

FOCUS ON

Relevance of the Stage Heuristic Model for Developing Healthy Public Policies



1st Revision: April 2025

Introduction

Healthy public policies are characterized by a strong concern for health and equity that includes identifying health impacts.¹ Healthy public policies aim to create supportive environments,¹ by improving physical, social, economic or environmental conditions, including health inequities.² This Focus On explores if the stages heuristic model (a model which takes complex policy steps and refines them into manageable stages) remains relevant to public health and health promotion practitioners.

Methods

A literature review was conducted to inform the revision of Public Health Ontario's eight step model for developing healthy public policies, of which the theoretical underpinning is the stages heuristic model. Seven databases (MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Health Business File, SocINDEX, Scopus, PAIS International) were searched to identify relevant articles published in English over the last seven years.

Background

The reasons why 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 Individual, social, cultural, environmental, economic and political factors add layers of complexity,³ as does inter-organizational and network relationships at local, provincial, federal and international levels.⁴ Public health and health promotion practitioners need to consider that these factors can not be examined independently;⁵ rather a holistic approach to solving complex problems that evolves over time is required.³ This holds true when working to influence the policymaking process.^{5,6}

The Policymaking Process

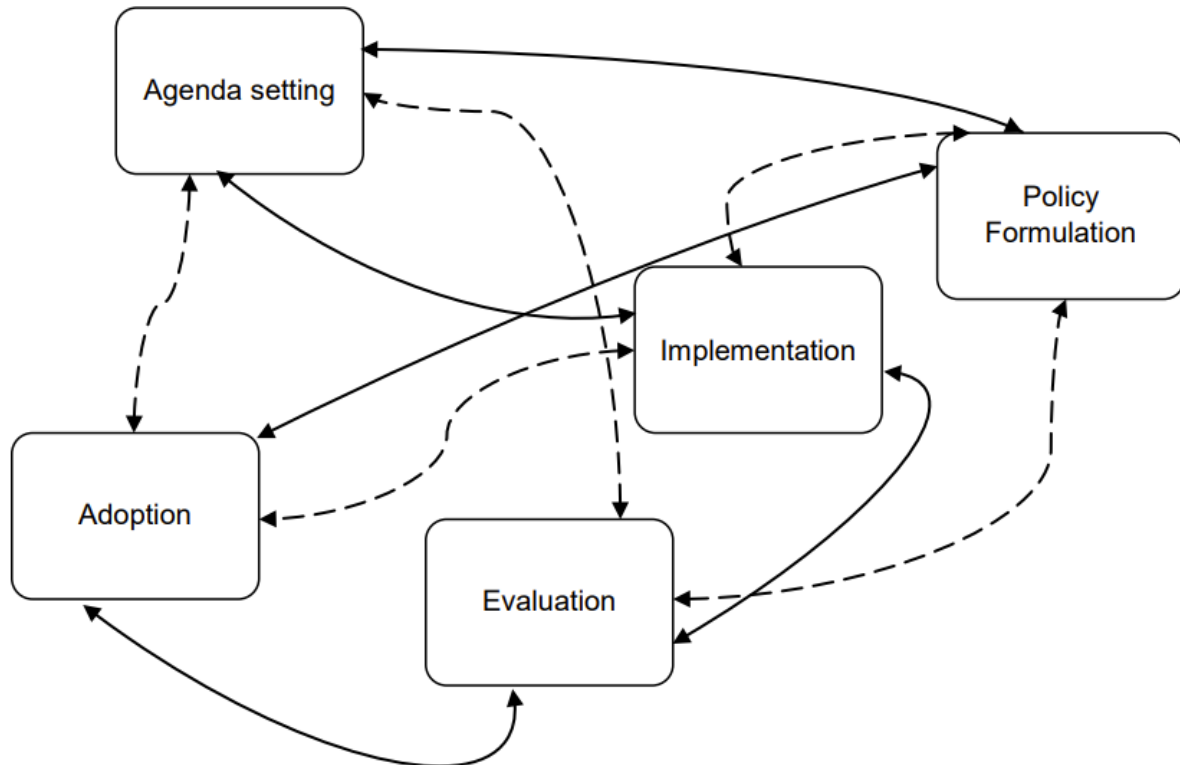
The policymaking process involves a number of actors including decision makers, institutions and individuals.⁷ It includes defining a problem, using evidence to identify potential solutions and engaging in knowledge brokering and transfer in order to influence policy outcomes.⁷ Of particular importance 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 Policy theories and models can make this potentially complex and overwhelming process simpler and manageable⁴ by separating the policymaking process into a series of steps or stages.⁸ The stages heuristic model is a widely recognized model which depicts the policy process in stages.⁴

Stages Heuristic Model

This model was developed in 1956 as a way to 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 depicts the policy process as a fluid cycle of stages: agenda setting, policy formation, decision making/policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation.^{7,10}

Criticisms of the stages heuristic model exist. One criticism is that the model does not identify the factors which drive the policy forward.¹⁰ Another is that the model fails to address the complexity of policymaking,¹¹ as 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 an orderly sequence in which equal time is allocated for each stage.¹² The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCCHPP) proposes 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 the stages heuristic model as a turbulent flow, representing the complexity and inter-relationship between the stages.¹⁰

Figure 1: Stages Heuristic Model: A Turbulent Flow



Source: Used with permission from the National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy.

The literature included in this review offers some advantages of the stages heuristic model. For example, as previously mentioned, it “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)} This helps to identify where public health and health promotion practitioners may contribute to the policy making process.¹³

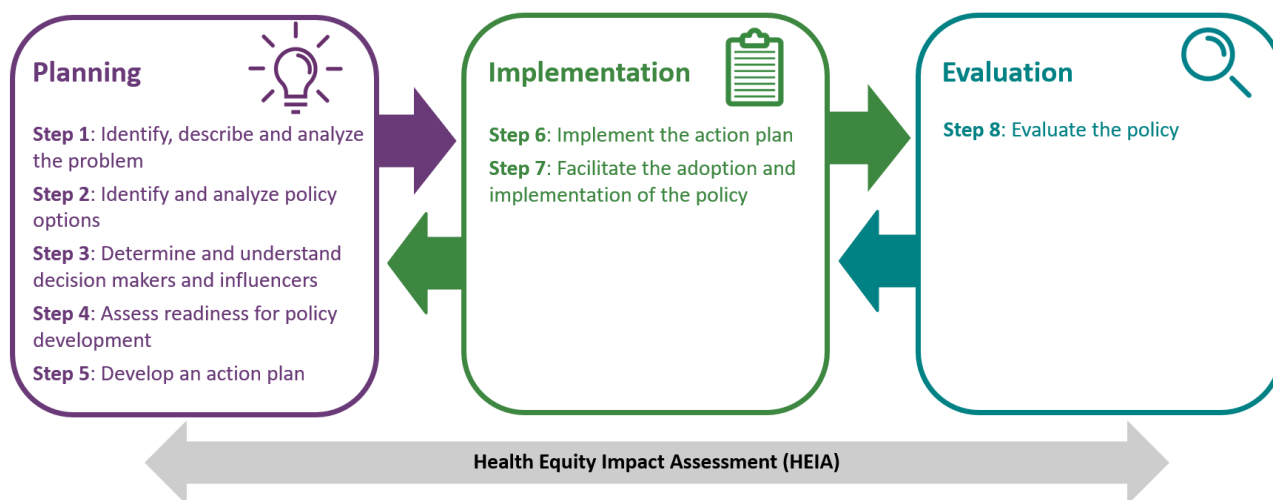
Issue of Relevance

Several theories and models have been developed to influence the policymaking process.¹⁴ The theories and models identified in this literature review had disadvantages. For example, Real-Dato found when comparing the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the 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 concluded 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)} The NCCHP’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 it 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

The results of this literature review were used to inform the revision of Public Health Ontario's [At A Glance: Eight Steps to Building Healthy Public Policies](#),¹⁶ 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 Policies



These eight steps closely mirror the five common stages of the stages heuristic model presented in [Figure 1](#):

- Stage 1: Agenda setting (identify, describe and analyze the problem)
- Stage 2: Policy formation (identify and analyze policy options, determine and understand decision makers and influencers, assess readiness for policy development, develop an action plan)
- Stage 3: Policy implementation (implement the action plan, facilitate the adoption and implementation of the policy)
- Stage 4: Adoption (facilitate the adoption and implementation of the policy)
- Stage 5: Evaluation (evaluate the policy)

Conclusion

The reviewed literature demonstrates that the stages heuristic model remains relevant for public health and health promotion practitioners to use 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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Summary of Revisions

Changes in this revision are summarized in the table below.

Date of Implementation	Description of Major Changes	Page
January 21, 2025	Figure 2 was updated	4
January 21, 2025	Copy editing, hyperlinks were verified and updated	Throughout

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