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Five Pitfalls in Defining a Health System and Implications for Research and Management

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Abstract : Globally, researchers have struggled over time to adequately define the notion of health system to inform research. This study is significant because it proposes an integrative framework for a robust definition of the health system. The objective of this article is to examine major pitfalls in definitions of health system used in prior literature and implications of these for research and management. The study used methodological steps of a scoping review proposed by Arksey and O'Malley to identify and examine 24 definitions of a health system in articles selected from six databases and web search engines. Thematic analysis was used to delineate and categorise definitional pitfalls into broader themes. There are a plethora of five major pitfalls in the extant definitions of a health system which may easily scupper any unsuspecting researcher if not avoided or addressed in research. These definitional pitfalls are reductionist assumptions which ignore dynamic and complex connections, overly wide boundary and lack of specification of levels in a health system, and limited focus on process in a health system. In addition, there is the tendency of treating different components of the health system as equal and simplifying of the ontological complexity of the health system. Future scholars are advised to avoid or address the identified five major pitfalls if they are to develop robust definitions of an HS. The use of an integrative framework for a robust definition of a health system is recommended, while implications of the pitfalls are discussed as a basis and catalyst for complexity-informed research and managing interactively.

Keywords : complexity management, health system, pitfalls, reductionism, research
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