



Evidence and
Implementation
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Behavioural and Implementation
Science Interventions
Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine



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#166 - When does an unpaid tax look like an unnecessary antibiotic prescription? What an evaluation in one policy context can tell us about another

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Background:

An evidence-based government should have two aspirations: 1) running evaluations of current (or planned) policies, services, and programs; and 2) using the findings from evaluations or empirical studies of solutions that have been shown to work in different contexts and implementing them into the local context.

For the last 10 years, Behavioural Insights (BI) teams in Australia have run dozens of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) to test interventions that are based on theories from behavioural science. This experience has given BI practitioners an understanding of how they can run RCTs in a policy context. Running these evaluations has given State and Federal governments an understanding of whether a policy, service or program works in its specific context.

These same practitioners have also been using interventions and ideas that have been shown to work in one context (i.e. the academic settings where the psychological, economic and sociological theories used in BI interventions are tested) to another (i.e. an Australian policy setting). When these practitioners test the effectiveness of these interventions, they directly test whether the operationalised theory works in the specific policy context. At the same time, they indirectly test the original theory from which their intervention is derived from. This dual process could allow policymakers and researchers to use large-scale policy evaluations to develop



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better theories about human behaviour, whilst developing an evidence-based government.

Whether this dual process is possible is controversial. If one assumes that each policy context and policy problem is unique, running evaluations in government would only be useful in telling us whether past policies, programs and services were effective rather than helping us learn more about solving different and future problems.

This view differs from the model used in evidence-based medicine, where frameworks like the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) are used to define the conditions that an intervention seeks to treat. This guides clinicians to treat different presentations of these conditions using similar treatments. No such framework currently exists for public policy problems and the diversity of problems that policymakers face means that it is not clear whether such a project is tractable. However, this does not mean that policy problems so unique that lessons from one evaluation tell us nothing about future problems.

We argue that precisely defining a policy problem or context using a 'behavioural lens' can help policymakers use a wider body of evidence to fit effective policy solutions to problems, without requiring a comprehensive classification of policy problems. The 'behavioural lens' defines a policy problem in theoretically meaningful terms. This can help policymakers view two policy problems that from first impressions look different to be similar enough to be solved by a similar solution. For example, the use of descriptive social norms in letters (which specifically tell recipients that people like them do not do what they are doing) have been shown to be effective in both getting people to pay their taxes and stop GPs writing unnecessary antibiotic scripts. A key feature in both contexts was that the tax evaders and over-prescribers were outliers that were not aware of their outlier status.

In this panel, we will introduce the idea of the 'behavioural lens' and then discuss:

1. What can a policy evaluation in one context tell us about the same idea in another context?
2. How can policymakers determine whether one policy context is similar enough to another to allow one intervention to be scaled to another?

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