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Successfully scaled solutions need not be homogenous *Soman & Hossain, 2021*

Context

Soman and Hossain address a critical challenge in behavioral public policy: the common observation that behavioral interventions show diminished effects when scaled from controlled research settings to real-world implementation.

They challenge the assumption that for an intervention to be valuable at scale, it must produce homogeneous (uniform) effects across all contexts and populations. The paper responds to skepticism about whether behavioral science findings can reliably inform large-scale policy decisions.

Key Insights

The authors identify three key challenges with scaling:

1. **Context dependence**: an intervention that works in one setting may not work in another and small contextual differences can have a huge impact.
2. **Heterogeneous treatment effects**: different groups respond different to intervention and so it is important to understand which sub-groups benefit most / are negatively impacted.
3. **The "kitchen sink" problem**: combining multiple successful interventions does mean they work together, they can interact unpredictable and backfire.

The authors propose how to strive for effective scaling:

1. Researchers & Governments should co-create evidence together.
2. Researchers should be incentivised to articulate all context dimensions and test the effect under different contexts.
3. Differences in the scaled-up context and testing context should be documented and then researchers should speculate on whether the results will change.
4. Heterogeneous treatment effects should be tested.
5. Project teams should include beahvioural scientists, designers and data scientists to designer, test, scale and monitor interventions.
6. The cost of experimentation within organisations should be reduced.

Implications

- How are you customising interventions to fit different contexts rather than assuming one-size-fits-all?
- What ethical safeguards ensure that customised interventions don't exploit or disadvantage particular sub-groups?
- How are you experimenting within your organisation?
- How do you consider how the context of your test and scale-up environment differ?

Soman, D., & Hossain, T. (2021). Successfully scaled solutions need not be homogenous. Behavioural Public Policy, 5(1), 80-89.