Response to Guy Johnson and Nicholas Pleace's article 'How Do We Measure Success in Homelessness Services? : Critically Assessing the Rise of the Homelessness Outcomes Star'

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Introduction

In their article in the June 2016 edition of this journal, Johnson and Pleace articulate a number of critiques of the Homelessness Outcomes Star (HOS) on grounds ranging from its theoretical underpinnings to the supporting research and guidance for use. However, it is important to note that the authors have themselves not used the tool with service users or received training in the use of the tool. Nor have they carried out any primary research on the use of the tool by service users, workers, managers or commissioners. Their article is based on a literature review and their own opinions. Unfortunately, this has led to a number of important misunderstandings relating to the tool and how it is used, and as a result the analysis and conclusions reached are fundamentally flawed. The purpose of this response is to highlight and correct those misunderstandings.

The Star Does Not Pre-determine Service User Goals

Johnson and Pleace argue that because the HOS consists of a number of pre-determined outcome areas (the outcome domains which form the points on the Star), it is paternalistic and does not allow individuals to set their own goals. In fact, an intrinsic part of the tool is an Action Planning table which the person and their worker use to jointly identify and agree the specific goals they wish to achieve and the steps to take towards them. The outcome areas were chosen following extensive consulta-

tion and piloting with practitioners and service users in over 15 organisations over a three-year period. These areas provide a framework for the conversation about goals, helping to ensure that all key areas of life are covered but not pre-determining what individual goals should be in each of those areas. The Journey of Change and scales provide a structure for thinking about progress and some objectivity in measuring it, but a lot of care is taken to ensure that the definitions are broad enough to allow for a wide range of needs and preferences. For example, in the Meaningful Use of Time domain, 10 on the scale means "You are engaged in regular activities that work for you". This is hardly a call to become an "economically productive and socially engaged consumer" as Johnson and Pleace imply (p.37).

The Star Is Not Based on an Individual Pathology Analysis

Johnson and Pleace claim that because the Star focuses on individual agency, it denies the importance of structural factors such as poverty, disadvantage and inequality in the creation of homelessness. In fact, they go further to argue that the HOS is built on an understanding of homelessness that puts individual pathology at the centre. This analysis confuses causes and solutions.

Our understanding is that at a societal level homelessness is indeed the result of a complex set of social factors including poverty, disadvantage and lack of affordable housing which impact on individual circumstances and capabilities in complex and varied ways. However, for the individual who is now homeless, and who is in receipt of a support service aimed at enabling them to find and sustain a tenancy, the key task at hand is to address the barriers to that happening. As Johnson and Pleace themselves acknowledge (p.44) many homeless people do face barriers to permanent housing beyond the lack of suitable accommodation. Without addressing these barriers, housing solutions are likely to be short-lived. The Star is designed to be used with people who have complex and multiple needs to support them and their worker to create positive change in their lives because that is what the person wants and what the worker is employed to do. Of course it is also important to highlight and address the wider structural factors, but that is a different task requiring different skills and tools.

We do understand the point that is being made, that there is a danger that by focusing on individual agency people feel pathologised. However, extensive piloting of the tool in service delivery settings through a three year development process, followed by ten years of training and supporting people to use the tool, has shown that in the contexts in which the Star is used the focus on individual empowerment is not taken to imply that the individual is in some way at fault. Whilst workers and service users are often sceptical of a new tool and wary of 'putting people in boxes',

once they try the Star in practice the vast majority are engaged and excited by the way in which it supports conversations, gives an overview and highlights change. They do not mistake the focus on individual agency for a diagnosis of individual pathology. The articles cited by Johnson and Pleace (including Peterson *et al.,* 2014 and Harris and Andrews, 2013) make this very clear. For example, Harris and Andrews conclude that the Star gives service users "the opportunity to define their own reality" and "identify their own priorities" (Harris and Andrews 2013, p.2). However, Johnson and Pleace seem to dismiss this independent, empirical research as simply "presenting" the Star as an effective tool (p.37) as if these authors were interested parties marketing the tool rather than independent researchers drawing their own conclusions.

The Star Is a Holistic Tool and the Scales Should Not Be Used in Isolation

Johnson and Pleace look in some detail at the 'Managing Tenancy and Accommodation' scale and its focus on complying with rules and regulations in order to maintain a tenancy. They critique the scale because it paints an image of homeless people "as individuals who have to be made 'housing ready'" arguing that the issues facing homeless people are much more wide-ranging including "boredom, isolation and needs for treatment" rather than just an inability to keep to the rules. This Star fully recognises these needs in the other scales including those on Meaningful Use of Time, Social Networks, Managing Mental Health, and Drugs and Alcohol. The point of the Star is that it aims to identify all possible areas of needs and support conversation and measurement on each. In fact every effort is made not to duplicate issues between the scales because this would lead to item redundancy in the psychometrics and unhelpful repetition for the service users. It is a holistic tool and must be critiqued as a whole. It is not very meaningful to take one of the scales in isolation and argue that issues covered in other scales are ignored. Furthermore, it is the case that for some people who are homeless, not complying with the terms of their tenancy is an issue which puts them at risk of homelessness or limits their ability to progress to more secure forms of accommodation. Including this possibility within the Star does not imply that this is an issue for all homeless people. Part of the strength of the tool is that it allows workers and service users to create a nuanced picture of the domains in which needs exist, what those needs are and how the person is engaging with those needs.

In addition to the above, we do see the need to acknowledge within this scale that the individual may be 'housing ready' but not housed due to lack of available accommodation. This is recognised at scale point 8 which states 'You are able to live in your own place and maintain a tenancy with support, though you may either

be in your own flat or waiting for a flat at this point'. However, the distinction between whether housing is available and whether support is needed could be clearer in this scale. In versions of the Star published more recently, such as the Family Star Plus, this distinction is drawn out more clearly.

The Star Is Not a Self-completion Tool

The HOS is not designed as a self-completion tool as stated by Johnson and Pleace. This is a fundamental and rather surprising misunderstanding given that much is made of the Star's innovative collaborative completion approach in the documents that Johnson and Pleace cite including MacKeith (2011) and Burns *et al*. (2013). Unlike conventional approaches which focus either on the service user perspective (self-completion tools) or the professional perspective (expert tools), the Outcomes Star aims to bring together both perspectives through dialogue to create a more rounded assessment. This overcomes some of the difficulties of self-assessment which Johnson and Pleace highlight (p.43) and also the difficulties of expert assessment which does not sufficiently take into account what matters to the service user or draw on their understanding of their situation. However, this collaborative approach does bring its own challenges, one of which is that because it is a new approach, there are no established criteria for determining the reliability of this kind of tool. This is one of the reasons why, as Johnson and Pleace correctly point out, information about the psychometric properties of the tool has lagged behind its use. This is an issue that we are actively engaged in addressing and substantial progress has been made. Independent studies carried out by Bailey and Kerlin (2015), Battrick, HIlbery and Holloway (2013), Smyth (2014) and Maquire, Johnson, Vostanis and Keats (2010) all report that the HOS showed responsiveness to change. Secondary analysis of the data collected in an independent study that used the HOS alongside another tool showed convergent validity with two other measures. An analysis of HOS data on the Star Online carried out for internal purposes has shown that the HOS has a unidimensional factor structure, good internal consistency, no item redundancy and is responsive to change. Following further testing on inter-rater reliability, these results will be published later this year. An article on the psychometric properties of the most used version of the Star, the Family Star Plus, is now completed and will be published soon.

However, whilst Johnson and Pleace are right to highlight the importance of validation, their analysis reveals a lack of understanding of how the different metrics work. On the one hand, they state that the tool is a self-completion tool, and on the other they quote Killaspy *et al.* (2012) who mis-used the tool as an expert-completion tool and unsurprisingly identified inter-rater reliability issues. Inter-rater reliability is not a relevant concept for self-completion tools as there are no expert 'raters'.

HOS Data Is Meaningful for Service Users, Workers and Managers

Johnson and Pleace question whether the data collected by the HOS is meaningful. Firstly, they argue that the delineation between different stages is not clear and for this reason the data is not meaningful (p.40). We would agree that the Journey of Change and the individual scales are a simplification of a complex reality. However, that does not mean that they do not have utility or that the data collected is not meaningful. Any kind of data collection is ultimately a simplification – the trick is to simplify enough to provide a means of engaging with the complexity but not so much that the meaning and dynamics of the real world are lost. We have always argued that Star data is useful but have never implied that it would give final answers or that it is in itself sufficient information for assessing service effectiveness (Triangle, 2015).

Secondly, they argue that aggregating the readings across all 10 domains of the HOS gives a figure that is difficult to interpret. This is a good point and one which has become more and more evident as Triangle has worked with organisations to support them to draw meaning from their Star data. Whilst we do still use the overall mean as a way of making simple comparisons, the emphasis has now moved to analyses that focus on individual domains and movement between stages on the Journey of Change. Here, the meaning of the numbers is very evident; if 50 service users had a drug or alcohol problem that they were not willing to talk about (i.e. at 1 or 2 on the Drug and Alcohol scale) and 40 of those 50 progressed to 4 or above, the scales clearly define that this means those people are now recognising this as an issue and taking measures to reduce the harm caused by their addiction. Workers and managers have told us that this kind of information is invaluable in monitoring progress.

Finally, it is argued that the lack of specific guidance on how frequently the HOS should be used with service users makes it difficult to compare between services. The timeframe for second completion is not set by Triangle because the Star is used in a wide range of settings and so the implementation must reflect this. We do not encourage benchmarking between services or organisations unless allowance has been made for these kinds of differences.

Motivational Interviewing Is a Separate Technology to the HOS

A key aspect of the critique that Johnson and Pleace make of the Star is that it uses Motivational Interviewing (MI) as an approach to support change. They then go on to question the evidence for the effectiveness of MI and whether it should be applied in some of the contexts in which it is used. This conflates the Star with MI. Although the HOS can be used alongside MI, this is by no means essential and the Star can be used without employing MI techniques. A critique of MI is not a critique

of the HOS. Johnson and Pleace also question whether it is wise to focus on service user motivation in the way that the Star does. However, as they themselves acknowledge, motivation is an important part of the recipe of change. The Star does not imply that it is the only ingredient, but gives it a high prominence because it is an ingredient that the service user has access to.

The Fact that HOS Has Not Turned Back the Tides of Austerity Does Not Mean it Has Failed

Johnson and Pleace point to the fact that the existence of the HOS has not "prevented deep cuts to homelessness services". It is true that politicians like simple 'hard' facts. They want to know that homelessness has been reduced by x% and that £y has been saved in the process. However, in this new field of outcome measurement, we are learning that it is difficult to deliver this kind of information. This is partly because gathering this kind of data is a difficult task and one that most service providers do not have the organisational processes and software to perform. It is partly because these kinds of outcomes are often achieved over timescales that are longer than the politician's attention span or time in power. It is partly because change, as Johnson and Pleace argue, is dependent on wider societal factors that take decades to transform and that service providers have limited power to implement. However, the fact that the HOS engages with these complex realities is an asset not a weakness. It may mean that it does not deliver the silver bullet that everyone wants, but that may be an unrealistic expectation.

As Johnson and Pleace themselves acknowledge, outcome measurement both offers the possibility of benefits to service users, workers, managers and commissioners and is a difficult and complex task. The Outcomes Star aims to steer a course between the extremes of, on the one hand, treating each individual on their own terms and offering no map, structure or means of aggregating, and on the other, simplifying matters so much that the map and measurement bear no relation to the real world. The level of uptake of the Star, the substantial anecdotal evidence and growing body of independent research indicate that whilst it is far from perfect, it is striking that balance reasonably well and quite a lot better than the alternatives. We do not claim, as Johnson and Pleace state (p.37) that the tools are an "unqualified success" but our aim is to continue to improve them and to create new tools and approaches that enable key-work and outcome measurement to be more and more effective. We very much welcome informed, constructive critiques that support this process.

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