Session 3.
Asking Health System Research Questions

Health Systems Research Course
Western China School of Public Health
7-11 December 2015
Four key steps in HSR

1. Identify research focus (problem/concern/opportunity) and question
2. Design study
3. Ensure quality and rigour
4. Apply ethical principles
Session objectives

• To recognise what makes a ‘good’ HSR question
• To identify starting points for HSR questions
• To learn how to generate substantively relevant questions
• To differentiate between different kinds of HSR questions
1. Review what makes a good question and look at examples of HSR questions in China
2. Describes steps to generate a good HSR question
   a) Starting points
   b) How to frame questions
   c) Purpose of research
3. Exercise
1. What makes a good HSR question?
Key principle

- Question drives study!

Start with the problem/concern/opportunity

and

aim to inform decision-making by policy and system actors

1. What makes a good HSR question?
Examples of HSR questions in China

1. What makes a good HSR question?
What makes a ‘good’ HSR question?

Adapted from Robson, 2002

• **Substantively relevant:** worthwhile, non-trivial questions, worthy of the effort to be expended +
  
  — *How questions are generated* >> will build on what is known not duplicate it, will assist system development in a particular context

• **Clear, specific, answerable, interconnected:** unambiguous and easily understood +
  
  — *How questions are framed/worded* >> pay attention to the details: scope (time, place, people), concepts

• **Specific:** sufficiently specific to be clear about what constitutes an answer +

• **Answerable:** can see what data are needed to answer it and how those data will be collected +

• **Interconnected:** questions are related in some meaningful way, forming a coherent whole

1. What makes a good HSR question?
Quick activity

Read the following question:

How can TB services be improved in Sichuan Province?

Using the criteria we have just discussed – do you think this is a good question?

1. What makes a good HSR question?
2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
How to design a HSR Question

a) Starting points
   – Focus/terrain of health policy & health systems
   – Level (macro/meso/micro/cross-level)

b) Framing the question
   – What are research users’ ideas?
   – What past work has been undertaken?
   – Disciplinary perspectives?

c) Thinking about *purpose* of research:
   – Normative vs exploratory/ descriptive/ explanatory questions

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Focus/terrain of health policy & health systems

- Health financing
- Human resources
- Health service delivery
- ...

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
## Level of analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of analysis</th>
<th>Macro (architecture)</th>
<th>Meso (organisation/intervention)</th>
<th>Micro (individual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative/evaluative</td>
<td>How can political parties be effectively involved in a country’s process of planning universal coverage?</td>
<td>What are the reasons for the low efficiency of community governance structures that administer a decentralised fund scheme?</td>
<td>Does individual coaching offer better support to health system managers than individual training?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory/explanatory</td>
<td>What norms underpin effective oversight by communities?</td>
<td>How do ‘pay for performance’ arrangements interact with local accountability structures?</td>
<td>Why do front-line providers frequently diverge from recommended clinical guidelines?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sheikh et al., 2011

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
b) Framing the question

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
1. Consult stakeholders
   - What do they know and understand?
   - What do they see as important and useful?
   - What do they identify as knowledge gaps?

2. Review the literature
   - What knowledge has already been generated locally, internationally?

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Research users ideas?

Same issue, different questions?

District manager

Hospital manager

National manager

International agency

Patient group

Community group

Research question

Different issues & questions?

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
What wider knowledge is available?

- Look at international experience (*replicate don’t duplicate*)
  - importance of literature review: add to the literature!

- Use theory (relevant empirical and theoretical resources)

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Types of literature reviews

Go find the resources – lots out there!

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
1. Identify the review question or focus
2. Frame the area you are searching (year, area or topic)
3. Search for primary studies and theoretical papers (using databases, search engines, or a particular publication)
4. Select papers — inclusion/exclusion criteria; quality appraisal (assess relevance & rigour of what you find)
5. Collect the key items or extract the data
6. Review papers & data
7. Synthesis (make meaning, pull together a coherent argument)

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
‘Critical Appraisal’

• The art of providing a reasonable evaluation of a text by breaking it down and studying its parts
• To be critical does not necessarily mean to criticise in a negative manner
• Requires you to question the information and opinions in a text and present a reasonable analysis
• ‘Analysis’ means to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the text (or research report), based on clear criteria – and with an understanding of the text’s purpose, the intended audience and why it is structured in the way it is

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Which disciplinary perspectives?

• Evaluation of removal of user fees might consider:
  – Implementation process: policy analysis
  – Motivation of health workers: psychology/management
  – Impact on out of pocket payments: economics
  – Impact on coverage and infant mortality: epidemiology

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
c) *Purpose of research*

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
What is the study ‘purpose’?

Normative/evaluative: Seeks to generate/identify norms, best practices,’gold standard’ interventions

Exploratory: To find out what is happening, especially in little understood situations

Descriptive: To give accurate profile of people, events, situations

Explanatory: To explain patterns relating to phenomenon being researched; To identify relationships between aspects of phenomenon

Emancipatory: To create opportunities and the will to engage in social action

Robson, 2002; Thomas, Chataway & Wuyts, 1998; Yin, 2009

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Need more balance in questions asked

• Past emphasis on normative/evaluative work and ‘generalisable’ answers

• More work on exploratory and explanatory questions considering socio-cultural-political understandings of health systems

Sheikh et al., 2011

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
### Purpose

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Why adopt that purpose?</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Normative</strong></td>
<td>To generate ‘best’ practice ideas</td>
<td>• Does intervention x work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Which intervention for issue y is most effective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploratory</strong></td>
<td>To find out what is happening, when little is known</td>
<td>• What categories of information are used in decision-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the social processes, including power relations, influencing actors’ understandings and experiences, and shaping impacts of interventions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptive</strong></td>
<td>To give accurate profile of people, events, situation</td>
<td>• What is the quality of care in place q?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What is the level of health worker motivation in place z?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• What are stakeholder positions on policy A?</td>
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2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
### From purpose to question (Cnt)

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<tr>
<td>Explanatory <em>(some control over events)</em></td>
<td>To explain relationships, assuming fairly linear causality</td>
<td>• Do managers influence facility performance? How?</td>
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</table>
| Exploratory/Explanatory; Explanatory *(little control over events)* | To identify and explain relationships, assuming complex causality | • How and why does management influence facility performance?  
• When and under what circumstances does management influence facility performance? |
| Emancipatory | Draw on expertise of practitioners  
Encourage practice changes | |

2. How do we generate a good HSR question?
Exercise (10 minutes)

- Get into pairs
- Assess ONE of the following questions using the criteria for good HSR questions
- Re-write the question (if you think it can be better)

**Aim:** “In China, public hospital reform has been underway for almost 5 years, and 311 pilot county hospitals are the current focus. This study aimed to assess the job satisfaction and active participation of medical staff in the reform.”


**Aim:** “In 2002, the Chinese leadership announced a change in national welfare policy: Voluntary medical schemes at county level, called the “New Rural Co-operative Medical System” should cover all counties by 2010.” The aim of the study is to explore the main characteristics of the NRCMS and to analyse the introduction of local schemes in one Kazak county of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region since 2006.

Aim: “China has made impressive progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for maternal and reproductive health, but ensuring that progress reaches all segments of the population remains a challenge for policy makers.” The aim of this study is find out where disadvantaged populations in terms of maternal health are in China, and to explore the causes of these inequities.


Aim: “China has achieved universal health insurance coverage. This study examined how patients and hospitals react to the different designs of the plans and to monitoring of patients by the local authority in the Chinese multiple health security schemes.”
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