Global Community-Based Public Health Research: Educating for Social justice

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Background

Public Health in Ghana: Community-based Research Methods is a 5-week study abroad program that combines public health concepts with anthropological theory and methods to teach social justice and advance public health education and practice. The program uses a community-based participatory approach, collaborating with the local community, local and district health professionals, and our partners at MountCrest University College.

What is a Social Justice Approach?

Social justice is the foundation and a core value of public health. It is based on the notion that every person has a right to fair and equitable treatment and a just share of the benefits society has to offer. As a way of *doing justice in society*, public health can and should act to:

- Reduce health inequities
- Work with vulnerable populations
- Address the social determinants/social and structural factors that affect health
- Apply human rights principles
- Use a collaborative, community-based approach

Students learn to utilize and embody these principles/concepts through the community engagement experience.

Combining Anthropology & Public Health

Theory

- Holistic perspective/systems approach: puts program and public health problems into larger historical, social, political, economic, ethical and cultural context
- Allows for critical macro and micro (local) level exploration of topics

Methods: Combination Methods

- Qualitative - ethnographic methods and participant observation
- Grounded Theory - students engage in an iterative research process where research questions are derived from field experiences/community feedback

Practice

- Community-based experience designed to teach students how to incorporate social factors and cultural contexts into understanding of health issues; how to investigate and integrate community values, beliefs and practices into public health strategies and interventions using collaborative, CBPR approaches.

Social Justice Approach

- Facilitates identifying issues related to social and structural factors; demonstrates how power structures link to experiences of disease and illness and feeds into larger social justice framework employed by public health.
- Positionality and Reflexivity: In an effort to support 'self-conscious, effective, and ethically sound' public health practice, students are required to explore how their position, i.e., political, cultural, social, economic, and interpersonal values, impacts and interacts with the research process

Examples

Through a combination of ethnographic field methods and community participation, students were able to elucidate the dynamics of complex public health issues

Mental Health

- Using a critical interpretive approach, students conducted research that explored the relationship between the macro, political- economic structures, (i.e., national mental health policies) in Ghana and the local perceptions of mental illness and the individual mental illness experience (i.e., professional and lay persons). By illuminating disparities between the resources, current practices, and individual experiences, more refined points of intervention were identified and relevant policy recommendations were made.

Breastfeeding

- Participant observation - students were able to identify disparities between knowledge and practice. E.g., participants knew and understood national breastfeeding recommendations; however, observations revealed that participants were not following recommendations. Upon observing this, students were able to redirect research efforts towards understanding the barriers for turning breastfeeding knowledge into breastfeeding practice.

Malaria

- Research suggests local community knowledge about malaria affects insecticide-treated net use; as such, students assessed local knowledge and perceptions around malaria prevention. Results showed that rather than a lack of knowledge around transmission, the local community felt a lack of malaria prevention was linked to diminished resources, a lack of well-understood and defined environmental policy, and ill-conceived net designs. Results were given to local Chiefs and health teams, i.e., those with the resources and legislative power to improve and enforce local environmental policies

Students in the Field
Lessons Learned – Advancing Public Health Education and Practice

- Value of combining the discipline of anthropology with the field of public health
- Providing the larger historical, social, political, economic, ethical and cultural background is critical to contextualizing the overall experience
- Students develop global and cultural competence
- Results represent community experiences and are used to inform policy recommendations - community voice in public health practice, i.e., social justice
- Significance of the lived experience and a community-based participatory process for students' *personal* and *professional* development. Students explore issues related to global public health – in theory and praxis - integrating broader questions relating to ethics and sustainable, effective public health practice
- Students are required to explore complex topics about 'real world' public health practice, addressing topics from practical, structural, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions.