

Uses and Applications of Qualitative Research Methods in Policy Evaluations

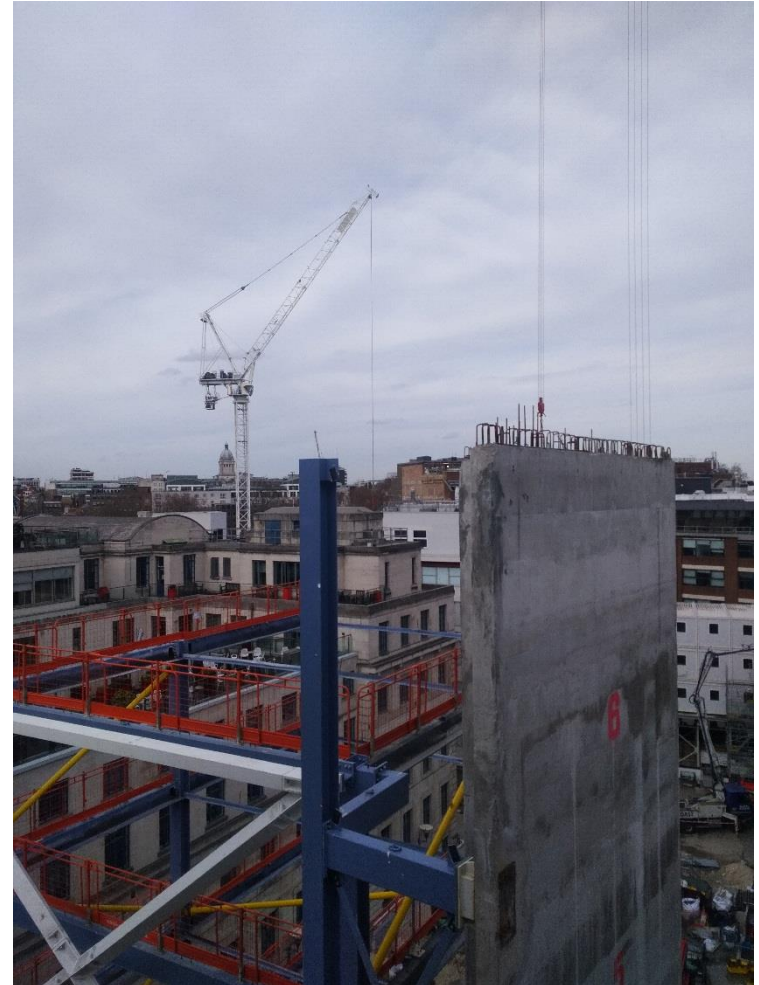
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Today's seminar

- **Part 1: prospective** – what I will be doing at the University of Auckland
- **Part 2: retrospective** - qualitative analysis and causal inference in evaluation (a case study)



Background

- NCRM IVES award to visit the Public Policy Institute (PPI) in conjunction with COMPASS
- Scheme aimed at enabling UK social scientists to engage with scholars internationally, in order to stimulate debate and develop ideas in relation to methodological innovation
- Funds incoming and outgoing visiting scholar awards (www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/IVES/)

Background

- Assistant Professor in Qualitative Research Methodology at the LSE's Department of Methodology / Associate, LSE Cities
- Sociologist / Geographer by background, with a range of interests centred on the urban condition
- Director of the MSc Social Research Methods, specialising in teaching research design and qualitative research methods

Part I: Work programme

Uses and applications of qualitative research methods in policy evaluations using observational designs: a review and synthesis

- *How to conceptualise the integration of qualitative methodologies and data into policy evaluations?*
- *How have qualitative methods been variously deployed in evaluations of policy instruments and interventions using observational designs?*

Motivation

- Instances of tokenism towards qualitative methodologies in ‘mixed-methods’ research concerned with causation
- E.g. Olken’s (2007: 245-6) influential study of reducing corruption in Indonesia includes use of interviews and focus groups, but these are mentioned as an aside in an appendix with little discussion of their analytical role
 - Likewise Posner (2004: 533) mentions the collection of focus group data in his study of the political salience of cultural difference in Zambia, yet the contribution of this data to the overarching absence is not reported

Motivation

- ‘Light touch’ use of qualitative methods at odds with textbook/abstract accounts of the role of qualitative methodologies in mixed-methods studies
- Thinking primarily here about *quantitatively*-driven mixed methods designs
 - How do researchers employing such designs conceptualise the role of qualitative sub-components of their studies?



- Extensive literature on principles for integrating qualitative and quantitative research
- E.g. Small 2011 outlines a conceptual approach to integration of i) data collection and ii) data analysis approaches



i. Data collection (Small 2011: 63-71)

Motivations

- **Confirmation** – verify findings from one mode with findings from another;
- **Complementarity** – one method compensates for weakness of other

Sequencing

- **Sequential designs** – one method of data collection preceded by another for methodological reasons (e.g. understand observed associations or test emergent hypotheses)
- **Concurrent designs** – order of data collection less relevant (e.g. could be trumped by need for full immersion in the field); practicalities (time constraints)

Nesting

- **Nested designs** – esp. interview participants selected as subset of survey respondents (illustration and enhanced interpretation)
- **Non-nested designs** – where obtaining multiple data from same source impractical, unnecessary or unhelpful (e.g. research fatigue)

ii. Data analysis (Small 2011: 71-79)

Independent analyses

- Conventional analyses of data sets collected using different modes

Crossover analysis

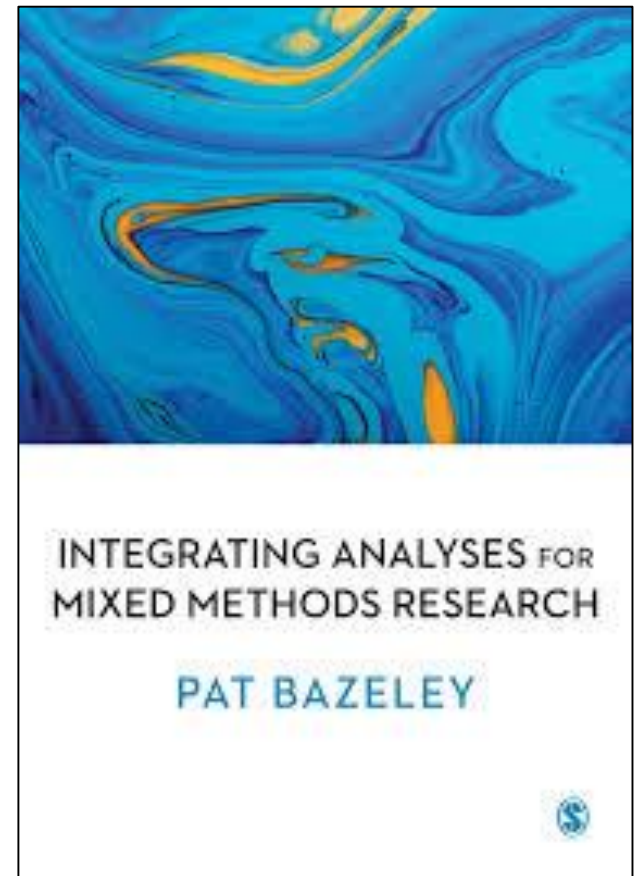
- “[Q]ualitative data are analysed primarily through formal, mathematical, or statistical techniques” (72) and vice-versa (e.g. some forms of content analysis)
 - Most prominently regression-based analyses of small-n or narrative text data—interview or ethnographic data analysed using standard models of analysis for survey data (frequency statistics → statistical regressions) [e.g. ‘computational ethnography’ (Abramson et al 2017) such as ‘ethnoarrays’ or heatmaps]

Integrative analyses

- Multiple analytical techniques for single data source (e.g. social network analysis and conversational analysis of interview data)

Integrating analyses

- Growing interest in specific issue of how to integrate *analyses* (e.g. Bazeley 2017) in mixed-methods studies oriented to ‘a common theoretical or research goal’ (7)



Integrating analyses

*I define integration...in terms of the relationship between methods in reaching a common theoretical or research goal...: **purposeful interdependence** between the different sources, methods, or approaches used is the critical characteristic that distinguishes integrated mixed methods from a monomethod or even a multimethod approach to research. Interdependence speaks to a ‘conversation or debate’ between findings, leading to a ‘negotiated account’ (Bryman 2007: 21), a meaningful two-way exchange of information and inferences between varied types of sources gathered and/or analytic strategies employed during the design and analysis process of a study, without which the component parts cannot fully function in meeting the overall study purpose.*

Bazeley (2017: 7-8 [emphasis in original])

Policy evaluation

- One field that has readily embraced mixed-methods research is social and public policy (Burch and Heinrich 2016), in particular ‘realist’ methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of policy interventions
- This area of ‘experimental and observational methods for policy evaluation’ is one that has consistently been identified in [NCRM Research Needs Consultations](#):
 - E.g. Luff, Wiles and Sturgis (2015: 20) note that among consultees “[t]here was an overarching view expressed that the methods currently being used are not always suitable or sufficiently advanced for the practical and social research situations in which they are implemented” (with particular concerns about a tendency to inappropriately transfer a ‘medical RCT’ model to analyse social and psychological policy interventions)
- The present proposal seeks to review and synthesise multi-strategy approaches to policy evaluation as a means to articulate “re-usable conceptual platforms, common theories drawn on and applied across a wide range of research addressing complex social mechanisms and structures” (ibid 2015: 20)

What will I be doing?

- Reviewing published mixed-methods approaches to realist public policy evaluation that use observational research designs which incorporate a qualitative research component
 - Focus on public health evaluations
 - A purposive review for which I will adopt some tools of systematic reviewing (e.g. specifying search parameters/terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria)
 - *What contribution have qualitative findings made to the broader evaluation? In particular, how have they been used by researchers seeking to draw credible inferences? How have data collection and analysis methods been integrated (e.g. in terms of ‘sequencing’)?*
- Synthesising the review findings with a view to conceptually distinguishing the range of approaches social researchers have taken to harnessing qualitative research
- Upon return to the UK using the materials produced through the study to design a training workshop for early career researchers (as part of the NCRM training programme and/or our own MY530 advanced qualitative methods workshops)
- Looking to foster strong and productive links with colleagues in PPI and COMPASS, and to talk to and learn from as many as possible during my visit!

Part 2: qualitative analysis and causal inference in observational settings (a case study)

- In research in observational settings (e.g. Davis 2013), challenges faced by social researchers attempting to draw credible inferences are well documented
 - *How to assess causal attribution in the absence of controlled experimental evidence?*
- My current research interests in part draw on my involvement in a study where we sought to use qualitative research to precisely help draw credible inferences (Green et al. 2015)
- Used philosophical work of Nancy Cartwright and Eileen Munro (2010) to outline one way of understanding the contribution qualitative research can make to strengthening claims about causal pathways in observational studies

The problem

- Critiques of observational and (quasi-) experimental methods for evaluating complex interventions in complex systems where causality is ‘conjectural and multiple’ (Ragin 2000:15)
- External validity – for policy evaluations, what can we say about whether it will work elsewhere?
- Credibility – different outcomes prioritised by different constituencies

The policy intervention

- Free bus travel for young people (12-17 year-olds in full-time education) in London ('zip card')
- Scheme aimed to:
help young people to continue studying, improve employment prospects and promote the use of public transport (Transport for London 2006)



This will help
kids to
develop
independence

What about
older bus
passengers?
They will be
pushed off
the buses

There's an
obesity crisis:
getting young
people sitting on
buses won't
help!

How do we
inform policy
decisions with
'good enough'
evidence?

More young people
on the buses will
mean even more
gang related
violence ...

It's a waste of
money when
finances are
tight.

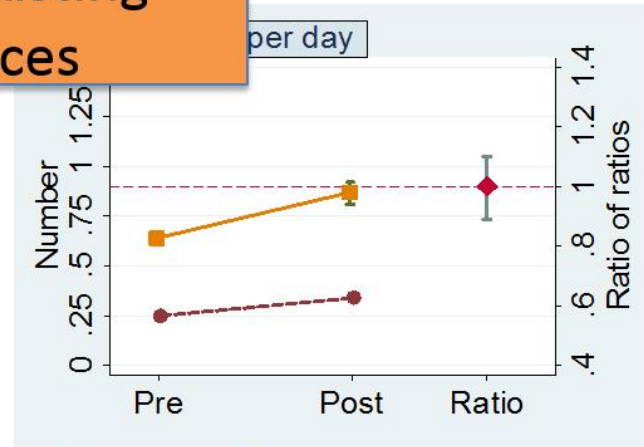
Study design

Quasi-experimentation possible if:

- there are variations in exposure, e.g.:
 - ‘before’ and ‘after’
 - between young people in London and others (adults, those outside London)
- we have access to data

See: [Wilkinson et al \(2011\)](#)

Quantitative data
from existing
sources



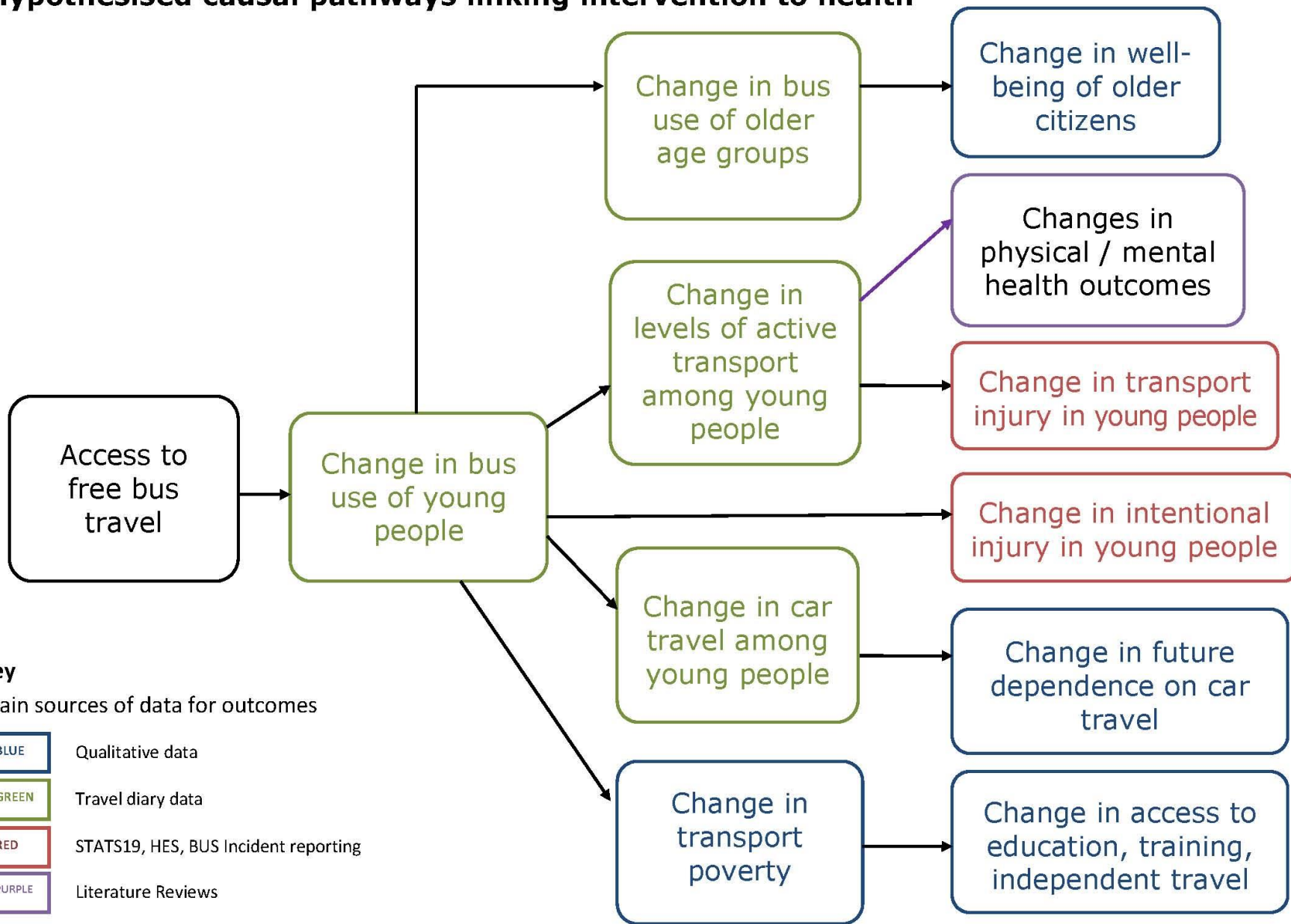
Qualitative data –
from young people
and older citizens



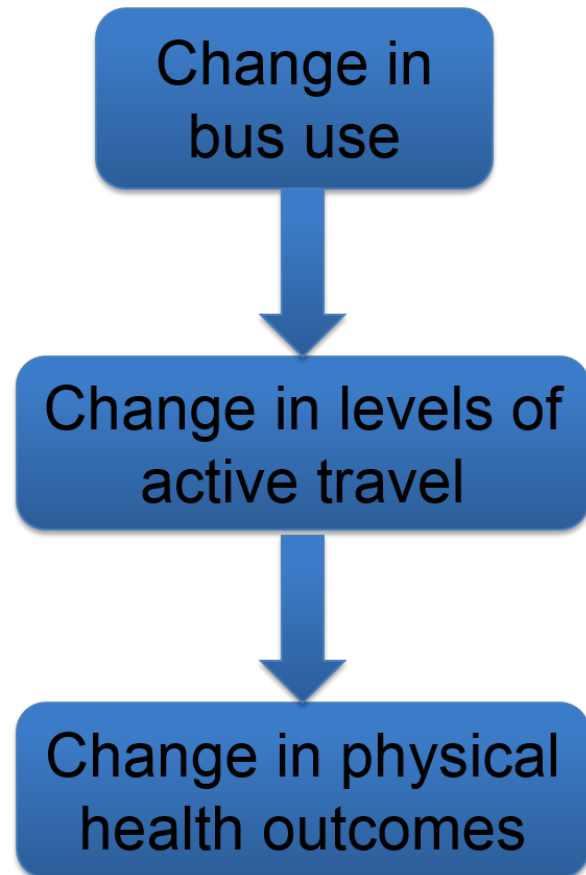
Designing the evaluation

- Mapped out causal pathways that we hypothesised linked the intervention to health outcomes
- Discussed these with stakeholders: are these credible, of interest to policy makers?
- Identified sources of data that would enable us to compare outcomes over time in affected group (young Londoners) and others

Hypothesised causal pathways linking intervention to health



What data are available?



- Travel diary data before and after intervention to compare changes in:
 - use of buses
 - distances walked with those in adults
- Systematic literature review to assess evidence for link between ‘active travel’ and health outcomes ([Saunders et al 2013](#))

Qualitative component

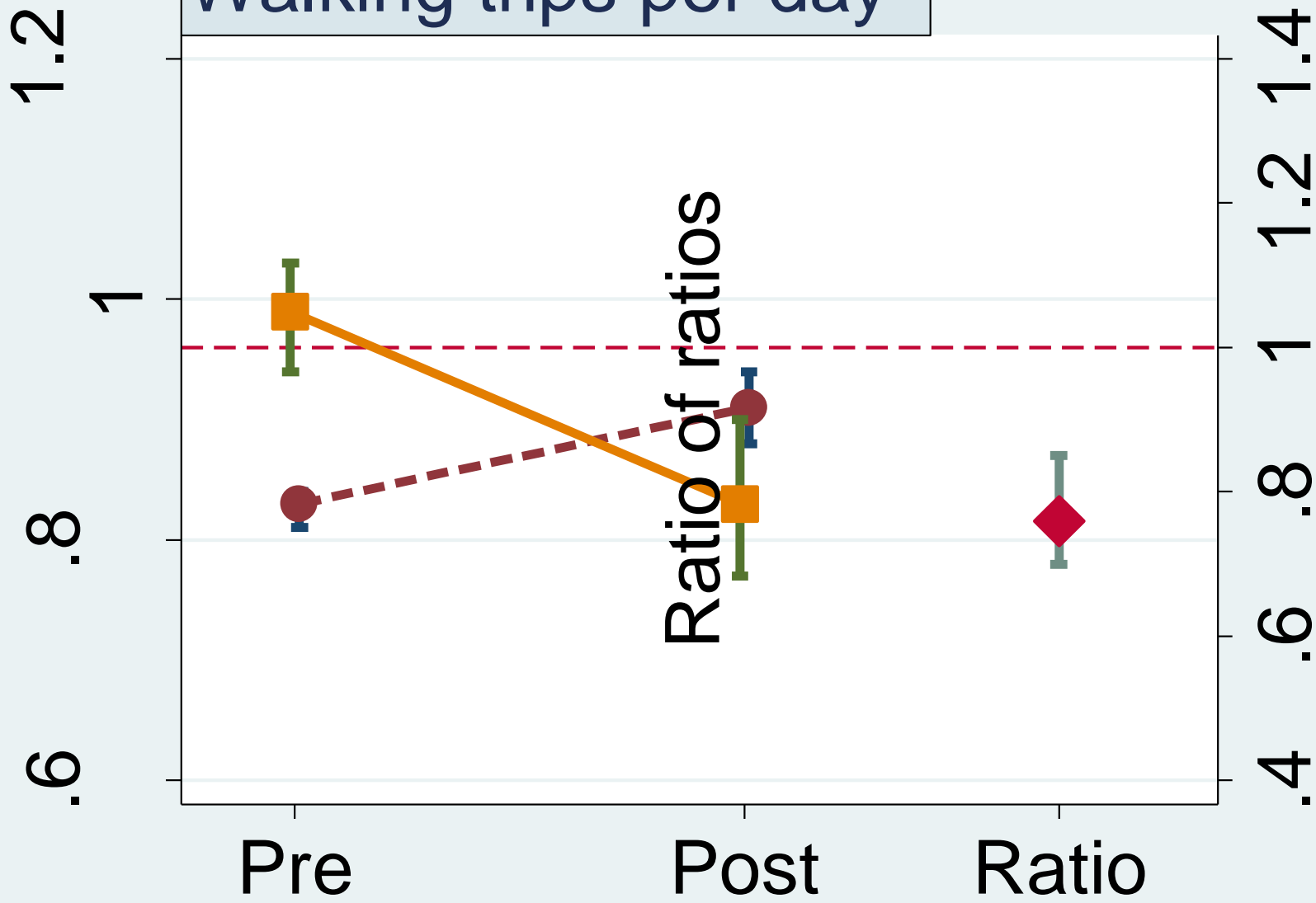
- To provide some insight into outcomes where there were no existing quant data (views on driving, social inclusion)
- Analysis to help understand the meaning of variables ('active travel' is not just 'walking and cycling', using the bus is also active for young people)
- *An understanding of how and why (free) bus travel changes what young people do*
 - **Importance of understanding the system**

'Capacities' approach (Cartwright & Munro 2011)

- How does X operate to promote Y?;
- What is needed for X to promote Y?;
- What can stop/inhibit the operation of X?;
- What other capacities promote/inhibit Y?;
- What happens when capacities interact?



Walking trips per day



Walking distance per day (km)

1.6
1.4
1.2
1

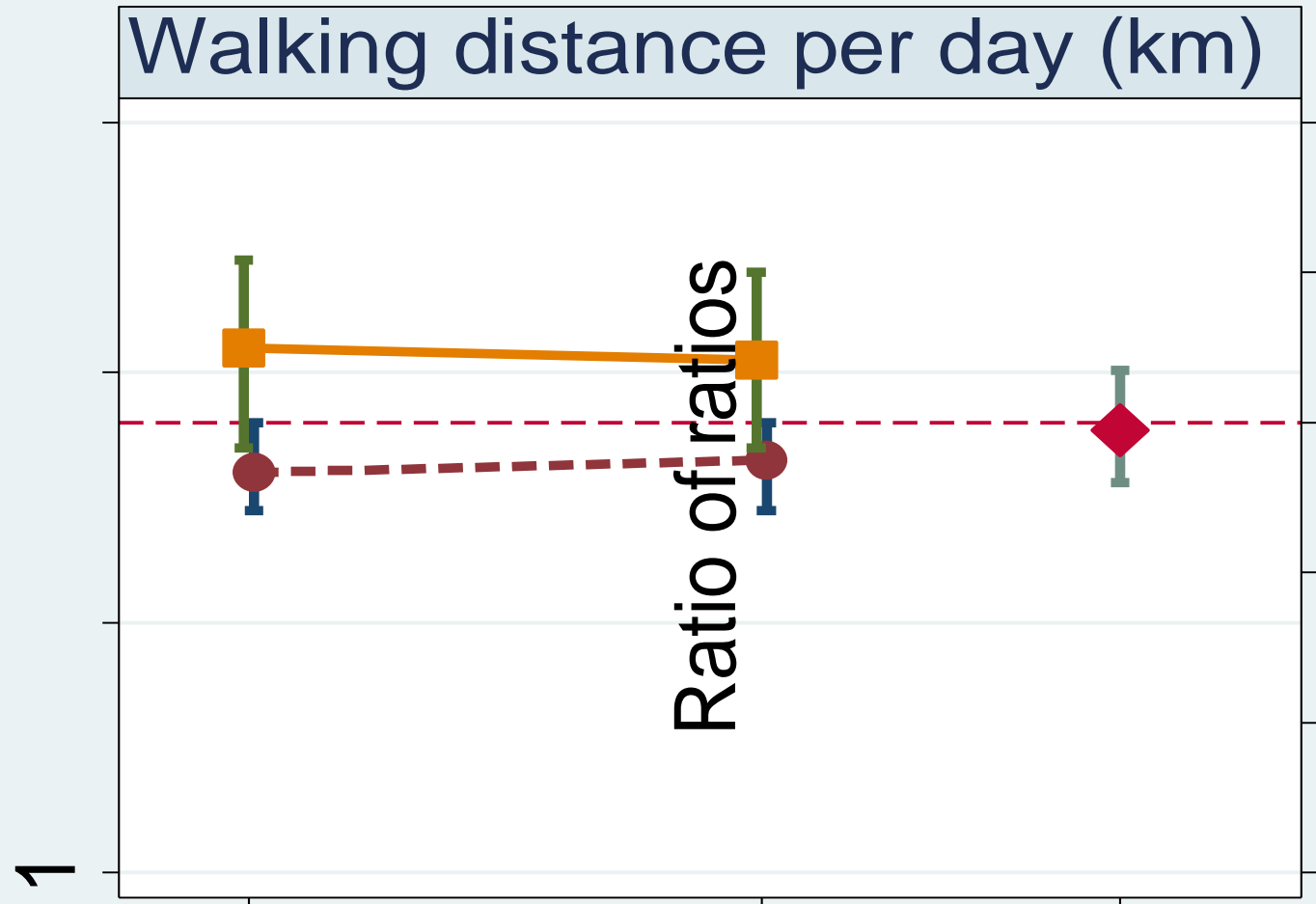
1.4
1.2
1
.8
.6
.4

Pre

Post

Ratio

Ratio of ratios



Short hops...

- Sometimes if I'm really lazy or just can't be bothered. If I'm walking and I'm past a, I'm next to the bus stop and the bus is making its way up I just jump on. But if not, I just keep walking, I can't be bothered to wait. (F, 16)
- [I]f I'm like going to meet a friend or whatever and I'm, or I'm going to Romford, but I could walk to Romford in about ten minutes. But if there's a bus I'll get on it because it's quicker and easier. (M, 15)

...And **attributed** to scheme

- I: [I]f you didn't have the free bus travel, how would you get to school do you think?
- R: I'd have to walk, I'd probably walk. It's, it's about, but I'd have to leave much earlier because it's about a half an hour walk, five minute bus journey. I'll take the bus any day.
(M, 15)

Used for extra/discretionary trips

- I take the bus every day... [for] going to school, going to dancing, going to see my friends, maybe going to church... because it's free ... I can go to different places, so anywhere I want to go. (M, 15)
- Me and my friend tend to just get on the bus and go somewhere and then just get off and get the bus back... We saw a park once on a bus and we were like, that's nice, and got off there for a while. (F, 12)

How does X promote Y?

Comparison 1 – those with zip cards rescinded:

- [W]hen I didn't have [free bus travel] I did struggle in terms of not getting everything done because I didn't have that freedom to get on a bus (focus group participant 12-17).
- [Speaking about friends who've had card confiscated] It puts a strain on their social activities because they can't go out as much (M, 15).

What is needed for X to promote Y?

Meaning of travel - importance of loyalty

- I got on the bus and everyone else was just left there. And then he [the driver] just, he, I was like can you open the door because you're not letting my friends on? I was going to come off. Drove off, I had to walk all the way [back to join my friends] and that's actually quite a long walk (focus group participant, aged 14-16).

Travelling together important

- F1: [We sometimes go by bus] because it's free as well so if people run out of money on their Oyster then we'll all go with them because we don't want anyone to go by themselves. (F, 17)
- F2: [...] I usually travel everywhere by tube if we can. But like you said, if some of us have got no money on our Oyster then we'll just take the bus. (F, 17)

Universal eligibility

- Mostly every Saturday [my friend and I] will probably just jump on a bus, because we have a free Oyster Card, and go anywhere and get another bus from there, and another one. And we just travel, we don't know where we're going, we just jump on a bus because we can. (M, 15)

What inhibits X promoting Y?

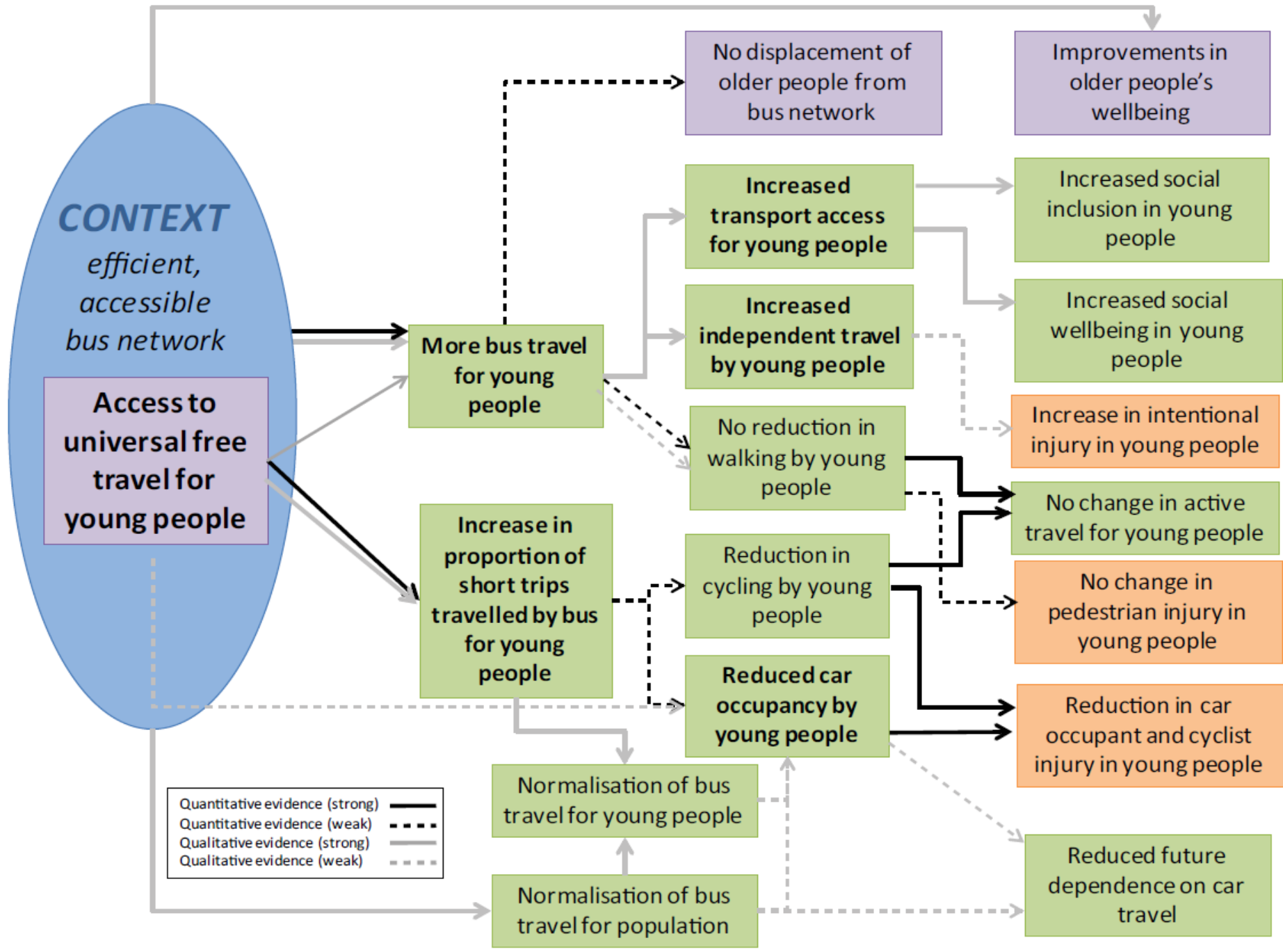
Comparison 2 – those with disabilities:

- Some ramps don't tend to work, so that's a bit of a hassle ... sometimes it's dangerous with an electric chair, it's heavy... (M, >16)

An ACCESSIBLE service

A final logic model

- In the context of **good, accessible bus services**, the **universal** provision of free bus travel is likely to:
 - Remove transport poverty for young people, thus encouraging social inclusion
 - Encourage bus use and reduce car occupancy, thus contributing to ‘de-stigmatising’ public transport and potentially contributing to a sustainability agenda
 - Have no significant effect on distances walked, but possibly contribute to decreased levels of cycling



Conclusion

- Applied observational evaluations have a number of academic and policy audiences
- All concerned with internal validity, transferability and credibility...
 - But likely to prioritise one of these
- A pragmatic approach which treats elements of the causal pathway as discrete ‘chains of variables’ AND attempts to characterise the ‘capacities’ of the intervention by, in part, harnessing qualitative data

Full study:

<http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/projects/phr/09300113>

Acknowledgements (case study)

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Acknowledgements (current research)

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- Full details:

<https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/IVES/IVES10.php>

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