
2. Review documentation	3. Initial interview with wellbeing worker and documentary evidence gathered
3. Engage with informants	2. Desk-based review of documentary resources
4. Substantiate	4. Interviews and focus groups with key change agents and social actors
5. Analyse and interpret	5. Outcome statements shared with stakeholders
6. Support the use of findings	4. Further substantiation and revision of outcome statements
	6. Findings disseminated to key change agents

Results

- A range of potential outcomes were identified and grouped into six outcome statements describing changes in the behaviour of individuals, groups or other social actors
- Stakeholder consensus and documentation provided a basis to substantiate four of the six outcome statements
- Two outcome statements failed to be substantiated due to confounding or inconclusive evidence
- Participants reported that OH techniques helped surface, refine, and agree plausible project outcomes
- However, some questioned the premise and rigour of aspects of the evaluation approach

Conclusions

- OH is a promising methodology for rapid and pragmatic evaluations of complex, emergent public health programmes
- Low cost, customisable and adaptable
- Collaborative and participatory
- Need for advance consultation on scope and application and clear communication about its processes and limitations
- Need for good buy-in from all key change agents

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References

Wilson-Grau, R., 2019. *Outcome harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications*. IAP.
Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). Outcome Harvesting. Ford Foundation, November 2013