Reports from the Programme conference Policy frameworks

A framework for researching the impact of public policy on inequalities in health
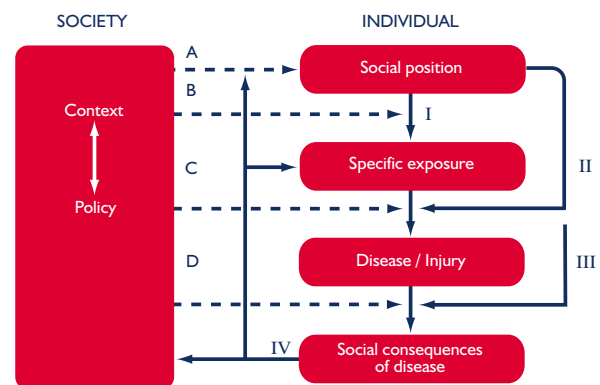
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Because many of the causes of the health divide lie outside the health sector, there is an urgent need to develop ways of assessing the impact of broader social and economic policies. The task is fraught with evaluation dilemmas, but pragmatic solutions are evolving, including the use of 'natural policy experiments'. These take advantage of variations in policy formulation or implementation in different localities and countries. Our ESRC study selected one such experiment - the differing social welfare policies in operation in the UK and Sweden - and assessed their impact on the health-related circumstances of lone mothers and people at risk of or experiencing unemployment.

This presentation outlined the conceptual framework (Figure 3) we refined for the task and its potential value for policy development. Essentially, it has been helpful in our study in pointing out distinct and empirically testable mechanisms generating inequalities in health, and also in distinguishing between several entry points where policy might potentially have an impact. It can, in combination with adequate individual level data on factors such as exposure levels and distributions, be used for health inequality impact analysis. The ultimate aim is to identify effective policy levers for making improvements.

Figure 3:
Framework for researching policy impact on health inequalities

The impact of social position on health through differential exposure (I), differential vulnerability (II), and differential consequences of disease (III). Consequences of disease might feed back into a casual pathway (IV). The modifying effect of social context and policy on social stratification (A), differential exposure (B), differential vulnerability (C), and differential social consequences of disease (D)

Source: Diderichsen and Hallquist, 1999