

Designing expert hearings: how to use deliberative research methods for public health evidence

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Why use deliberative methods?

Deliberative methods, such as **citizens juries**, **deliberative dialogues** and **expert hearings**, are used in public policy as a form of democratic engagement because they create a space for debate, reflection and consensus building between actors [1,2]. The process of deliberation allows examination of complex or contentious issues, often drawing on a range of evidence sources - professional opinion, scientific evidence and lived experience.

Despite the limited use of deliberative methods in public health research, the rationale addresses several contemporary issues:

- Acknowledgement of the contested nature of population health evidence
- Inclusion of different stakeholder perspectives including lay evidence
- Real time engagement with research questions and findings thereby allowing the testing of arguments
- Improving the policy relevance of research and hence its impact.

Methodology – expert hearings

This poster examines the application of deliberative workshops – known as ‘**expert hearings**’ - as a method of collecting, interpreting and validating public health evidence. Three case studies are presented. Design and sampling choices created the conditions for deliberation on agreed topics with a mix of expert testimony, questioning led by an enquiry panel and participant discussion.

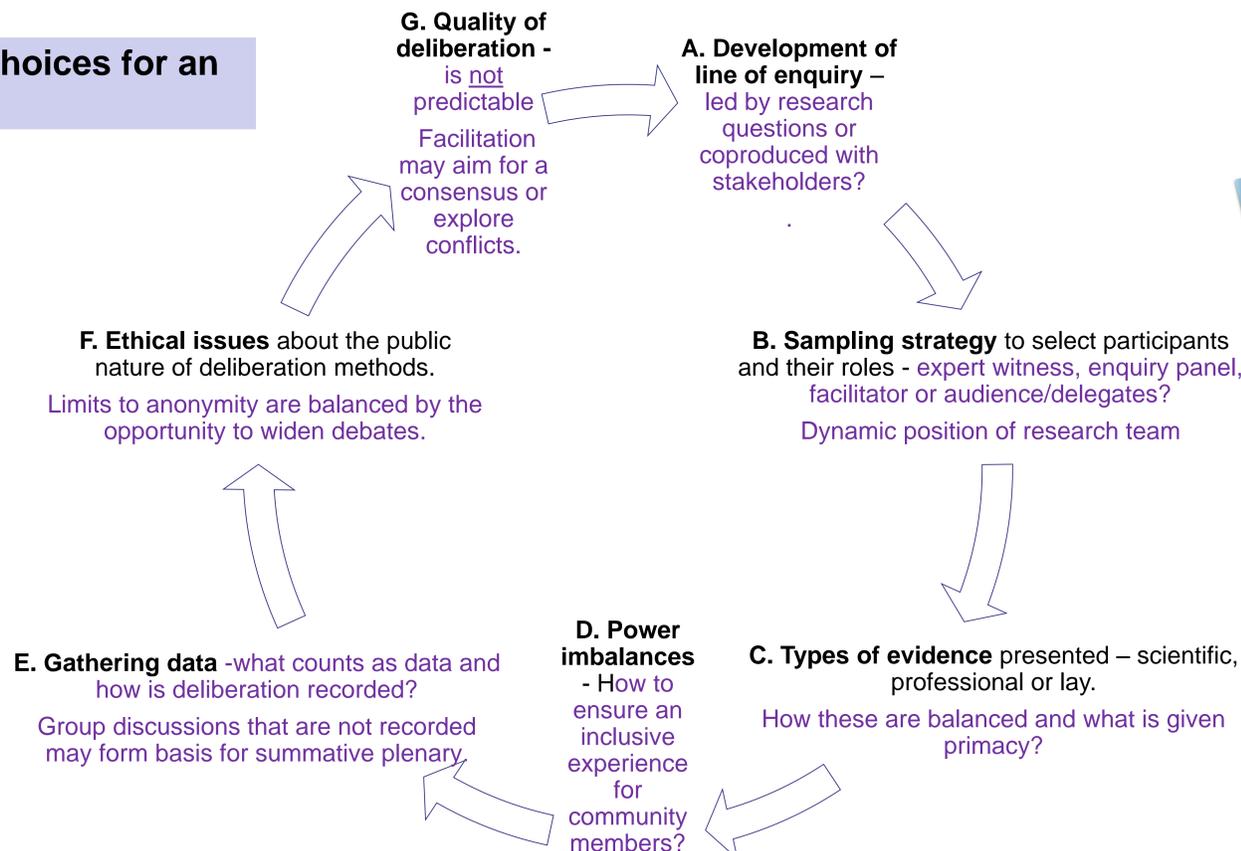
Common features were:

- ✓ incorporation of democratic principles of deliberation
- ✓ valuing experiential and lay evidence
- ✓ in-depth exploration of complex and contested issues
- ✓ enabling actors to question expert testimony
- ✓ testing emergent ideas during the hearing
- ✓ rigorous qualitative analysis of data collected leading to policy-friendly outputs.

Expert hearings - 3 examples from public health research

- A series of expert hearings conducted for a qualitative study into lay people's roles in public health (NIHR SDO 08/1716/206) [3].
 - *Highlights: community activists included as expert witnesses, public involvement in developing the lines of enquiry, and lay representation on the enquiry panel. New contested issues emerged through debate eg remuneration of lay health workers.*
 - An expert hearing bringing together national and local stakeholders as part of a systematic review on peer education/support in prisons (NIHR HSDR 10/2002/13). [4].
 - *Highlights: a single day bringing together wide range of stakeholders from practice, policy and academia across English & Welsh criminal justice system; negative impacts debated alongside the more well-versed positive effects; generated a system-wide view of the implementation of peer-based approaches.*
 - Two hearings conducted to test the meaning and application of evidence collected as part of a What Works Centre for Wellbeing evidence programme.
 - *Highlights: a reality check of systematic review evidence with practice-based examples of what works; calling them public hearings to be more inclusive; strong value-based discussion on wellbeing; public debates on epistemology (whose evidence counts?) and limitations to the formal evidence base.*
- These studies have enabled us to build experience of expert hearings as a research method. In each case, we documented design issues and reflections. This has generated a set of design choices (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Design Choices for an expert hearing



Conclusion

Deliberative methods, such as expert hearings, can produce valuable contextual evidence that illuminates policy-relevant issues, yet such methods are under-utilised in public health research. Deciding the scope of a hearing is important and this method is best used for exploring contested issues rather than gathering information.

There needs to be attention to design issues to secure genuine deliberation on a topic. This set of design choices (FIGURE 1) will support researchers in generating and testing evidence through an expert hearing or similar deliberative workshop.

References

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