

Ethical & Methodological Issues in Public Health Research

PHS 5820

Instructor: Christopher J. Colvin, PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology (University of Virginia), MPH in Epidemiology (University of Cape Town)

Office: 7 Alfred St, Observatory, Cape Town

Phone: +27-21-447-7605

Email: cjc5r@virginia.edu

Class Times: See weekly schedule

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

Health and illness are complex, multi-dimensional phenomena. Good health—and bad—is the product of the interaction of *biological* factors (genes, microbes, organ systems), *psychological* factors (cognitive schema, behaviours, attitudes and learned responses, emotions), *social and cultural* factors (social structures and networks, cultural beliefs and practices, moral values), *economic* factors (opportunity structures and life chances, labour practices, access to resources), *political* factors (state policies and legislation, decision-making structures and processes, and political conflicts and activism), and *environmental* factors (pollutions of all sorts, built environments, the availability of water, arable land, space, and other resources). And to add to this complexity, the factors that affect health operate on individual, family, community, national, regional, and global levels as well.

The study of health and illness is therefore necessarily a highly multi-disciplinary undertaking. Investigating something as complex as health—in an individual, a community or an entire population—requires the tools of a wide variety of research traditions, from anthropology, sociology and economics, to policy studies, public service, and political science, to epidemiology, microbiology, pharmacology, and genetics. This course will introduce students to some of the basic research methods used to investigate health and illness and help them see the ways different disciplinary perspectives can be used to understand and address the key global health challenges of our time.

The course will review both quantitative and qualitative methods but its emphasis will be on qualitative methods. The nature and role of qualitative research in public health—and the health sciences more broadly—has been and continues to be the subject of intense debate. How are qualitative data and analysis different from quantitative data and analysis? How do these different research traditions relate to each other? How can we evaluate the reliability and validity of qualitative research? Can health researchers grounded in quantitative techniques and positivist epistemologies *do* qualitative research? Can they do it *well*? What value does qualitative research add to large-scale epidemiological studies or randomised controlled trials? These are some of the methodological issues we will address in the

course of this class. We will also address some of the many ethical issues that arise in public health research.

This course will be closely integrated with PHS 5821 (Public Health Practicum/Field Placement). This methods course will help to initiate and guide the work done in the field research projects and the field research experience will, in turn, provide much of the experiential “raw material” about ethical and methodological challenges that we will then reflect on and process in the methods course.

Course Objectives

This course will enable students to:

- Identify and describe key concepts and theories related to qualitative and quantitative inquiry in public health, study design, data collection methods, analysis, report writing, and dissemination.
- Develop basic research designs of their own and to interpret and evaluate research reports and articles in the public health literature,
- Explain how qualitative and quantitative research studies differ and how to choose the research methods appropriate to research questions in public health,
- Understand the ethical and logistical issues involved in public health research and problem solve ways of addressing these challenges.

Thematic Sections

The course is broken down into 12 topical units. Rather than being presented separately, these topics will be addressed in an integrated fashion with the fieldwork and research project development experience. The topics are as follows:

- 1:** Course Outline and Key Issues: What is health research?
- 2:** Qualitative and Quantitative Health Research Questions and Designs
- 3:** Protocol Design and Planning for Summer Project
- 4:** Data collection: Observation, participant-observation and other techniques
- 5:** Data collection: Interviews and focus groups
- 6:** How Who Matters: Sampling and Reflexivity in Health Research
- 7:** Ethics and Health Research
- 8:** Analyzing Qualitative Data
- 9:** Strengthening and Assessing Rigour in Health Research
- 10:** Data Management and Project Logistics
- 11:** Knowledge Translation: Getting Results into Policy and Practice
- 12:** Research Project Presentations and Peer Reviews

Assignments

Assignments for this course will include:

Group Research Project

Most of the course grade will be devoted to the development of a research report presenting and analyzing findings from the group field research project undertaken in PHS 5821. Students will be graded on a range of activities and products during the program (development of interview questions, reflection memos on ethical issues, participation in discussion around data analysis, etc) as well as a final written report on the project findings. Some components of the overall project will be graded as a group and others will be graded individually. See PHS 5821 syllabus for more information on the research project.

Instead of a final exam, a final, revised version of the research report will be due 2 weeks after the end of the program.

Readings

Required Readings:

- *Sizwe's Test (also titled 'Three Letter Plague')*, Jonny Steinberg
- *Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic—and How It Changed Science, Cities and the Modern World*, Steven Johnson
- *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting and Presenting Your Research*, Julian M. Murchison
- Lancet Series on "Health in South Africa", Papers 1-6 (will be provided by lecturer)
- Selections from *Qualitative Methods in Public Health* (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley), Family Health International (will be provided by lecturer)
- Other assigned methods articles and research reports

Supplementary Readings:

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hancock, T. & Minkler, M. (2005). Community health assessment or healthy community assessment: whose community? whose health? whose assessment? IN: M. Minkler (Ed.) *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (2nd ed.), 138-157.
- Williams, K.J., Bray, P.G., Shapiro-Mendoza, C.K., Reisz, I. & Peranteau, J. (2007). Modeling the principles of community-based participatory research in a community health assessment conducted by a health foundation. *Health Promotion Practice*, 10
- Briggs, Charles, 2003. Interviewing, Power/Knowledge and Social Inequality. *In Postmodern Interviewing*. Jaber F. Gubrium, and James A. Holstein, eds. 243-52. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kolb, Bettina, 2008. Involving, Sharing, Analysing - Potential of the Participatory Photo Interview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9(3): Art. 12.
- Mitchell, Lisa, 2006. Child-Centered? Thinking Critically About Children's Drawings as a Visual Research Method. *Visual Anthropology Review* 22(1): 60-73.