



Qualitative evaluation approaches at the level of the 'whole system'

Laura Sheard,
ActEarly Qualitative Evaluation Lead



What do we mean by a 'whole system'?

- What does it broadly include and exclude?
- We can look to the academic literature for a definition but....what does it actually mean for Bradford and Tower Hamlets?
- And what's the shared understanding of this term/ concept amongst the ActEarly group?
- How can we use qualitative methods here to benefit this large programme of research?



Theory: Hawe (2009)

- Thinks of interventions as ‘events in a system’
- Linkages, relationships, feedback loops and interactions among the system’s parts
- Complexity tends to lie in the setting in which the intervention is introduced, and with which it interacts, rather than strictly the intervention itself
- Appreciating that change in complex systems happens non-linearly
- Understanding the pre-intervention context from a qualitative perspective is important

Am J Community Psychol (2009) 43:267–276
DOI 10.1007/s10464-009-9229-9

ORIGINAL PAPER

Theorising Interventions as Events in Systems

Penelope Hawe · Alan Shiell · Therese Riley

Published online: 24 April 2009
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Abstract Conventional thinking about preventive interventions focuses over simplistically on the “package” of activities and/or their educational messages. An alternative is to focus on the dynamic properties of the context into which the intervention is introduced. Schools, communities and worksites can be thought of as complex ecological systems. They can be theorised on three dimensions: (1) their constituent activity settings (e.g., clubs, festivals, assemblies, classrooms); (2) the social networks that connect the people and the settings; and (3) time. An intervention may then be seen as a critical event in the history of a system, leading to the evolution of new structures of interaction and new shared meanings. Interventions impact on evolving networks of person-time-place interaction, changing relationships, displacing existing activities and

Introduction

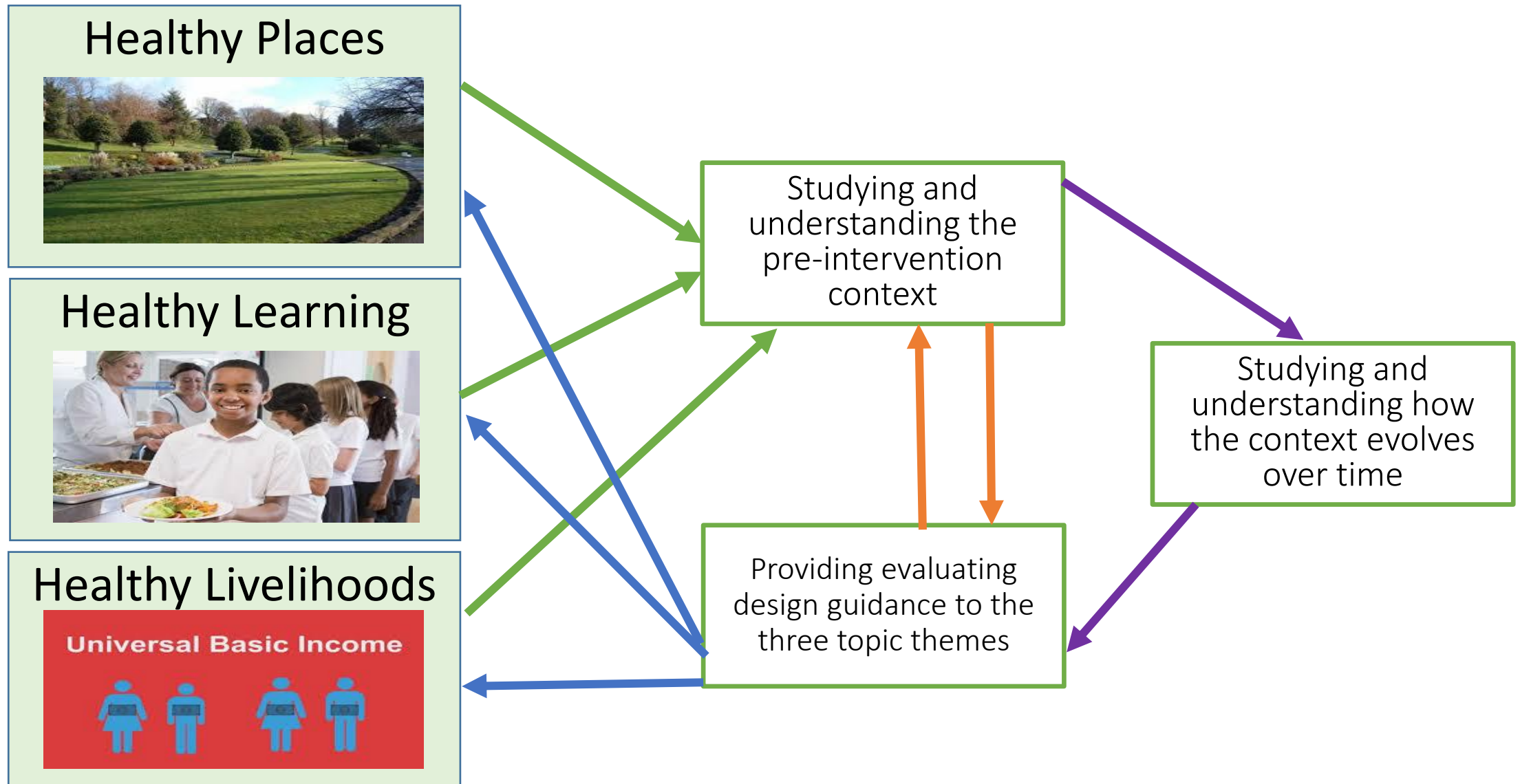
An interchange in the 1980s captures a history that has repeated itself several times since in the field of prevention. When the Stanford Heart Disease prevention project was first being described and discussed, the lead investigators were criticised for using the word “community” to describe their intervention while actually relying on theories of behaviour change from individual psychology to power their thinking. The critics were asking for a cognisance of community and community-change processes (Leventhal et al. 1980). Missing the point completely, the Stanford team replied that given that individuals were the ones having heart attacks, they were happy with the approach they had adopted (Meyer et al. 1980).

How does theory helps us think about our qualitative evaluation approach?

- We are not asking “does this intervention work?” (or even a group of interventions)
- Rather, we want to know, “**what is the impact of this intervention** (or group of interventions) **on the system itself?**”
- “How do these interventions interact with the system?”



What might the qualitative evaluation theme be doing over the five years? Part 1



Part 2A: Longitudinal 'research on research'

- Began as a rapid evaluation during bid preparation
- Qualitative interviews and social network analysis
- Baseline wave of data collection in Autumn 2018
- Core areas of focus were: sustainability, cross disciplinary working, co-production/ citizen science, sense of purpose/mission
- To be repeated every 18-24 months in order to map and analyse change over time
- Want to add documentary analysis of key meetings so that group decisions/ dynamics can be understood
- Rarely have whole systems approach research studies evaluated 'themselves'



Part 2B: Strategic stakeholder research

- Likely to be embedded within the ‘research on research’ study
- Interviews with ‘decision makers’ (policy makers, commissioners, senior leaders etc) across sectors to understand birds eye view of changes happening in the cities, over time



Part 3: First option, longitudinal citizens study

- Cohort of citizens in Bradford/ Tower Hamlets who are followed up over the five years of the project (and slightly beyond)
- Are their lives changing for the better or for the worse? How? Why?
- BUT...there is a risk of a lot of background noise (think: Brexit and macro economics)
- Sampling would need to be especially tight



Part 3: Second option, understanding settings and organisations

- Evaluating particular settings or organisations, such as schools, parks, welfare services, religious settings, community microcosms, local authority departments
- Aim is to understand what impact the suite of ActEarly interventions has had on different parts of the system
- BUT...how do we choose which to focus on?
- We need to remain clear that it is not the individual intervention itself that we are evaluating



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to **Jessica Sheringham** who informed my ideas around this presentation and the direction it took!

