Making psychological theory useful for implementing evidence based practice: a consensus approach

S Michie, M Johnston, C Abraham, R Lawton, D Parker, A Walker, on behalf of the “Psychological Theory” Group

Background: Evidence-based guidelines are often not implemented effectively with the result that best health outcomes are not achieved. This may be due to a lack of theoretical understanding of the processes involved in changing the behaviour of healthcare professionals. This paper reports the development of a consensus on a theoretical framework that could be used in implementation research. The objectives were to identify an agreed set of key theoretical constructs for use in (1) studying the implementation of evidence based practice and (2) developing strategies for effective implementation, and to communicate these constructs to an interdisciplinary audience.

Methods: Six phases of work were conducted to develop a consensus: (1) identifying theoretical constructs; (2) simplifying into construct domains; (3) evaluating the importance of the construct domains; (4) interdisciplinary evaluation; (5) validating the domain list; and (6) piloting interview questions. The contributors were a “psychological theory” group (n = 18), a “health services research” group (n = 13), and a “health psychology” group (n = 30).

Results: Twelve domains were identified to explain behaviour change: (1) knowledge, (2) skills, (3) social/professional role and identity, (4) beliefs about capabilities, (5) beliefs about consequences, (6) motivation and goals, (7) memory, attention and decision processes, (8) environmental context and resources, (9) social influences, (10) emotion regulation, (11) behavioural regulation, and (12) nature of the behaviour.

Conclusions: A set of behaviour change domains agreed by a consensus of experts is available for use in implementation research. Applications of this domain list will enhance understanding of the behaviour change processes inherent in implementation of evidence-based practice and will also test the validity of these proposed domains.
success of future implementation research is likely to be enhanced by applying psychological explanations of behaviour change rather than models that simply predict behaviour. Consequently, a useful first step would be to identify those theories and component parts of theories—that is, theoretical “constructs” that relate to behaviour change. These theories are likely to identify opportunities and methods for intervention.

A previous theory simplification exercise by leading psychological theorists Fishbein,11 Bandura,12 Triandis,13 Kanfer,14 and Becker15 led to a consensus on constructs relevant to HIV research on behaviour. However, it is not clear how this consensus was reached or how relevant these constructs might be for research on the implementation of EBP. Furthermore, the framework developed by Fishbein et al16 was published for a psychology readership. Since research on the implementation of EBP is frequently conducted by non-psychologists, it would be valuable to make such a framework accessible to non-psychologists.

This paper presents the method and results of a project which aimed to identify an agreed set of key theoretical constructs for use in (1) studying the implementation of EBP and (2) developing strategies for effective implementation, and to communicate these constructs to an interdisciplinary audience.

METHODS

Contributors

Three groups of experts were identified and were invited to contribute to the project.

As well as the main working group of health psychology theorists, two further groups played distinctive roles in refining and validating the findings: a multidisciplinary group was asked to give feedback on the utility of the approach to health services research, and a psychological group to carry out a backward validation exercise.

Health psychology theorists

Health psychology theorists (theory group) with an interest in theoretical approaches to implementation research and behaviour change had the task of identifying theoretical constructs and reaching a consensus about how related theoretical constructs are best grouped into categories or “domains”. This psychological “theory group” comprised 18 UK health psychologists with a range of research interests in organisational, clinical, social and public health psychology. One third of the group had experience of working as clinical or organisational consultants within the NHS.

Health services researchers

Health services researchers involved in implementation research were included to give critical feedback on the proposed list of construct domains. The “health service research (HSR) group” comprised 16 implementation researchers from an international research collaboration funded by the UK Medical Research Council. It comprised three general practitioners, one public health specialist, two dentists, one pharmacist, three statisticians, one health service researcher, three sociologists, and two psychologists. Three were from the Ottawa Health Research Institute in Canada and one was from the Centre for Quality of Care Research, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Health psychologists

Health psychologists without a specific expertise in theory, implementation research or behaviour change were included as a validation exercise. The “health psychology (HP) group” comprised 30 delegates at a national health psychology conference.

Procedure

The work was carried out in a series of five meetings, with intervening homework tasks, between May 2003 and July 2004. The procedural steps are summarised in fig. 1. They were planned and facilitated by the first two authors and records were kept of all meetings and tasks. There were six stages to the work:

- identifying theories and theoretical constructs (theory group);
- simplifying into theoretical domains (theory group);
- evaluating the importance of the theoretical domains (theory group);
- interdisciplinary evaluation (theory group with HSR group);
- validating the domain list (HP group); and
- pilot interview questions (theory group alone and then with HSR group).

Identifying theories and theoretical constructs (theory group);

In an initial brainstorming session, participants identified as many psychological theories and theoretical constructs as possible that were relevant to EBP implementation. Theoretical constructs were defined as component parts of...
Theorising the importance of the theoretical domains (theory group)

Following the second meeting, participants individually evaluated the list of theoretical domains for coherence, for overlapping constructs, and for relevant constructs that had been omitted from the list generated in the first stage. This fed into discussions in two independent subgroups of the theory group and then a plenary discussion, which generated an agreed list of domains encompassing the set of theories and constructs.

Interdisciplinary evaluation (theory group with HSR group)

The theoretical domains were evaluated in relation to their utility to health service researchers, particularly in relation to evaluating behaviour change interventions. Domains were ranked in importance by assessing which were essential, and comparing and matching the domains with a list of factors influencing behaviour that had been generated by a group of leading psychologists in the USA.16

Validating the domain list (HP group)

Having simplified the list of constructs into domains, a “backward validation” exercise was undertaken whereby participants were provided with the list of domains and asked to identify theories and constructs reflecting the content of each domain. Each of the 30 HPs did this individually. In order to identify the key constructs within each of the domains, four groups were then each given three of the domains and asked to agree the three most important constructs in each domain.

Pilot interview questions (theory group alone and then with HSR group)

Both the theory group and the HSR group were asked to generate interview questions that would (a) assess the nature of behaviour change required to achieve a recommended change in healthcare practice and (b) identify the domain of theoretical constructs relevant to understanding the behaviour change processes necessary to achieve the desired behaviour. These questions were designed to assist implementation researchers and service managers in identifying behaviour change explanations and processes relevant to desired behaviour change. Both open and closed questions were included.

Agreed questions were then piloted in role plays by the theory group and the HSR group. Refined questions were field tested in interviews with healthcare professionals and service managers involved in implementation of EBP. Interviewees were identified and interviewed by members of the theory group. A list of the interviews is given in box 2.

Feedback on the utility of these interviews in identifying what might be changed in implementing specific guidelines was then considered by members of the theory group and resulted in an amended set of interview questions.

RESULTS

Identifying theories and theoretical constructs

128 explanatory constructs drawing on 33 psychological theories were identified (see Appendix 1).

Simplifying into theoretical domains

Of the 128 constructs, 17 were prioritised as key constructs relevant to interdisciplinary research into understanding and changing behaviour and 14 constructs were prioritised as particularly relevant to changing the behaviour of health-care professionals. The latter were: reinforcement/reward/incentives/perceived contingent reward; perceived control/self-efficacy; intention; action planning/implementation...
There was no domain dealing with “cognitive processes”. “Nature of behaviour” could provide great guidance. “Goal intention” required further clarification.

“Physical environment” was ambiguous in relation to its inclusion of “antecedents” e.g. cues, stimulus conditions, priming. “Goal intention” required further clarification. “Nature of behaviour” could provide great guidance on the dimensions on which desired behaviours might vary. There was no domain dealing with “cognitive processes” e.g. memory.

Checking against the theories and theoretical constructs identified in stage 1, it was agreed that two further construct domains were required: “memory, attention and decision processes” and “beliefs about EBP/guidelines”. The latter included professionals’ beliefs about guidelines—for example, about their origin, identity and time scale of implementation.

### Box 2 Pilot interviews

- Two GPs about implementation of National Service Frameworks for coronary heart disease.
- Two Research and Development leads
  - Introduction of an algorithm to assist medical staff in assessing deep vein thrombosis risk.
  - Implementation of a care of the dying integrated pathway.
- Two midwives
  - National Institute of Clinical Excellence guideline re cardiotocography monitoring.
  - Ward based guideline re ruptured membranes.
- Researcher in Department of Nursing and Midwifery investigating the implementation of an integrated care pathway for community mental health teams.
- GP/implementation researcher re guideline to ensure diabetic retinopathy screening in primary care.

### Interdisciplinary evaluation

Discussion of the utility of the domain list for health service researchers led to further refinement. The interdisciplinary group considered that “beliefs about EBP/guidelines” was part of a broader domain of “social/professional role and identity”. The “nature of the behaviour” domain was accorded a different order to the rest, as it describes the dependent variable rather than the influencing factors. The constructs assigned to “social/professional role and identity” and to “memory, attention and decision processes” were agreed by the authors after the domains were refined.

### Validating the domain list

Checking that the domain list accurately reflected underlying theoretical constructs through backward validation showed that the theories and theoretical constructs allocated to the domains by the HP group corresponded closely to those generated at stage 1. This provided reassuring validation of the representativeness of the agreed list of domains. However, some additional constructs were identified for each domain.

The constructs assigned to domains, including those added by the validation exercise, are listed in the second column of table 1. The theoretical domains identified by Fishbein et al. are listed (in parentheses) alongside these domains in the first column.

### Piloting interview questions

The questions developed to identify the behaviour change processes likely to be most relevant to implementing specific examples of EBP are shown in the third column of table 1. These were discussed and agreed and subsequently underwent further modification as a result of feedback from in-group role plays and field testing with healthcare professionals and managers. Field interviews provided valuable insights into which domains were most relevant to implementation of particular recommended behaviours and also suggested possible intervention strategies. An illustrative interview is shown in box 3.

### Evaluating the importance of the theoretical domains

Concerns with the above list included:

- “Social environment” might be better subdivided into organisational and individual influences.
- “Physical environment” was ambiguous in relation to its inclusion of “antecedents” e.g. cues, stimulus conditions, priming.
- “Goal intention” required further clarification.
- “Nature of behaviour” could provide great guidance on the dimensions on which desired behaviours might vary.
- There was no domain dealing with “cognitive processes” e.g. memory.

Checking against the theories and theoretical constructs identified in stage 1, it was agreed that two further construct domains were required: “memory, attention and decision processes” and “beliefs about EBP/guidelines”. The latter included professionals’ beliefs about guidelines—for example, about their origin, identity and time scale of implementation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains*</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Do they know about the guideline?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge about condition/scientific rationale</td>
<td>What do they think the guideline says?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Schemas-mindsets-illness representations</td>
<td>What do they think the evidence is?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Procedural knowledge</td>
<td>Do they know they should be doing x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do they know why they should be doing x?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Skills (Skills)</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Do they know how to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Competence/ability/skill assessment</td>
<td>How easy or difficult do they find performing x to the required standard in the required context?</td>
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<td>Practice/skills development</td>
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<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Social/professional role and identity (Self-standards)</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>What is the purpose of the guidelines?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional identity/boundaries/role</td>
<td>What do they think about the credibility of the source?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group/social identity</td>
<td>Do they think guidelines should determine their behaviour?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social/group norms</td>
<td>Is doing x compatible or in conflict with professional standards/identity?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Alienation/organisational commitment</td>
<td>(prompts: moral/ethical issues, limits to autonomy)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Would this be true for all professional groups involved?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) Beliefs about capabilities (Self-efficacy)</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>How difficult or easy is it for them to do x? (prompt re. internal and external capabilities/constraints)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Control—of behaviour and material and social environment</td>
<td>What problems have they encountered?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perceived competence</td>
<td>What would help them?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-confidence/professional confidence</td>
<td>How confident are they that they can do x despite the difficulties?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>How capable are they of maintaining x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>How well equipped/comfortable do they feel to do x?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Beliefs about consequences (Anticipated outcomes/attitude)</td>
<td>Outcome expectancies</td>
<td>What do they think will happen if they do x? (prompt re themselves, patients, colleagues and the organisation; positive and negative, short term and long term consequences)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anticipated regret</td>
<td>What are the costs of x and what are the costs of the consequences of x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appraisal/evaluation/review</td>
<td>Do they think will happen if they do not do x? (prompt)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td>Do benefits of doing x outweigh the costs?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>How will they feel if they do/don't do x? (prompt)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contingencies</td>
<td>Does the evidence suggest that doing x is a good thing?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reinforcement/punishment/consequences</td>
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<td>Incentives/rewards</td>
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<td>Beliefs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unrealistic optimism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Salient events/sensitisation/critical incidents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Characteristics of outcome expectancies—physical, social, emotional; sanctions/rewards, proximal/distal, valued/not valued, probable/improbable, salient/not salient, perceived risk/threat</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) Motivation and goals (Intention)</td>
<td>Intention; stability of intention/variability of intention</td>
<td>How much do they want to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goals (autonomous, controlled)</td>
<td>How much do they feel they need to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goal target/setting</td>
<td>Are there other things they want to do or achieve that might interfere with x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goal priority</td>
<td>Does the guideline conflict with others?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Are there incentives to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Commitment</td>
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<td>Distal and proximal goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transtheoretical model and stages of change</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Memory, attention and decision processes</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>Is x something they usually do?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>Will they think to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attention control</td>
<td>Will they remember to do x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>How will they decide not to do x? Why? (prompt: competing tasks, time constraints)</td>
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<td>(8) Environmental context and resources (Environmental constraints)</td>
<td>Resources/material resources (availability and management)</td>
<td>To what extent do physical or resource factors facilitate or hinder x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Environmental stressors</td>
<td>Are there competing tasks and time constraints?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Person × environment interaction</td>
<td>Are the necessary resources available to those expected to undertake x?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of task environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9) Social influences (Norms)</td>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>To what extent do social influences facilitate or hinder x? (prompts: peers, manager, other professional groups, patients, relatives)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social/group norms</td>
<td>Will they observe others doing x (i.e. have role models)?</td>
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<td>Organisational development</td>
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<td>Professional boundaries/roles</td>
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<td>Management commitment</td>
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<td>Supervision</td>
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<td>Inter-group conflict</td>
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<td>Champions</td>
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<td>Social comparisons</td>
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<td>Identity; group/social identity</td>
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<td>Organisational commitment/alienation</td>
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<td>Feedback</td>
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<td>Conflict—competing demands, conflicting roles</td>
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and theory development on planning in behaviour change (for example, Gollwitzer and Brandstätter). However, Fishbein et al. suggested that three domains were necessary and sufficient prerequisites for the performance of a specified behaviour—namely, (1) a strong intention to perform the behaviour; (2) no environmental constraints that make it impossible to perform the behaviour; and (3) the skills necessary to perform the behaviour. The remaining five of Fishbein et al.’s constructs were seen as determinants of intention strength.

Thus, our 12 domains identify key constructs but not the causal processes that link theoretical constructs in a coherent explanation of behavioural regulation or behavioural change. Our domain list provides a guide to relevant explanations of current behaviours and key prompts to behaviour change, rather than an articulated theoretical explanation of a particular set of behaviours.

Both Fishbein et al. and our own group emphasised the need to clarify the nature of the behaviour involved. Yet evidence-based guidelines may give poor specificity in defining the necessary behaviours. Unless there is precision in describing and defining the behaviour that needs to be changed, it will not be possible to identify construct domains that might explain the underlying behavioural processes and the associated opportunities for change.

The interview questions in column 3 of table 1 illustrate the kind of explanation that might be investigated in each domain. Using these questions to explore a behaviour will ensure that no important domain is overlooked, and the results may assist in explaining the behaviour and in designing a behaviour change intervention.

The domains may also provide insights that lead to greater understanding of the processes underlying existing non-theoretically based interventions. For example, educational reminders have been found to help to reduce the frequency of GPs ordering lumbar spine and knee radiographs. There are several processes that could explain the success of this

### Box 3 An illustrative interview

An interview with a midwife about attempts to reduce routine cardiotocograph (ctg) monitoring during delivery revealed that there were two relevant explanations of the lack of behaviour change. The first was beliefs about consequences. Midwives, particularly those with many years experience, believed that there were substantial risks to mother and baby associated with non-use of ctg monitoring despite evidence indicating otherwise. The second domain that represented a barrier to change was memory, attention and decision processes. The midwife regarded ctg monitoring as an automatic routine activity, cued by the presence of the ctg monitor in the delivery suite. A suggestion was made that, if ctg monitors were removed and accessing one necessitated deliberative processing and effort, the use of ctg monitoring would decrease. This example suggests a two pronged approach to the successful implementation of this evidence: (1) intervene to change beliefs about the consequences of not using the ctg and (2) remove the cue to action provided by the presence of the ctg in the delivery suite.
intervention: the reminders may provide information that enhance knowledge; they may act as cues, creating a facilitative environmental context which triggers behaviour, they may influence attention and memory; they may serve as persuasive communications which lead to changes in beliefs about the consequences of ordering these radiographs; they may function as a social sanction or as contingent feedback, further influencing beliefs in consequences; or they may remind the recipient that other doctors behave differently and may not approve of ordering these radiographs—that is, instigating a process of social influence. Enhancing the understanding of underlying processes will give guidance for developing effective interventions.

While potentially useful, the domain list cannot comprehensively identify all factors that may impede the implementation of EBP. However, barriers that are not obviously psychological such as legal or physical constraints may be mediated by psychological processes represented by our domain list—for example, “beliefs about consequences”, “social/professional role and identity”, and “environmental context and resources”. The use of this explanatory domain list may allow the selection and combination of effective behaviour change techniques and methods, based on a century of research, to improve implementation of EBP.22 23

**Key messages**

- The implementation of evidence-based practice (EBP) depends on human behaviour.
- Interventions to improve the implementation of EBP have had only modest effects.
- Interventions may be improved by drawing on theories of human behaviour.
- Psychology has produced a huge number of such theories, many of which overlap.
- This project aims to simplify and integrate the psychological theories and theoretical constructs of relevance to EBP.
- A consensus approach produced 12 theoretical “domains” as an integrative framework for studying the implementation of EBP.
- The project also produced sets of questions based on this framework that can be used in identifying and understanding problems in EBP.

**REFERENCES**


**APPENDIX 1 PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES IDENTIFIED IN STAGE 1**

**MOTIVATION THEORIES**

- Theory of planned behaviour (+ theory of reasoned action, protection motivation theory, health belief model)
- Social cognitive theory
- Social learning theory
- Social comparison theory
- Cognitive adaptation theory
- Social identity theory
- Elaboration likelihood model
- Goal theories
- Intrinsic motivation theories

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● Self-determination theory
● Attribution theory
● Decision making theories (e.g. social judgment theory, “fast and frugal” model, systematic versus heuristic decision making)
● Fear arousal theory

More information about these theories is available from Myers.24

**ACTION THEORIES**

- Learning theory
- Operant theory
- Modelling
- Self-regulation theory
- Implementation theory/automotive model
- Goal theory
- Volitional control theory
- Social cognitive theory
- Cognitive behaviour therapy
- Transtheoretical model
- Social identity theory

**ORGANISATION THEORIES**

- Effort-reward imbalance
- Demand-control model
- Diffusion theory
- Group theory (e.g. group minority theory)
- Decision making theory
- Goal theory
- Social influence
- Person situation contingency models

**APPENDIX 2 GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

**Framework**: a structure composed of parts framed together.

**Theory**: a system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena.

**Theoretical construct**: a concept specially devised to be part of a theory.

**Domain**: an area of interest; a sphere of thought, action or knowledge.

**Theoretical domain**: a group of related theoretical constructs.

**Cue**: a stimulus or signal to perception, articulation, or other physiological response.

**Stimulus**: an event (whether internal or external to the organism) which gives rise to a reaction.

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