A Case Study of the United States Veterans' Disability Compensation Policy Subsystem

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Abstract

In public policy literature, there is a lack of research that integrates social construction theory within the advocacy coalition framework. Far less is known about how these theories address policy change and processes related to programs for disabled veterans (DVs).

Problem

A chasm exists between the formulation of the policy and legislation advocating for disabled veterans and the implementation of current policy for improving disability claims processing for disabled veterans.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to conduct a policy analysis to evaluate how well the needs of disabled veterans are met through the U.S. Veterans' Disability Compensation (USVDC) program. In a case study of a city in the southeastern U.S., gaps between formulation and implementation of USVDC policy were examined.

Relevant Literature

The theoretical frameworks used in this study were

•**The formulation and implementation gap** to analyze policy (Hacker, 2006)

•**social construction (**Schneider & Ingram, 2007)

•**advocacy coalition framework** (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

A review of the public policy literature revealed a need to integrate various theories or frameworks of the policy processes in the same study (Nowlin, 2011; Real-Dato, 2009; Schlager, 2007).

Research Questions

The central research question was: **To what extent is the USVDC program more effectively meeting the needs of disabled veterans?**

1. To what extent can the social construction and design theories be used within an advocacy coalition framework to inform transition assistance in the United States Veterans' Disability Compensation policy subsystem?

2. What are the policy gaps between the intent and implementation of United States Veteran's Disability Compensation Policy?

3. To what extent can the policy subsystem actors use social construction and design theory to help fill those gaps?

Procedures

This research integrated social construction and policy design theory within the policy subsystem of the advocacy coalition framework to analyze the formulation and implementation policy gaps for service members transitioning to becoming disabled veterans.

PolyAnalyst 6.5 software, was used to perform a qualitative content analysis on documents collected from the policy network.

Data Analysis

Data consisting of **363 USVDC formulation and implementation documents**, from March 2007 through August 2013, were coded using a priori codes and content analysis methodology.

Policy subsystem members were Coalition A members: United States Veterans Administration (VA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), United States Senate and House Hearings, Social Security Disability, Georgia Department of Veterans Affairs, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Coalition B members were the street level actors that implement policies governing disabled veteran benefits. Examples are VA caseworkers and Veteran Service Officers.

Figure 1. Linked terms from key word extraction

Findings

The USVDC policy subsystem struggled to manage the claims backlog that grew to over one million claims. Between April 2013 and September 2013, an emphasis to reduce the claims backlog improved stalled policy formulation, resulting in a shift to positive social constructions for DVs. From 2007 through March of 2013, the USVDC policy subsystem did not meet the needs of the American disabled veteran. A surge on the part of Coalition A members to eliminate the claims backlog from April 2013 until September 2013 was successful. The VA VBA intends to continue the momentum to eliminate the backlog by 2015.

Figure 1 is the result of a linked terms extraction in over one half of the documents in this content analysis. The figure depicts connections between terms.

The center of gravity of this figure and in the total content analysis is the term **veteran**.

A notable result of note in this diagram is the term transition (in light blue to the left center) as an outlier and separate from all other linked terms.
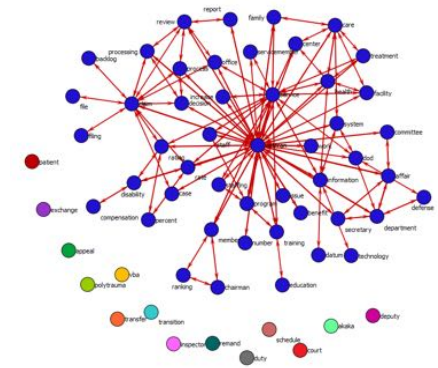
Limitation

One limitation may have been the lack of content data from direct claims processors from the VBA, who process the veteran disability claims backlog. Another study could apply the same methodology of this dissertation but with content from interviews with these employees.

Conclusion

This analysis of policy is a step in the direction to provide change in policies toward more positive social constructions in quality of life issues for disabled veterans.

Social Change Implications

Improved collaborations between policy makers, the Veterans' Administration, and recently transitioned target group DVs, to reshape policy formulation and implementation to further improve the quality of life for sick and injured veterans, when entering the USVDC policy subsystem.

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