

The growing contribution of qualitative evidence synthesis in Cochrane Reviews

The Problem

Systematic reviews have been criticised for taking an artificially narrow view of the available evidence on a given issue. Studies which focus on evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention in an unbiased way may inadvertently privilege not only a particular methodological perspective, but also prioritise the perspective of trialists and intervention providers above those affected by the intervention. We argue that, by including qualitative evidence, systematic reviews can address some of this bias and include more diverse perspectives on a given problem in a systematic and methodologically robust way.

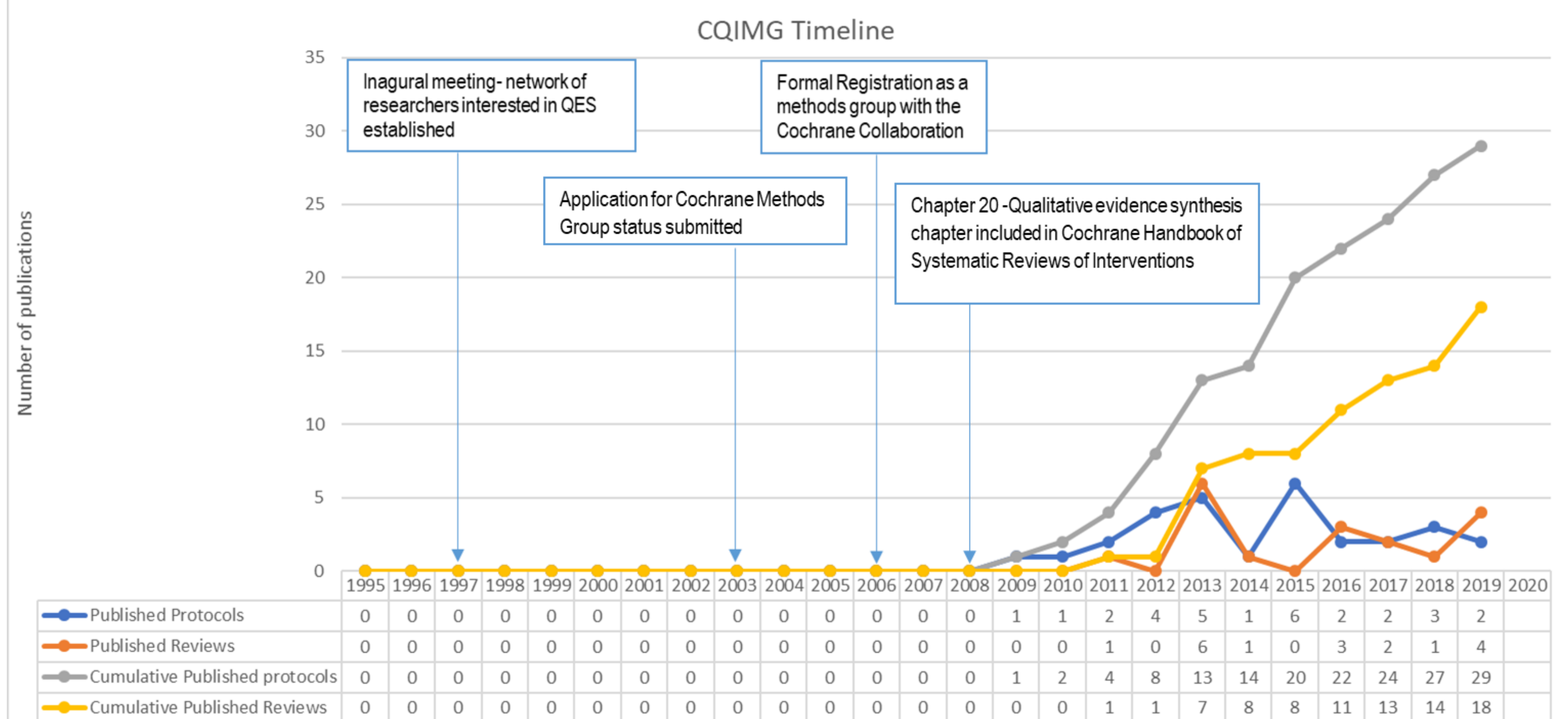
Methods

We identified the methodological characteristics of Cochrane reviews and protocols which include (or plan to include) qualitative evidence, summarising key characteristics. We conducted a constant comparative analysis of their commonalities and differences in terms of their research questions, the populations included, and their methods of synthesis.

Key Results

Incorporating qualitative evidence has added value to Cochrane Reviews by:

1. helping users of the review to understand the complexities of implementation and the acceptability, or otherwise, of interventions which may explain, for example, people's willingness to adhere to treatment.
2. enabling review authors to understand possible causes of heterogeneity.



Perspectives privileged in Qualitative Evidence Syntheses (QES) include

- Those of patients, carers and health professionals
- Those of the research community (only once - along with other stakeholders)
- One protocol 'co-produced' by researchers working with stakeholders

Analytic methods

- QES frequently provide evidence about "factors affecting successful" implementation
- Several 'pilot' reviews demonstrate the utility of new methods in Cochrane Reviews
- 'Mixed methods' reviews use theories generated in QES as an empirical basis for exploring heterogeneity between trials

Diverse perspectives and methods: how the inclusion of qualitative evidence is enhancing Cochrane reviews

Thomas J, Cargo M, Booth A, Flemming K, Harden A, Garside R, Pantoja T, Noyes J
Cochrane Qualitative & Implementation Methods Group