Integrating ethics into applied public health research, training, interventions and policy

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Wicked problems 101

- All policy and planning work involves wicked problems
- Not evil – but wild, untamed, complex, political, unsuited to technocratic solutions

- Technocracy is "a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant and political and economic institutions" (Fischer 1990)
- "In a technocracy, technical solutions are offered for problems that were at one time considered to be political problems of conflicting values and interests" (Evans 2006)

Wicked problems 101
(Rittel and Webber 1973)

- "The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are 'wicked' problems, whereas science has developed to deal with 'tame problems'. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good, there is no objective definition of equity, policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false, and it makes no sense to talk about 'optimal solutions' to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no 'solutions' in the sense of definitive and objective answers"

Population health as a wicked problem

- Expert 'solutions' – whether practical or research-based – are never sufficient for addressing wicked problems
- Achieving population health requires not just good science and well-designed interventions, but also political will, good processes, and popular buy-in

- Hence the importance of taking ethics seriously in applied public health

Sources of applied public health ethics

- Traditional bioethics
  - Autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice
- Public health practice
  - But ethos is not ethics

- Political philosophy of population health
- Health policy ethics (ethics of health policy assessment)

- All, some, or none of the above – depending on the 'job description' of applied public health ethics

Applied public health

- The development, implementation, and evaluation of population- and community-level interventions to shift the risk profile of entire groups

  - Focus on populations, not just individuals
  - Focus on population-level determinants, not just individual behaviors
  - Focus on risk profiles of populations, not just groups of 'high-risk' individuals

Roles for ethics and ethicists in applied public health

- <u>Motivating</u> population-health interventions
- <u>Developing</u> ethical population-health interventions
- Ethically <u>implementing</u> population-health interventions
- <u>Evaluating</u> population-health interventions with an eye to justice (and other moral) considerations

Motivating applied public health interventions

- Rose's *Prevention Paradox*: "'A preventive measure that brings much benefit to the population offers little to each participating individual'. This has been the history of public health – of immunization, the wearing of seat belts and now the attempt to change various life-style characteristics. Of enormous potential importance to the population as a whole, these measures offer very little – particularly in the short term – to each individual; and thus there is poor motivation of the subject" (Rose 1985/2001)

Developing ethical applied public health interventions

- Public and population health are complex topics; <u>understanding</u> them requires:
  - Interdisciplinarity
  - Upstream collaborations
  - Intersectoral and community collaborations
  - Taking ethics seriously
    - Taking ethics seriously in interdisciplinary protocol design means understanding that ethics is not just service, not an add-on, not an afterthought – but an integral part of research design, team building, implementation, and evaluation

Implementing ethical applied public health interventions

- Public and population health are complex topics; <u>addressing</u> them requires:
  - Interdisciplinarity
  - Upstream collaborations
  - Intersectoral and community collaborations
  - Taking ethics seriously
    - Taking ethics seriously in protocol implementation means understanding the complexity of people's motivations, taking the time to build trust and cultivate relationships upon which people make decisions, and recognizing the limits of autonomy while nonetheless promoting and protecting it

Evaluating ethical applied public health interventions

- Ethicists may play a helpful role in designing evaluations of applied public health interventions

- Two important questions:
    1. <u>Assuming the justice of the aims of an intervention</u> (an upstream consideration), are those aims being met?
    2. <u>Are they being met in justice-preserving or justice-promoting ways?</u>

- After all, population health may be maximized in ways that increase health inequities, rather than reducing them – this would be bad!

But…

How?

How, indeed?

- Get your ethics fix early and often, whether through training or collaboration

- <u>Training</u> in ethics should be both formative and lifelong; it should be interdisciplinary, team-based, and problem-centered; it should include a focus on the relevant science and practice base, the complexity of planning and the nature and practice of policy, and the many levels and sites of ethics in a pluralistic civil society

Moreover, not just any ethicist will do

- An applied public health ethicist:
  - must understand what it means to take a *population perspective* in science and ethics
  - must be amenable to interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration
  - must care about influencing policy, understand policy processes, and be prepared to work hard to effect policy change

- These are unfortunately rare characteristics

Take-home lessons

- There are no recipes for integrating ethics into applied public health research, training, practice, and policy

- But there are some key ingredients:
  - upstream integration; interdisciplinarity; a population perspective; intersectoral collaboration; identifying and cultivating the rights kinds of ethicists; and formative and lifelong training in applied public health ethics, science, policy, and practice

- Cook, don't bake, 'solutions' to wicked problems

Thank you!
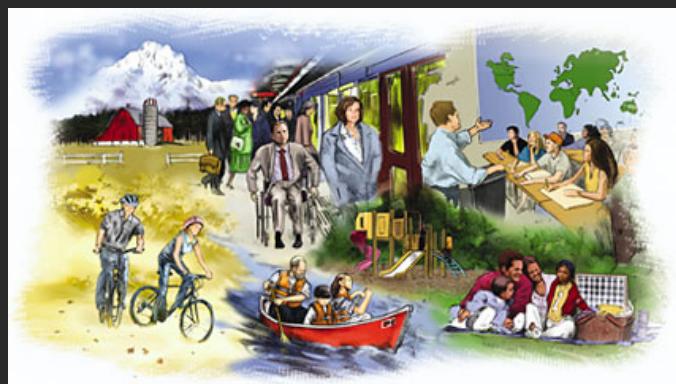
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