

Social Justice and Core Competencies for Public Health

Improving the Fit

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ABSTRACT

Social justice is a core value of public health. However, the public health core competencies for Canada document (release 1.0) does not contain any explicit reference to the essential attributes of social justice within the competencies themselves. We argue that social justice attributes should be integrated into the core competencies and propose examples for consideration.

Key words: Social justice; public health; human rights

RÉSUMÉ

La justice sociale est une valeur fondamentale en santé publique. Cependant, le document sur les compétences de base pour la santé publique au Canada (version 1.0) ne fait pas explicitement mention des attributs essentiels de la justice sociale dans les compétences mêmes. Nous tentons de démontrer, avec exemples à l'appui, que les attributs de la justice sociale devraient être intégrés dans les compétences de base.

Mots clés : justice sociale; santé publique; droits humains

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Social justice means the fair distribution of society's benefits, responsibilities and their consequences. It focuses on the relative position of one social group in relationship to others in society as well as on the root causes of disparities and what can be done to eliminate them.¹ Public health is inextricably linked to social justice in that societal arrangements of power and property powerfully shape the public's health.² Public health is arguably the segment of our health care system that can best exemplify social justice principles and values. In part, this is due to the nature of public health practice, which aims to intervene for the collective good using levers for change such as advocacy, policy change and social interventions. Although "some forms of social injustice may be corrected or prevented by individual action, most forms of social injustice require social or legal action for their correction or prevention."³ Social justice values are deeply rooted in public health practice. The historian, Barbara Rosenkrantz noted that early on "public health was closely allied to social reform, without any apologies".⁴ However, in the mid-20th century, a shift occurred towards reductionist thinking and there was an increased demand for empirical evidence to support public health interventions. In this context, social justice ideals were considered by some to be overly subjective.⁴ Some distancing from public health's social justice values subsequently became evident in public health policy documents.

More recently, authors have begun to call for the explicit recognition of social justice as a foundational value of public health.^{3,5} The current discussion of core competencies in Canada provides an important vehicle for public health to reflect its social justice values. In this paper, we briefly review the process that was undertaken to develop core competencies for public health in Canada. We identify key attributes of social justice and review the social justice orientation of the core competencies as reflected in release 1.0. Finally, we call for the explicit integration of social justice principles in these competencies and propose examples for consideration.

Developing core competencies for public health in Canada

Core competencies are the "cross-cutting skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary

TABLE 1
Examples of Potential Social Justice Core Competencies for Public Health

Domain of core competencies*	Potential competency reflecting social justice attributes
Public health sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe public health's role in righting social injustices • Understand relationships between social determinants of health and inequities
Assessment and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use data to describe and differentiate between health inequalities and health inequities • Work with marginalized populations to use quantitative and qualitative data to examine and take action on inequities and disparities in health status
Policy and program planning, implementation and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the ways in which each policy option may reduce or increase social and health inequities • Recognize the potential differential effects of health interventions on population subgroups
Partnerships, collaboration and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support governments and community partners to build just institutions • Solicit input from individuals and organizations to address inequities
Diversity and inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate dialogue about the fair allocation of resources • Understand and apply the Universal Declaration on Human Rights
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop communication strategies for subpopulations that have been historically oppressed
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate the values of social justice within the mission and strategic plans of an organization • Identify how the redistribution of public health resources may alter or reinforce inequities.

* Domains are those proposed in the Core Competencies developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (Release 1.0).

for the broad practice of public health” by all public health practitioners.⁶ Part of the impetus to develop core competencies for public health in Canada followed the experience with SARS and subsequent recognition of the need to strengthen the public health workforce.⁷ The selection of competencies has been guided by the report from the Advisory Committee on Population Health and informed by similar work in other countries, most notably the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand.^{6,8} Many contributed to the core competencies, including the public health human resources joint task group, participants of core competencies workshops held at the Canadian Public Health Association in 2004, and discipline-specific initiatives such as that led by the Community Health Nurses Association of Canada.⁹ In 2005, an Ontario Public Health Association Task Group prepared a draft set of 62 core competencies.⁶ These were discussed in several national forums, and the Public Health Agency of Canada led a national consultation process to obtain input on them.¹⁰ The Public Health Agency of Canada published “The Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada: Release 1.0” in September 2007.¹¹ Before examining whether or not social justice values are reflected in the current version of the competencies, we describe the attributes of social justice.

Social justice attributes

Social justice has been identified as one of the most important goals of social progress and a founding pillar of public health.^{12,13} Over the last twenty years, it has emerged as an underlying goal of many social, humanitarian and health organizations, and has been referred to in high-profile public health documents and venues.^{3,12-18}

Philosopher John Rawls’ theory of justice is built on the idea that justice is fairness and that social justice is the fair distribution of society’s benefits and responsibilities.¹⁹ This is the definition most commonly used in the literature.^{1,20-22} Rawls’ definition of social justice can also be interpreted to include the benefits and burdens of public health action or lack thereof.²⁰ Beyond Rawls, social justice is defined in the public health literature through the works of such scholars as Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, Norman Daniels, Robert Nozick, Martha Nussbaum, Onora O’Neil, Amartya Sen, Robert Veatch and others. It is often linked with the concepts of equity and health equity as well as with human rights, empowerment, environmental justice, social determinants of health, democracy, social development, poverty reduction, fairness, and social responsibility.^{17,19,22-31}

Some examples of the defining attributes of social justice efforts include identifying inequities and their underlying determi-

nants; advocating for human rights and dignities; establishing just economic, social and political institutions; supporting equity, and when appropriate, equality; and demonstrating concern for civil rights.¹⁴ If social justice were the machine, these kinds of attributes would be the moving parts. Therefore, when reviewing whether social justice principles or values are evident in the core competencies, we examine the presence or absence of such attributes.¹

Core competencies and social justice principles

The document “Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada (Release 1.0)” was reviewed by each author. Each of the 36 competencies was examined to identify either explicit or implicit references to social justice attributes. Several competencies implicitly reflect an underlying social justice value. For example, competence 5.2, “address population diversity when planning, implementing, adapting and evaluating public health programs and policies”, underscores the importance of recognizing population diversity and subtly indicates a recognition of disparities. Similarly, competence 5.3, “apply culturally-relevant and appropriate approaches with people from diverse cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and persons of all ages, genders, health status, sexual orientations and abilities”, refers to the importance of anti-discriminatory practice. However, there are no competencies with an explicit reference to social justice. Inequity is mentioned once; in competence 1.1, “demonstrate knowledge about... inequities in health, the determinants of health and illness... as well as the factors that influence the delivery and use of health services”. Related terms such as fairness, injustice and disparity are absent from the competencies. Social justice is mentioned only once in the document as a whole. It is in a preamble to the listing of the competencies.

The authors state that although these attitudes and values form the context within which the competencies are practiced, and are important, they have not been included explicitly in the core competencies themselves because attitudes and values like social justice are “difficult to teach and even harder to assess” (p.3). We do not agree and we believe that social justice

should be explicitly included in the Public Health competencies themselves.

Integrating social justice principles in core competencies

We offer several examples of core competencies for social justice in Table I. This list is only a starting point. To fully develop this subset of competencies will require a discussion among those working in the field of public health in Canada. It is our view that social justice principles should be integrated into all of the existing domains for core competencies. Creating a new domain of social justice competencies might suggest that they are a separate and optional set of competencies. Since social justice is a core, foundational value for the work we do in public health, it is our contention that social justice principles should be reflected in each domain of our practice.

CONCLUSION

Core competencies for public health are critical. They are likely to be a driving force for many facets of public health, including: the design of graduate, undergraduate and continuing education programs; the selection of priority target groups; the development of intervention programs; and the evolution of accreditation standards. With our more complete understanding of underlying social determinants, public health practitioners are poised to take vigorous action to redress inequities. Social justice attributes should be explicitly incorporated into Canadian public health core competencies.

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