

How do opinion leaders support innovation and change in primary care?

Insights from a realist evaluation in Brazil

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Finding influencers within the crowd.





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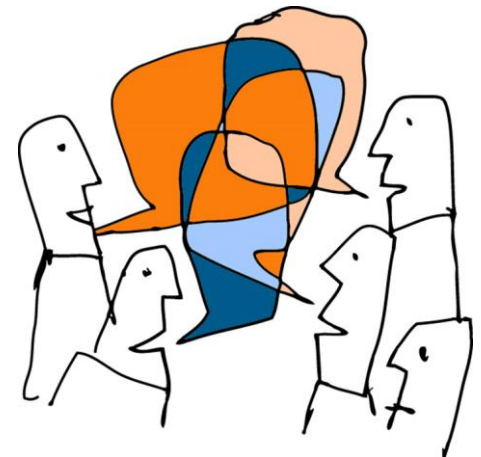
What the study is about

Opinion leaders in the Florianopolis' primary care reform



Opinion leaders: the influentials

- People with credibility and influence within their social groups (Weimann 1994)
- Overall, an effective intervention to change health professionals' behaviour (Flodgren 2019) – but results are hard to predict
- Many theories have suggested how they work (Burt 1987; Mittman 1993; Locock 2001), but little is still known about how specific mechanisms interact with the context to explain the varied outcomes observed



The study setting: Florianopolis, Brazil

- National leader in primary care coverage and quality
- Rapid expansion with little resources generated burnout and defensive attitudes
- A reform was put in place to improve access and teamwork while motivating practitioners to overcome local barriers



The programme: engagement of opinion leaders in support of innovations (an implementation strategy)

Innovations

- Advanced access
- Nursing protocols

Assigned roles of the opinion leaders

- Producing innovations, e.g. adapting protocols or guidelines;
- Providing examples, e.g. presenting experiences in workshops;
- Informal persuasion and peer support, e.g. discussing the innovations in peer meetings.

Changing the hat from manager to researcher

Questions of my practice

- Why the same strategy worked better for some teams?
- Was it the same strategy? What we did wrong and right?

Questions of this study

- How the engagement of opinion leaders in implementation of advanced access and nursing protocols influenced the attitudes and behavior of their peers?
- How the interplay between mechanisms of opinion leadership and context variations determined different outcome patterns?

Outstanding questions

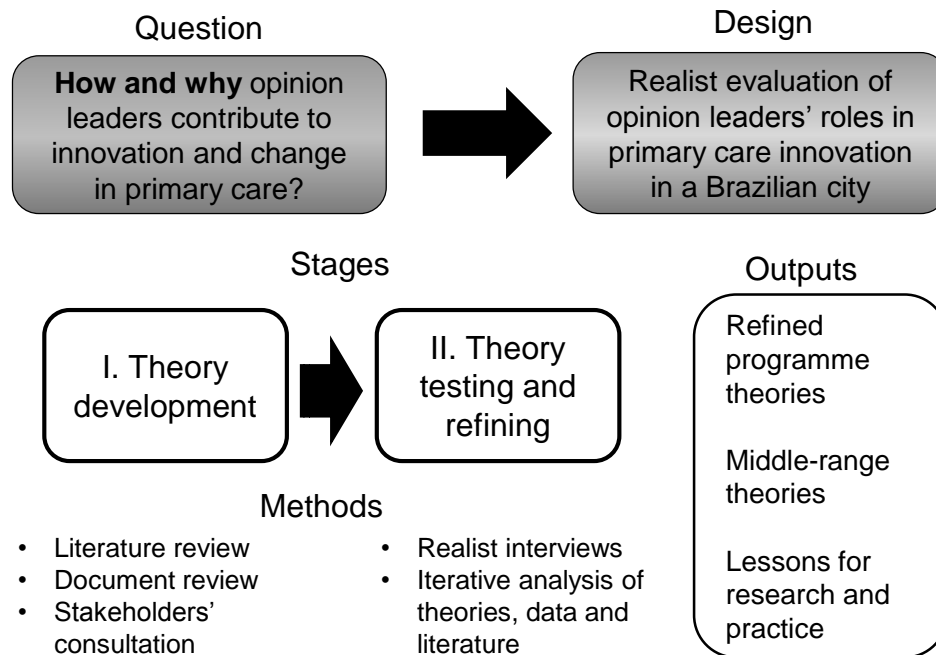
- How to best fit opinion leaders, innovations, target audiences, stages of implementation, intended purposes?
- How to harness their influence while preserving their credibility?

What I did (and how)

A theory-driven, realist evaluation



Study design



Constructing realist data

Stakeholders

- The presentation of advanced access experiences in workshops aimed to show the feasibility of that innovation and reduce fantasies and fear

Literature

- Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises the observers' beliefs about their capabilities (Bandura 1988)

Initial programme theory

- Disseminating the experiences of opinion leaders with innovations will show the feasibility and advantages of the innovation, **reduce uncertainty** and encourage **adoption trials**, provided that such opinion leaders are perceived by their peers as **similar** to themselves

Making sense of the data

Detailing the context (perceived advantages)

- *For those who have already understood and want to modify, the experience of the other, "wow, did you succeed there?" [worked], **because he already wanted to change.***

Alternative mechanism (avoidance of social sanctions)

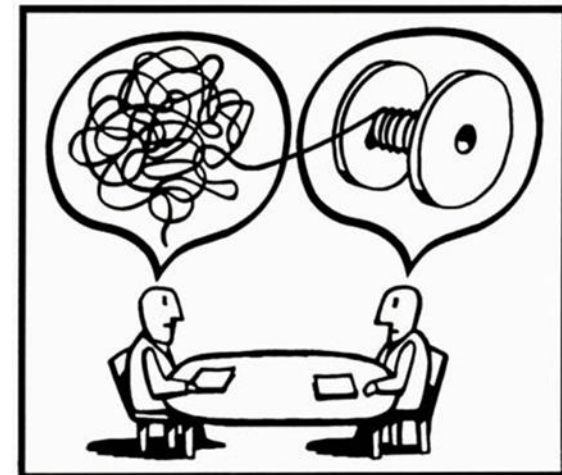
- *I'm not entirely sure whether people actually changed their conception or if simply by seeing all the people around them disagreeing with them, **they did not want to feel bad about it.***

Explaining negative outcomes (sense of unfairness)

- *... avoid the situation of saying, "Ah, but why don't you guys do it, we're doing it, it's so cool, it's easy," no, that can generate **a sense of being called a vagabond**, of being despised, and the person creates resistance.*

What I found

Refined theories and selected findings



Three programme theories

1. Recognising opinion leaders and assigning responsibilities to them in implementation promote buy-in and support to innovations

- Mechanisms: **satisfaction** and **ownership**

2. Involving opinion leaders in implementation improves the credibility and acceptability of innovations

- Mechanisms: **trust** and **belongingness**

3. The experience of opinion leaders with innovations influence the adoption behaviour of their colleagues in various directions

- Mechanisms: **confidence** and **conformity**

Trust based on informal relationships is a core mechanism of opinion leadership

Opinion leaders mobilised a sense of social obligation and reciprocity associated with relationships of respect and cooperation with their peers.

"It's the influence by the subjective contact, by the relationships. It's not an imposing leadership. It is a leadership that is together in the informal spaces, that stands together with the peers, that has affective ties beyond the work. And then you can say, 'Come on, let's do it, what does it cost to start this'."

Perceived similarity of the opinion leader is a key context mediator

‘One of us’

“It is a problem for the manager who visits the clinics; he is not identified as part of the group.”

‘Just like me’

“I think the smaller the gulf between who is dictating and who is going to have to follow the rules, the greater the chance of success.”

‘In the same boat’

“People see that a colleague who has a similar reality ... manages to develop the work, people realize that maybe they can do that”.

Opinion leaders may promote behaviour change through ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ normative influence

Soft or aligned influence is felt as self-driven and leads to sustained change

- Mechanism: social identity / belongingness

Hard or coercive influence is felt as imposed and leads to superficial change

- Mechanism: conformity / compliance

“I’m not entirely sure whether people actually changed their conception or if simply by seeing all the people around them disagreeing with them, they did not want to feel bad about it.”

The recognition of opinion leaders have specific effects in the innovation process

- The collaboration with managers improved the systems' capacity
- Recognition changed their group status and jeopardized credibility
- Perception of favouritism generated opponent leaders

There is a trade-off between engaging and spoiling opinion leaders

- The same engagement in innovation that turns opinion leaders into a resource for implementation also brings changes to their influential role
- Mobilising opinion leaders beyond what they would naturally do unleashes contradictory effects across levels of the system

No single social theory fully explains opinion leadership

- My findings were better explained by a combination of perspectives ranging from social psychology to organisational theory
- The middle-range theorisation offered an operational solution to combining theoretical perspectives into testable propositions
- The mechanisms of opinion leadership were nuanced (more dimmers than triggers), highly context-sensitive, and recurrent

“So you need to have the practice, people need to believe in that, see how it works, have people they believe and are close to them, to make them believe that it works...”

Meaning of the study

Key messages





Study limitations

- Limited view of the literature
- One-off, retrospective interviews
- Low participation of target individuals
- Lack of objective data on outcomes
- My position as ex-insider

What this study adds

- Clarifies specific processes triggered by the **recognition** of opinion leaders, including system-level and recurrent effects
- Highlights the role of **trust** based on informal relationships and perceived similarity of the opinion leader as key determinants of influence
- Develops a more **nuanced** range of explanation, e.g. the distinct outcomes of soft and hard normative influence, the processes involved in resistance
- Demonstrates the **fit** of realist evaluation and middle-range theorisation to develop current knowledge about opinion leaders

Future research

- The identification and recognition of opinion leaders should be defined as a **component** of future interventions, with specific strategies and outcomes.
- Studies should assess other **outcomes** beyond individual behaviour change, e.g. motivation, work commitment, buy-in. Analysing negative outcomes, in particular, may improve our understanding of opinion leadership
- Future studies of opinion leaders should adopt a **multi-theoretical** perspective and use methods that allow analysis of a contingent, agency-based, and cross-level phenomenon
- This was an **hypotheses**-eliciting study; some propositions could be tested in future studies, and some theoretical links could be further developed

Future practice

- Think twice before choosing an opinion leader intervention; clarify the purpose, carefully design the **initial stages**; consider the acceptable **balance** between harnessing their contribution and preserving their credibility ('domesticating' opinion leaders can pay off through system-level effects)
- Understand and draw upon the local networks of **relationships** when designing interventions, e.g. including senior workers as key informants and research collaborators, consider existing groups as spaces of influence, involve natural opinion leaders and potential opponents
- Include **ordinary** practitioners as opinion leaders, protecting their clinical work and allowing them to self-direct the influence process, to preserve and reinforce trust and social identity processes

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Thank you for coming