Perspective

Pushing the boundaries of research on human resources for health: fresh approaches to understanding health worker motivation

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Abstract

A country’s health workforce plays a vital role not only in serving the health needs of the population but also in supporting economic prosperity. Moreover, a well-funded and well-supported health workforce is vital to achieving universal health coverage and Sustainable Development Goal 3 to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. This perspective article highlights the potential of underutilized health policy and systems research (HPSR) approaches for developing more effective human resources for health policy. The example of health worker motivation is used to showcase four types of HPSR (exploratory, influence, explanatory and emancipatory) that move beyond describing the extent of a problem. Most of the current literature aiming to understand determinants and dynamics of motivation is descriptive in nature. While this is an important basis for all research pursuits, it often gives little information about mechanisms to improve motivation and strategies for intervention. Motivation is an essential determinant of health worker performance, particularly for those working in difficult conditions, such as those facing many health workers in low- and middle-income countries. Motivation mediates health workforce performance in multiple ways: internally governing health worker behaviour; informing decisions on becoming a health worker; workplace location and ability to perform; and influencing willingness to engage politically. The four fresh research approaches described can help policy-makers better understand why health workers behave the way they do, how interventions can improve performance, the mechanisms that lead to change, and strategies for empowering health workers to be agents of change themselves.

Keywords: health policy and systems research, human resources for health, migration, motivation, performance, supervision

Background

Human resources for health (HRH) encompass “all people engaged in actions whose primary intent is to enhance health”.1 Human resources form the heart of health systems, whether doctors and nurses, clinic managers, sanitation workers, health information data-entry officers, or community health workers. Major reports in recent years have highlighted the vital role that the health workforce plays, not only in serving the health needs of populations but also in supporting economic prosperity, especially as a major employer of women.2–5 Moreover, a well-funded and well-supported health workforce is vital to achieving universal health coverage4 and Sustainable Development Goal 3 to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.8

However, there are persistent HRH challenges, especially in low- and middle-income countries, that continue to frustrate progress towards universal health coverage.7–9 These challenges include a lack of stewardship; limited data and strategies to assess workforce performance; and HRH shortages, maldistribution and outward migration.10–12 Those working in health-care roles often struggle with low pay, limited opportunities for career progression, violence, poor health system support, and, for some, lack of recognition in the health system.13–15 Furthermore, health systems in low- and middle-income countries are challenged to accommodate increasingly mobile populations; rapid social and technological changes; expanding private sectors; complex governance issues; increasing health system fluidity, such as across private and public sectors; multiple systems of medicine; and formal and informal health worker roles.16

Although the overall challenges are similar, a country’s unique political and social structure may make it difficult to draw lessons from research done on HRH elsewhere, especially if the research was done in a high-income setting. Thus, policymakers need to be equipped to commission research that will directly inform their local health workforce policy-making and decision-making. Health policy and systems research (HPSR) approaches to HRH can provide the data and analytical insight
necessary, by drawing from a multitude of disciplines (i.e. public health, sociology, psychology, anthropology, organizational sciences, public administration and management studies) and applying appropriate methodologies to answer pressing research questions.\textsuperscript{17,18} HPSR focuses on choosing a method, or mix of methods, that fits the research question asked,\textsuperscript{17,19} whether evaluating programmes to improve health worker performance and motivation, determining mechanisms to strengthen training and supervision, or assessing the factors that influence migration.

Despite the important potential contribution of HPSR approaches, there remains little guidance on how HPSR can be applied to HRH. In addition, researchers and policy-makers may not be aware of the research methods available. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some underused research approaches that could help provide this vital information for policy-makers. The examples are drawn from A health policy and systems research reader on human resources for health (hereafter referred to as the HRH reader),\textsuperscript{20} a compendium of examples of best-practice research for HRH. Supported by the World Health Organization's Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, the HRH reader was developed to highlight the existence of a wide range of research methods and encourage their use.\textsuperscript{20} A particular aim was to illustrate how HPSR can be applied to HRH to produce information that moves beyond describing the problem or simply assessing whether an intervention “works” or not.

This perspective article uses the example of health worker motivation to highlight how different types of HPSR can assist policy-makers in acquiring a deeper understanding of the factors influencing what motivates and demotivates health workers.

### Exploratory research

Exploratory research seeks to understand phenomena in order to build hypotheses, concepts and theories. For instance, exploratory research may ask what drives corrupt behaviour by health workers or about the gendered experiences of health workers in humanitarian contexts. The HRH reader highlights some examples of exploratory research aimed at understanding what motivates health workers to join, perform and remain in their current profession.\textsuperscript{20} For example, Smith et al. used a “dictator game”, which is a standard technique in experimental economics for detecting the presence and power of altruism in decision-making, in a health setting.\textsuperscript{25} In the game, final-year nursing students in Kenya, South Africa and Thailand were asked to allocate a real financial endowment between themselves and another student, a patient or a poor person. Respondents in all three countries showed greater generosity to patients and poor individuals than to fellow students. This measurement technique allowed greater consideration of the altruistic values of the nursing students, rather than only job characteristics, for understanding determinants of their motivation.

Previous research has established that transformational leadership has a direct positive effect on health workers’ job satisfaction. An analysis by Choi et al. provided a deeper understanding of this effect.\textsuperscript{26} They found that the increased job satisfaction arising from transformative leadership for medical assistants and nurses in Malaysia was attributable to their increased empowerment. Similarly, a study by Aberese-Ako et al. exploring organizational justice showed how meeting the needs of front-line health workers as internal clients of the facilities and organizations within which they work is essential if they are to be motivated to provide quality and responsive care to patients.\textsuperscript{27} More broadly, Razee et al. explored how social context influenced the motivation of primary health workers in Papua New Guinea, expanding consideration beyond the immediate work environment to the communities within which health workers live.\textsuperscript{28} These researchers found that trust and cooperation between health workers and the community, as well as gender norms, contribute to motivating health workers to perform in difficult conditions.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, exploratory research provides an opportunity to understand associations in order to develop hypotheses. From
there, policy-makers can design and introduce interventions that can be tested using influence or impact studies.

**Influence research**

Influence research focuses on measuring the impact of one variable on another, by carrying out adequacy, plausibility and probability analyses. For example, a study may measure the extent to which an intervention or programme improved health worker motivation and performance. The HRH reader highlights examples of different methodologies used to measure programme effectiveness, including a study by Shen et al., which was the first to measure the impact of performance-based financing on motivation, job satisfaction and retention among hospital-based health workers. Using an experimental design, this study concluded that performance-based financing did not improve health workers’ motivation, but did improve their job satisfaction and retention. On the other hand, Leonard et al. used clinical vignettes to measure the degree to which peer scrutiny influences the application of skills and knowledge of physicians, along with highlighting the role of intrinsic motivation in performance. The findings from these studies reiterate the need for innovative techniques for measuring health worker motivation and performance, in order to develop effective performance-improvement interventions.

While the above-mentioned studies are able to establish linkages between intervention and outcomes, they are often not able to explain the reasons influencing why a change takes place. This requires an explanatory approach, using different research methodologies to unpack the black box of health worker performance.

**Explanatory research**

Explanatory research is a form of in-depth research for using, testing and advancing theory to explain causal mechanisms. It contributes to a deeper understanding of reasons behind the success and failure of reforms and new initiatives. For example, a mixed-methods study by Witter et al. in Pakistan demonstrated how performance-based financing programmes often make assumptions about the effect on health worker motivation and showed how traditional performance-improvement evaluations might be enhanced. Similarly, using realist evaluation techniques, Prashanth et al. evaluated the outcomes of a capacity-
strengthening training programme for mid-level managers in India and developed an explanation for why the programme seemed to have worked in some settings and not in others.\textsuperscript{32}

Explanatory research also sets out to comprehend the multifaceted nature and dynamics of social systems, to provide a richer description and a more nuanced understanding of the context within which health workers are carrying out their tasks. For example, by triangulating information from civil service agencies and creating job histories based on interviews, Purohit et al. examined the reality of the posting and transfer system for medical officers in an Indian state.\textsuperscript{33} They found that the guidance on posting and transfer of medical officers was not only weakly implemented but also undermined by a parallel system in which desirable posts were attained by the use of political connections and money.\textsuperscript{33} Relatedly, a study by Rocha at al. aimed to explain the organizational culture existing in a Brazilian public hospital, and how this, in tum, influences workplace functioning for nurses and midwives in particular.\textsuperscript{34}

Although explanatory research aims to understand the context and pathways of change that affect health worker motivation, it typically does not engage health workers to collaborate or co-produce solutions.

**Emancipatory research**

Emancipatory research focuses on how stakeholders jointly understand a problem, act on it, and can learn from working collaboratively to contest power relations and effect change. For example, emancipatory research could examine the root causes of disrespectful treatment within a district hospital staff team, and how staff can construct more respectful norms. The key aspect of emancipatory research is its intent to use stakeholder participation in the creation of knowledge within a process of change. Emancipatory research is centred on sharing power between the researchers and participants, thereby empowering participants to bring about change. The *HRH reader* highlights examples of how emancipatory research can describe life histories of health workers,\textsuperscript{20,35} as well as develop collaborative approaches for strengthening the support provided to them.\textsuperscript{36} For example, Namakula and Witter created life histories of health workers in Uganda to understand how they experienced the 20-year conflict, and their motivation to continue working.\textsuperscript{35} Hernández et al. carried out a concept-mapping exercise with public sector managers and health workers in a vulnerable region of Guatemala.\textsuperscript{36} Through this exercise, health workers and managers developed a shared and context-specific understanding of the actions needed to better support auxiliary nurses’ performance.

**Conclusion**

These research typologies – exploratory, influence, explanatory and emancipatory – suggest new ways to look at HRH challenges and new types of research that can be commissioned to support health systems policy-making. Descriptive research, such as the use of traditional surveys, is a valuable component of health systems research. However, it cannot tell us why health workers behave the way they do, what interventions can improve performance, the mechanisms that lead to change, and strategies for empowering health workers to be agents of change themselves. Exploratory research enables deeper understanding of motivation, through identification of the importance of intrinsic values,\textsuperscript{25} relationships between health workers and their communities,\textsuperscript{28} and organizational leadership and justice.\textsuperscript{26,27} Research studying the influence of interventions on outcomes has, for example, highlighted that performance-based financing did not improve motivation in one trial,\textsuperscript{29} while explanatory research unpacked a range of reasons why performance-based financing did not influence health worker motivation.\textsuperscript{31} Emancipatory research, which produces knowledge about HRH issues while also engaging health workers to identify and solve their own challenges, was showcased as a tool for health workers to identify the support needed to stay motivated in challenging working environments.\textsuperscript{35,36} As illustrated in this paper, the *HRH reader* offers guidance to policy-makers and researchers when addressing the need for human resources for health to achieve universal health coverage in the SDG-era,\textsuperscript{20} and demonstrates how they can use a wider range of research approaches to gain deeper understanding of HRH challenges and identify pathways for innovative and effective HRH solutions.

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