Workshop proposal for the Society for Social Medicine (SSM) annual conference, Glasgow, September 5-7 2018

Title: Perfect design or practical study? A workshop on navigating the challenges of community based prevention research

Workshop leader: Prof Anne-Marie Bagnall, Leeds Beckett University

Other facilitators/ convenors:

Prof Jane South, Leeds Beckett University

Daniel Pearmain, People's Health Trust

Annie Quick, New Economics Foundation

Sarah Arnold, New Economics Foundation

Background

i)   Subject

There is a shared interest among public health researchers in tackling methodological issues surrounding community based research, and on moving beyond a focus on individual level change. As part of a project on community empowerment funded by the People's Health Trust, we have conducted a feasibility study on quantitative and economic evaluation of complex community-based interventions. To understand different quantitative methods that can be used to evaluate community empowerment interventions, we have undertaken a methodological literature review that identified the following sets of challenges:

Defining population of interest – interventions taking place at a community level are not specifically targeted at a well-defined group of individuals. Therefore it is challenging to even find those who are affected by an intervention.

Diverse and un-prescribed effects – the effect of community empowerment interventions are likely broad, suggesting we need to measure multiple outcomes in order to detect change. This increases the likelihood of detecting spurious change and can require a lot of resource. Furthermore, in many cases these outcomes are not pre-defined by a programme (i.e. communities choose their own foci).

Causality - community empowerment interventions can be thought of in the context of complex systems (ie. they have emergent properties not fully explained by only understanding individual elements of the system). We need to use study designs and methods that allow for interactions among elements of the complex system (ie. individuals and organisations within their communities) and allow for non-linear, dynamic effects.

Context matters – community empowerment programmes to improve health often do so by affecting the larger contextual determinants of health. Traditional study designs such as randomised controlled trials and epidemiologic risk factor study design tend not to consider these contexts.

ii)   Topicality

We have reached a point where there is a shared ambition to improve the rigour and representativeness of the evidence base for these complex community based interventions. Recognition of complexity relates not just to interventions, which may have many components and involve many partners, but also the complex community systems they interact with. We now know a lot about the challenges, and these have driven the focus on the easy to measure (e.g. individual level) outcomes. There is a lot of interest in how we get the measurement right at a community level.

iii)   Likelihood of provoking discussion

We have found that researchers in this topic area are keen to share learning and collaborate on advancing knowledge in this developing and challenging methodological field. We have spoken informally to other researchers about the possibility of such a workshop and received positive responses, and we will soon be starting key informant interviews, in which we will also mention the workshop. .. Researchers in this field are likely to be presenting their work at the SSM annual conference.

iv)   What is the rationale for the workshop?

To explore together the best design options, with the aim of producing a summary to inform future evaluations of community empowerment interventions, and the design of these interventions to facilitate effective and meaningful evaluation. We also propose to produce an academic journal article which will bring together the findings from workshops, key informant interviews and a literature review

Aims: *What is expected to be achieved overall by the end of the workshop?*

We expect to have collected a range of viewpoints on best practice, challenges and solutions to conducting methodologically rigorous evaluation of community based interventions. This will contribute to a report and academic publication which will advance knowledge in the field. The report will be based on this workshop, a further workshop with policy makers and practitioners (?), a literature review (already conducted) and key informant interviews (already conducted).

Educational objectives: *What will the participants gain/ learn from this?*

The opportunity to share knowledge and learn from each other in this developing field of methodology for evaluating complex community-based interventions. We will collate and feedback the workshop findings to all participants.

Structure:

1) Opening remarks and aims – 5 mins
2) Short presentations
    a. Findings of literature review (5 mins)
    b. Findings from interviews with key informants (5 mins)
    c. The funder's view (5 mins)

3) Small group discussions (60 mins)
    a. Study design - including comparative and control groups (20 mins)
    b. Unit of measurement (e.g. individual; neighbourhood; community; LA) (20 mins)
    c. Outcome measures – e.g. "hard" vs "soft"; impact individual vs community (20 mins)

4) Feedback and closing remarks (10 mins)

Small group discussions will utilise a World Café approach, with participants spending 15 minutes at each of the three settings, sharing their experiences and discussing, in relation to each of the three topics:

                i)   Best practice
                ii)   Challenges
                iii)   Potential solutions

Facilitators will remain at the three tables, while participants will move on after 20 minutes. This enables a full range of views to be collected.

Target Group: Researchers (academic and non-academic?) and commissioners with an interest in and/ or experience of quantitative evaluation of community-based projects??

Number of participants: Minimum number 12, maximum 45??

Requirements: Classroom style size and layout (tables to gather round), flipchart paper and pens, Powerpoint facilities.