

Focus On:

Relevance of the stage heuristic model for developing healthy public policies



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Introduction

Healthy public policies are generally defined by a strong concern for health and equity that includes identifying health impacts of a policy being implemented.¹ They are developed to improve physical, social, economic or environmental conditions, including health inequities.² The aim of this article is to identify whether the stages heuristic model (a model taking complex policy steps and refining them into manageable stages) remains relevant to justify continued use by public health and health promotion practitioners to influence the development of healthy public policies.

The ideas outlined in this article are based on a literature review that was conducted by searching a number of databases (MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Health Business File, SocINDEX, Scopus, PAIS International) to identify relevant articles published in English over the last seven years.

Background

The reasons people engage in healthy or unhealthy behaviours and the types of policies that exist to make choices easier or harder are numerous, multifaceted, and complex.³ Moreover individual, social,

cultural, environmental, economic and political factors add layers of complexity³ as does inter-organizational and network relationships at local, provincial, federal and international levels.⁴ Therefore, public health and health promotion practitioners need to consider that it is not possible to examine these factors independent of each other;⁵ rather it requires a holistic approach to solving complex problems that evolves over time.³ This holds true when working to influence the policymaking process.^{5,6}

The policymaking process

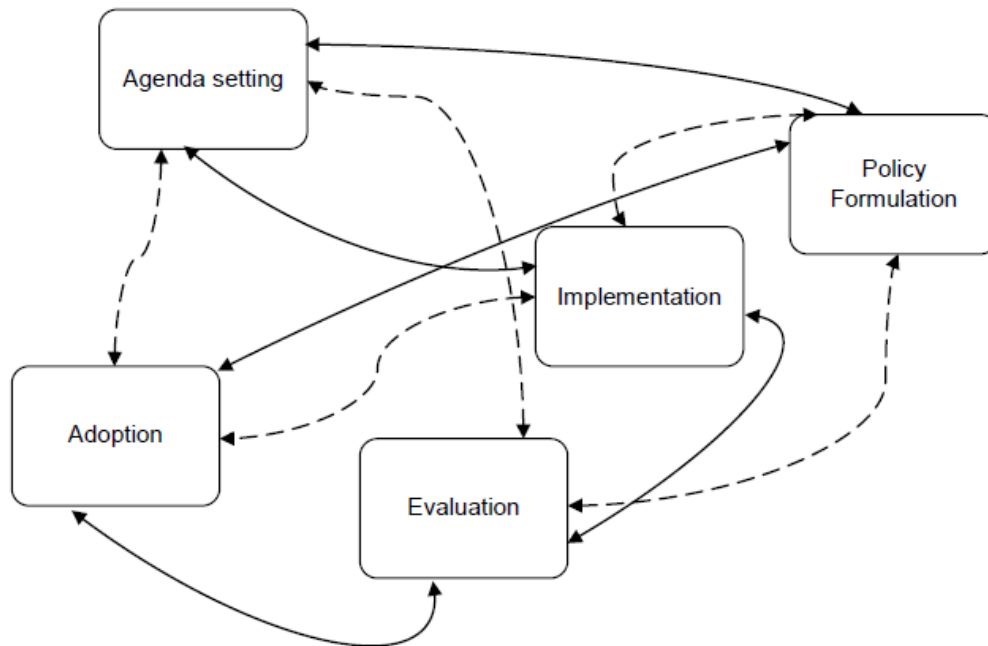
The policymaking process is comprised of a large number of actors including decision makers, institutions and citizens.⁷ It includes defining a problem, using evidence to identify potential solutions and engaging in knowledge brokering and transfer in order to influence policy outcomes.⁷ Of particular importance is that this process does not happen at one point in time. It occurs over a long period of time and can involve many different factors.⁴ Therefore, there is a desire to make this potentially complex and overwhelming process more simple and manageable.⁴ Theoretical concepts can be used to break up the policymaking process.⁸ The stages heuristic model is recognized as one way to break up the policy process.⁴

Stages heuristic model

This model has endured over sixty-years (first cited in 1956) as a way to explore and understand the policymaking process and “remains a useful heuristic to explore a complex world”.^{4(p.310)} The term heuristic means to simplify how to make judgements and decisions.⁹ This model provides a basis to understand the policymaking process by presenting the process as a fluid cycle of stages: agenda setting, policy formation, decision making/policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation.^{7,10} It also offers a way to take something complex and break it down into manageable ‘stages’ as a means to ensure policy success.⁵

Criticisms of the stages heuristic model exist. One such criticism is that this model does not identify what is driving the policy forward¹⁰ and that the model fails to address the complexity of policymaking.¹¹ Another example is that it does not “address the dynamics of multiple, interacting, iterative and incremental cycles of action at many different levels of mutual and reciprocal action at the same time.”^{11(p.83)} Historically, this model was presented as a linear process that happens in a very orderly sequence in which equal time is allocated for each stage.¹² However, according to the National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP) “it is understood that these stages sometimes occur simultaneously, sometimes appear in inverse order and are sometimes rapidly skirted...each of these stages corresponds to several ‘moments’ in the life of a policy, which are related to specific activities associated with the policy.”^{10(p.1)} Figure 1 visually outlines this turbulent flow and represents the complexity and inter-relationship between the stages.¹⁰

Figure 1: Stages in policymaking: a turbulent flow^{10(p.2)}



Some advantages are offered by applying this model. For example, the stages heuristic model “disaggregates the policy process into manageable segments,”^{13(p.6)} making it simple and understandable. It also “makes it possible to identify different ‘moments’ in the life of a public policy and to adapt information sharing, persuasion and action strategies as appropriate,”^{10(p.5)} and helps identify where public health and health promotion practitioners may contribute to the policy making process.¹³

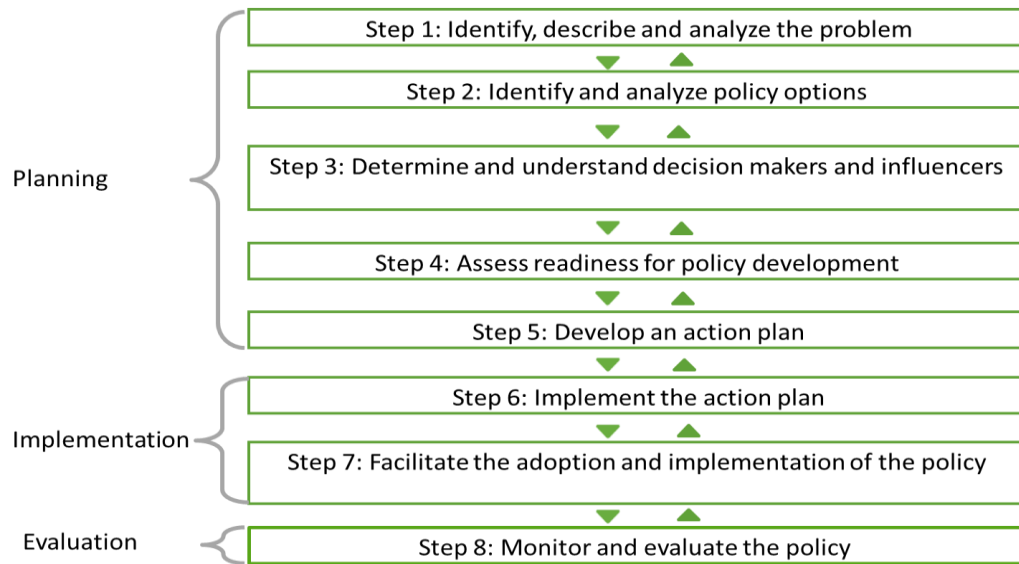
Issue of relevance

Several theories and models have been developed to influence the policymaking process.¹⁴ However, all theories and models that were highlighted in the literature had disadvantages. For example, Real-Dato found when comparing the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory and Multiple Streams Approach that “they too suffered from the inability to state clearly underlying processes nor do they pay attention to the end results; policy outputs of policy decisions.”^{15(p.121)} A literature review prepared for Peel Public Health identified that “no single policy model offers a fully comprehensive description or understanding of the policy process as each answers somewhat different questions.”^{13(p.4)} Lastly, the NCCHPP’s briefing note on the stages model concluded “the stages model can illuminate only part of the complexity of public policy processes and, most importantly, like other models, it has no predictive ability.”^{10(p.6)} Together, these findings highlight two key points: the stages heuristic model still has relevance because no other theory or model has been identified as the leading model, and other models similar to the stage model have disadvantages. Given the intent of this article to explore the relevance of the stages heuristics model, it appears that it remains a relevant model to consider as an option.

Implications: Eight steps for developing healthy public policies

The results of this literature review are being used to inform the revision of Public Health Ontario's eight steps for developing healthy public policies document, of which the theoretical underpinning is the stages heuristic model. Figure 2 provides an overview of the eight steps organized into three stages: planning, implementation and evaluation.

Figure 2: Eight steps for developing healthy public policies¹⁶



These eight steps closely mirror the five common stages of the stages heuristic model presented in Figure 1:

- agenda setting (identify, describe and analyze the problem),
- policy formation (identify and analyze policy options, determine and understand decision makers and influencers, assess readiness for policy development, develop an action plan),
- policy implementation (implement the action plan and facilitate the adoption and implementation of the policy), and
- policy review (monitor and evaluate the policy)

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that the stages heuristic model remains relevant and can be used by public health and health promotion practitioners when developing healthy public policies. Public Health Ontario used this evidence to update existing, and generate new knowledge products, and to inform the revision of the eight steps for developing healthy public policies. Given that the evidence indicates this model is still applicable, the result is an update to steps that closely align with the five common stages of the stages heuristic model.

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Author

Kim Bergeron, Health Promotion Consultant, Health Promotion Capacity Building, Public Health Ontario

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