

Proposal to establish a Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group July^{4th} 2002

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Contacting the Group

General enquires about the work of the group should be made to Jennie Popay, Professor of Sociology and Public Health at Lancaster University in the north west of England, who is one of three convenors for the group. Her contact details are:

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The group also has a website which is maintained by Peter Finch who can be contacted on peter@duke33.freemove.co.uk if you have any problems. The website address is: http://mysite.freemove.com/Cochrane_Qual_Method/index.htm

Proposed Co-Convenors

The proposed Qualitative Methods Group would initially have three co-convenors who have responsibility for dealing with queries and co-ordinating activities within specific areas of interest to the Methods Group: Esther Coren, (critical appraisal frameworks and maintaining the group's register of methodological research); Jennie Popay (methods for synthesis, enquiries regarding proposals for methodological work and general enquires); and Carl Thompson, (search strategies). The convenors' contact details are:

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Background to the Work of the Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group

The Cochrane Collaboration's main role is 'preparing, maintaining and disseminating systematic reviews of the effects of healthcare'. The parallel and closely linked organisation - the Campbell Collaboration – has now been established to prepare, maintain and disseminate systematic reviews of the effects of social and behavioural interventions in other areas of public policy including education, delinquency and criminal justice, social services, social welfare social work, housing, employment and training.

The findings of high quality randomised controlled trials are central to the endeavours of both Collaborations. However, it is also recognised that findings from qualitative studies aiming to explore the experience of all those involved in providing and receiving interventions and studies using multiple methods to evaluate the factors that shape the process of implementing interventions have an important role to ensuring the systematic reviews are of maximum value to policy and practice decision-making. To this end the Campbell Collaboration has established a Methods Group focusing on methodological issues raised by attempts to include evidence from studies of the process of implementation in systematic reviews of effectiveness. The protocol for this group, and the work it is involved in, can be found at (<http://campbell.gse.upenn.edu/>). It is proposed that the Cochrane Collaboration should establish a parallel group concerned to develop methods to include evidence from qualitative studies into systematic reviews.

The Focus of the Qualitative Methods Group

Qualitative research encompasses a range of specific methods generating different kinds of data and findings. These include: in-depth qualitative interviews producing narrative data, participant and non-participant observation, focus groups and ethnographic fieldwork. Inevitably, given this range of data types, there are also diverse approaches to analysis. These include the use of statistical packages such as Nudist and Ethnograph, as well as grounded theory approaches. The identification and refinement of thematic categories is a major aspect of qualitative analysis.

Qualitative research can help us to understand the way in which an intervention is experienced by all of those involved in developing, delivering and receiving interventions, what aspects of the intervention they value, or not, and why. These types of studies can provide insight into the factors, including aspects of professional, managerial and/or consumer behaviour and external factors such as other policy developments, which facilitate or hinder successful implementation of a programme or service and how it might need to be adapted for large scale roll out. They may also generate qualitative data on the outcomes of interventions. The findings from qualitative research studies can therefore help to answer questions about the impact, appropriateness and acceptability of interventions and thus enhance the scope, relevance and utility of effectiveness reviews

The relevance of qualitative research to the assessment of health interventions has only recently been given recognition although it has long been recognised in other fields, notably education, where RCTs often include qualitative elements. Increasingly, however, qualitative components are being built into RCTs of health interventions. Additionally, it is important to consider the potential contribution of qualitative research conducted outside of RCTs.

Methodological Issues Arising from the Inclusion of Qualitative Evidence in Systematic Reviews

The inclusion of qualitative studies into systematic reviews of evidence raises a number of important methodological issues. At a general level, methodological work is required to determine whether it is 'reasonable' to apply findings from independent studies to the results of a systematic review of RCTs or whether only qualitative research embedded within relevant RCTs should be included.

Other methodological issues arising from the inclusion of qualitative findings into systematic reviews include the need to develop methods for identifying, recording, appraising and extracting data from qualitative studies.

1. Search strategies: In terms of identifying relevant studies, there are implications for the development of registers of studies and for search strategies. Most registers of RCTs, for example, do not routinely record the availability of data from qualitative studies collected during RCTs and/or as part of linked studies. Conventional search techniques may not pick up relevant material. Search strings to identify qualitative studies using a range of different qualitative methods need to be further developed.
2. Critical appraisal: Tools are being developed which seek to deal with the interpretative nature of the qualitative research process but there is a need to review, test and disseminate different models and to consider the appropriateness of different approaches for use with studies using different qualitative methods.
3. Evidence synthesis: Finally, there is a need for methodological work on the processes by which findings from studies using different qualitative methods and generating a range of types of data can be synthesised and/or summarised and combined with the findings on effect size without compromising the need to minimise bias. Here there is a more general issue to be addressed. Given the importance of 'context' to qualitative research there is a need for methodological research to clarify the basis on which findings from such research can be generalised across studies undertaken in different socio-cultural conditions.

Aims of the Group

The proposed Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group would aim to develop and support methodological work on the inclusion in systematic reviews of findings from studies using qualitative methods and to disseminate this work within and beyond the Collaboration's Review Groups. This Methods Group will work closely with the Campbell Implementation Process Methods Group, also co-ordinated by Professor Jennie Popay. There is substantial commonality in the methodological issues facing these two methods groups and overlap in the people registering an interest in being involved in the work of the groups. The expectation is that the Cochrane Methods Group will focus particularly on methodological matters arising from the inclusion of findings from qualitative studies into systematic reviews. The Campbell Methods Group will focus particularly on methodological issues associated with process evaluations, which are characteristically mixed method and can include qualitative methods. The convenors will ensure that work is not duplicated across the two Methods Groups and eventually it is envisaged that the groups will merge to form a joint methods group across the two collaborations with subsequent merger of the convenor function. It is anticipated that the outputs from the groups will be available to people involved in both Collaborations.

The Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group will:

1. Identify appropriate roles for qualitative research within the context of Cochrane Systematic Reviews.
2. Develop and disseminate appropriate methodological standards for:
 - Searching for qualitative research relevant to Cochrane reviews;
 - Critically appraising qualitative studies;
 - Combining data from qualitative studies with other data within the context of a systematic review.

Dissemination of these methodological standards will be through various routes including contributing to the guidance for reviewers in the Cochrane Reviewers Handbook.

3. Provide a forum for discussion and debate about the role of qualitative research within the systematic review process and the development of rigorous and systematic methods to promote this role to:
 - Encourage transparency of, and learning about, method developments;
 - Encourage and facilitate liaison and sharing with other methods groups.
4. Provide links for Cochrane & Campbell Review Groups to people with expertise and experience of qualitative research to:
 - Provide advice and support for people aiming to incorporate qualitative research into a review;
 - Provide a mechanism for evaluating and developing review protocols

5. Provide training for members of Cochrane & Campbell Review Groups.
6. Maintain a register of relevant methodological papers.
7. Survey members on an annual basis to identify developing interests and ongoing contributions.

Current and Planned Activities

1. *Develop appropriate methodological standards:*

Members of the Methods Group are currently involved in a number of methodological studies focusing on frameworks for critical appraisal of study quality and approaches to data synthesis. Protocols for these studies are available on the groups website and include:

- The submission of a proposal to the second stages of the ESRC research methods programme for methodological work on approaches to narrative synthesis in Cochrane and Campbell systematic reviews. (Popay, Baldwin, Pettigrew, Roberts, Sowden. Decision due summer 2002.)
- Secured funding from the Health Development Agency to undertake an exploratory study of methods for including evidence from qualitative research and process evaluations into systematic reviews. This work is focusing on an existing Cochrane review of smoke alarms and an HDA systematic review of community based accident prevention initiatives. (Popay & Roberts, 2002/3.)
- Cochrane funding for an exploration of the methodological issues involved in, and value of, incorporating findings from qualitative research into a Cochrane systematic review of interventions to promote adherence to tuberculosis management. (Garner, Noyes, Popay, Volmick, 2002/3)
- Exploratory work on the relative strengths and weakness of different frameworks for the critical appraisal of qualitative studies. (Coren 2002/3)

2. *Disseminate outputs from the group including information on methodological standards*

The group has already begun to disseminate its work including preliminary guidance on the systematic review of qualitative studies. This work includes:

- The establishment of a website including an embryonic register of methodological studies relevant to the scope of the group and protocols for the methodological work described under (1) above. The website is also planned to provide a vehicle for exchange and debate.
- Contributing text on the systematic review of evidence from qualitative studies to the NHS CRD guidelines on the commissioning and conduct of systematic reviews. (Popay 2001).
- Contributing short pieces for the Cochrane Methods Groups Newsletter.

3. *Provide forums for discussion and debate on methodological issues*

The group is well advanced in the organisation of two high profile workshops in the UK, which will provide opportunities for discussion of methodological issues in the systematic review of qualitative studies. These types of activities will continue and include:

- An international workshop funded by the HDA on diverse approaches to evidence synthesis. Autumn 2002.

- A workshop funded by the Social Care Institute of Excellence on the contribution of qualitative research to the evidence base for social care. July 2002.
- Members of the proposed group have also run sessions/workshops at annual CC since Amsterdam in 1997. Similar workshops will be organised for future Colloquia.

4. *Training.*

Before substantive training in methods for the systematic review of qualitative research can be provided the results of the methodological work described above are needed. It is anticipated that a draft training strategy will be developed on the basis of the discussions at the HDA and SCIE seminar/workshop. The ESRC proposal for methodological research, described under (1) above also includes plans to develop training material on narrative synthesis. The group would anticipate providing formal training sessions at Cochrane Colloquia from 2004 onwards although some limited training may be provided in 2003 depending on progress with methodological research.

5. *Developing and maintaining a register of methodological work.*

Members of the network expressing interest in working with a Cochrane Qualitative Methods Group have already begun to establish a register of methodological texts relevant to the work of the group. This is available on the group's website. Esther Coren will co-ordinate the further development and maintenance of this register.

The Role of Group Members

As already noted the group has three convenors who have each agreed to take responsibility for particular areas of work. In addition, around thirty-five people have expressed an interest in being involved actively in the work of the group. These people are listed at the end of this proposal. We plan to survey these people as soon as the group is registered to identify members interests and the type of work they would be willing to be involved in, including, for example, refereeing review protocols, providing advice to reviewers, contributing to training activities and undertaking methodological research. All group members will be expected to contribute to the development of the register of methodological studies.

Support for the Group

1. Co-ordination: The proposed Methods Group does not yet have core funding so that there will be no dedicated staff supporting the work of the group in the immediate future. However, convenors will be allocating time to their specific areas of responsibility and to the overall co-ordination of the group. To this end Esther Coren will be allocating a day a month to the co-ordination role and Jennie Popay half a day a month.
2. Support within the Collaboration: Expression of support for the work of the proposed group have been received from the following Review Groups and Fields:
 - Paul Garner – Infectious Diseases Group
 - Jeremy Grimshaw – EPOC
 - Geraldine McDonald - Developmental, Psychosocial & Learning Problems Group
 - Miranda Mugford – Health Economics Methods Group
 - Sandy Oliver – Consumer Network
 - Liz Waters – Health Promotion and Public Health Field
 - ? - Wound Care Group
 - Rachel Churchill - Depression, Anxiety and Neurosis Group.
 - Others?
3. Administrative and technical support: Although the group does not yet have any core funding it will have some administrative and technical support for its work including:
 - Four hours a month administrative support from the Institute for Health Research at Lancaster University
 - Some administrative support will also be available from the UK Cochrane Centre.
 - Technical support for the development and maintenance of the group's website from Peter Finch.

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