A Survey of Methods Used to Study the Implementation of Health Policies Within Complex Systems and Environments

HEALTH POLICY PROJECT

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2014 Population Association of America Annual Meeting

May 1–3, 2014
Boston, MA

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Research on Health Policy Implementation Poses Several Challenges

- Implementation of health policies can change over time. Generally, it takes about a decade for the effects of policy to appear at the health system and outcome levels. However, this process is often shortened through the use of appropriate research methodologies.[2]

- Several components of policy implementation interact and are interdependent, so it can be challenging to measure unidirectional causality.[3]

- Health outcomes are influenced by factors external to the policy intervention. Hence, it's difficult to directly attribute changes in health outcomes to policy interventions.[4]

- Outcomes of the research may be related to the appropriateness of the policy rather than its implementation, thus detracting from the purpose of the study.[2,3]

- Using facility and administrative statistics in an environment with poor monitoring affects the researcher's ability to gather the appropriate data.[3] Hence, the true impact of policy on health systems remains unknown.

- It is not possible to conduct controlled experiments in policy research; researchers cannot determine the steps the policymakers and other players in the field will make.[4]

- Lack of transparency, collaboration, and communication between the government and development partners and within many agencies may affect the accuracy and quality of data shared with researchers.[2]

- The researcher's own position in the policy hierarchy and demographic characteristics can have an impact on the policy data collected.

Studying Health Policy Implementation is a Complex Process

The USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP) has developed a conceptual framework to show the links among health policy, health systems, and health outcomes, based on an extensive literature review and decades of experience conducting health policy work in various countries.[1]

- Dimensions of policy implementation help define how policies can be better implemented.
  - Institutional relationships and power dynamics among organizations
  - Capacity of organizations to implement policy
  - Financing and allocation of resources to fund policies
  - Strategic planning and analysis of policy barriers
  - Monitoring and accountability mechanisms

- Based on this extensive literature review, several methodologies have been used to study and define policy implementation.

- Several factors determine which methodology is used to document how a health policy is being implemented, such as the specific research question, the policy being studied, and the resources and time available.

Approaches to Data Collection That Can Be Used to Study Policy Implementation

- Document analyses
- Secondary data analyses
- Observation
- Interviews
- Surveys
- Power cube: addresses the forms of power noted in places of engagement, such as workshops and focus groups

Discussion

- It is difficult to establish causality because policy implementation is a complex process.

- The best methodology should be used for each research question.

- Policy implementation research can help explain the link between policy development and program implementation.

- Clear research recommendations should indicate the programmatic, research, and policy relevance of the findings.

- Main research findings should be communicated to relevant stakeholders in an appropriate manner.

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RESEARCH METHODS USED TO STUDY POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

DESCRIPTIVE

Literature review
Helps identify how policies have been implemented in other contexts and countries
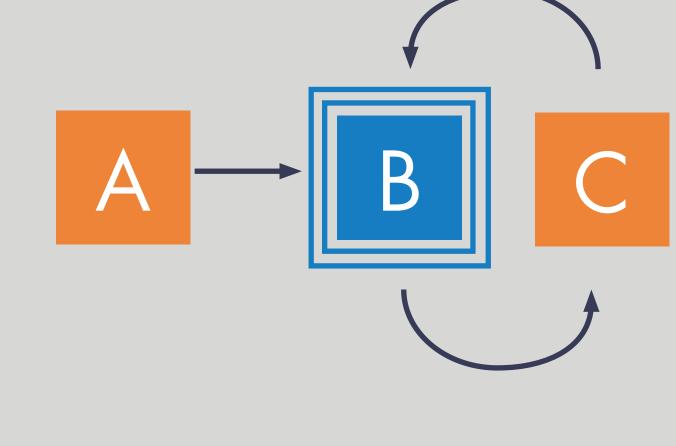
Case studies
In-depth investigations of a single instance of a phenomenon in its real-life context

COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS
Acknowledge that there are several pathways to implementation; various elements and variables interact distinctly from one another, but with the ability to "adapt and learn," so the process cannot just be repeated
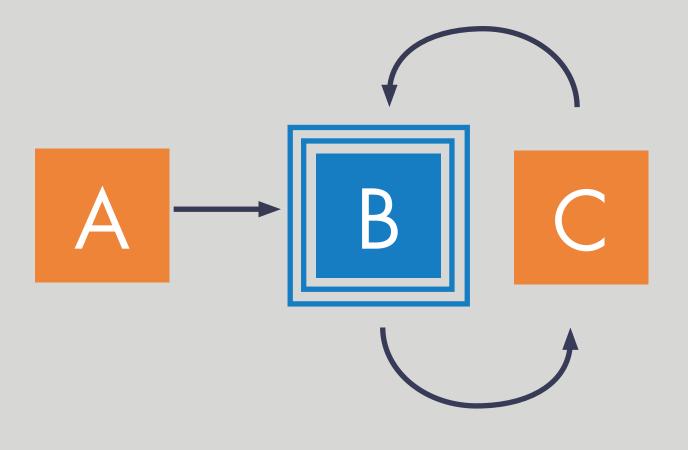
Feedback
Feeds output of a process within the system back as an input into the same system; positive feedback increases a factor's rate of change toward an extreme in one direction and negative feedback modulates the direction of change

Path dependence
Concept that the current state of the system depends on its previous history; the outcome cannot be attributed to any one factor and the list of factors changes depending on the time and the context; early events in a sequence matter[8-11]

Non-reversible processes can have similar starting points yet lead to different outcomes, even if they follow the same rules; outcomes are sensitive to initial conditions, bifurcations, and choices made along the way

ANALYTIC

Stakeholder mapping
Analyzes the power, networking, and political will of key actors;[5] clearly recognizes both the promoters and detractors of political influences
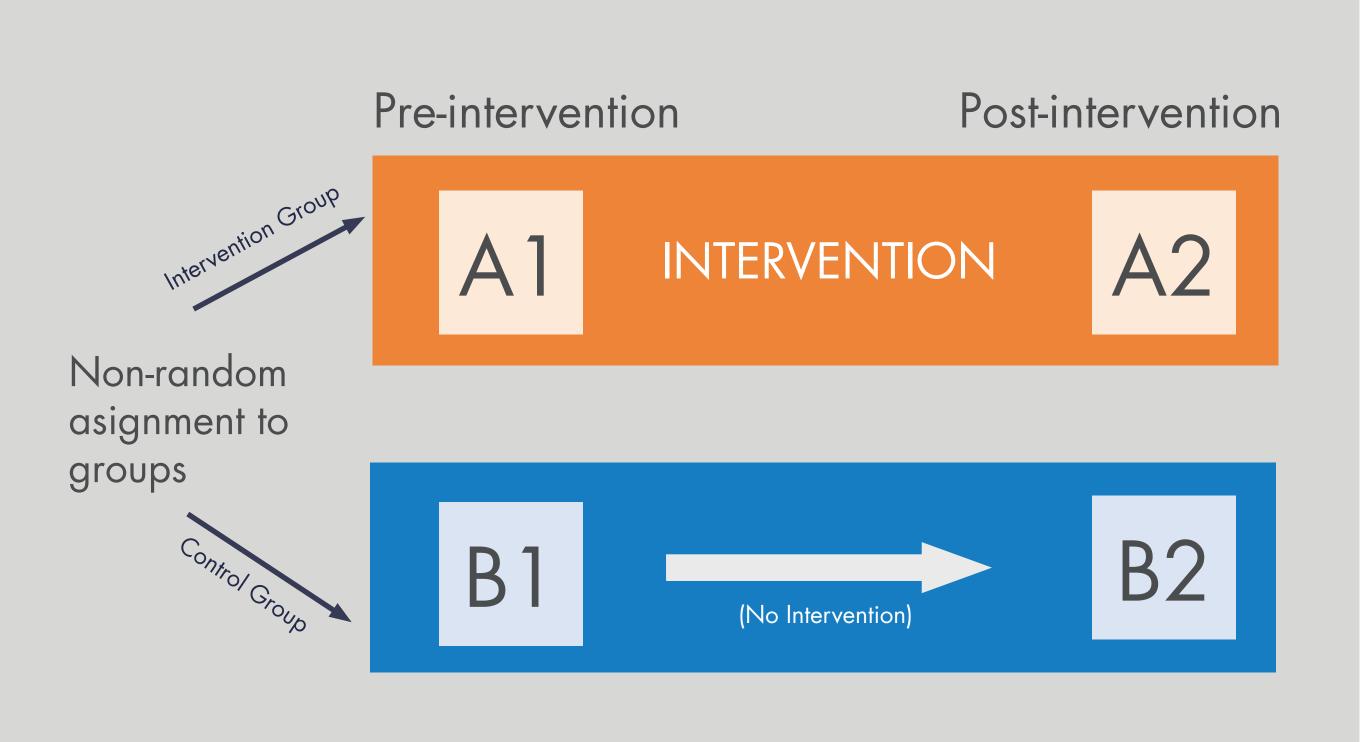
Cross-sectional surveys
Observation of and reporting on a group of people at a specific point in time

System dynamics
Uses mathematical modeling to identify complex issues and problems; deals with internal feedback loops and time delays that affect the entire system[6]
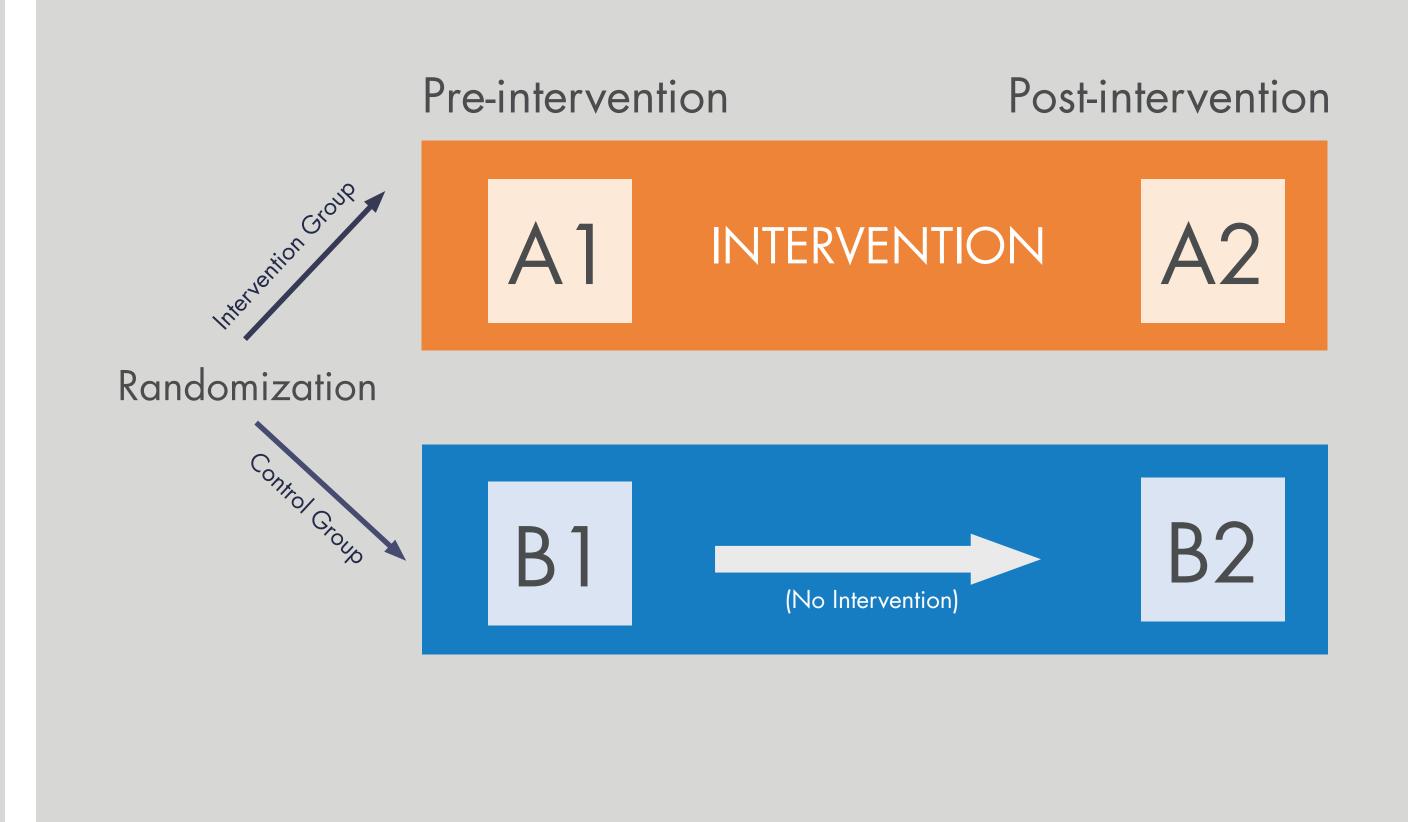
Quasi-experimental
Assigns research subjects to the intervention group in a non-random fashion[7]

Experimental
Assigns research subjects to the intervention and control groups in a random fashion; this design is also referred to as the "gold standard"[7]