

Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group guidance series-paper 5: methods for integrating qualitative and implementation evidence within intervention effectiveness reviews

Harden, Angela; Thomas, James; Cargo, Margaret; Harris, Janet; Pantoja, Tomas;
Flemming, Kate; Booth, Andrew; Garside, Ruth; Hannes, Karin; Noyes, Jane

Abstract

The Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group develops and publishes guidance on the synthesis of qualitative and mixed-method evidence from process evaluations. Despite a proliferation of methods for the synthesis of qualitative research, less attention has focused on how to integrate these syntheses within intervention effectiveness reviews. In this article, we report updated guidance from the group on approaches, methods, and tools, which can be used to integrate the findings from quantitative studies evaluating intervention effectiveness with those from qualitative studies and process evaluations. We draw on conceptual analyses of mixed methods systematic review designs and the range of methods and tools that have been used in published reviews that have successfully integrated different types of evidence. We outline five key methods and tools as devices for integration which vary in terms of the levels at which integration takes place; the specialist skills and expertise required within the review team; and their appropriateness in the context of limited evidence. In situations where the requirement is the integration of qualitative and process evidence within intervention effectiveness reviews, we recommend the use of a sequential approach. Here, evidence from each tradition is synthesized separately using methods consistent with each tradition before integration takes place using a common framework. Reviews which integrate qualitative and process evaluation evidence alongside quantitative evidence on intervention effectiveness in a systematic way are rare. This guidance aims to support review teams to achieve integration and we encourage further development through reflection and formal testing.

KEYWORDS:

Cochrane collaboration; Implementation research; Mixed methods research; Process evaluations; Qualitative evidence synthesis; Qualitative research; Systematic reviews