Student perspectives of community engagement
Master of Public Health program at McMaster University

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Public Health 2016

Building Public Health System Capacity 4

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9:00 am – 10:30 am

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Questions for audience

- How do you understand the term 'community engagement'?

- What does community engagement experience look like?

- What should MPH students learn about community engagement?

Community Engagement

- **Community engagement (CE) at McMaster University is defined as** *valuing the expert knowledge and passion that members of the community (both local and global) have about their communities and issues affecting them; fostering ongoing collaboration between University and community partners on how to better understand and consider the issues identified as priorities by local and global communities; and performing research, teaching and service with community members and partners for the public good within the local or global community.*
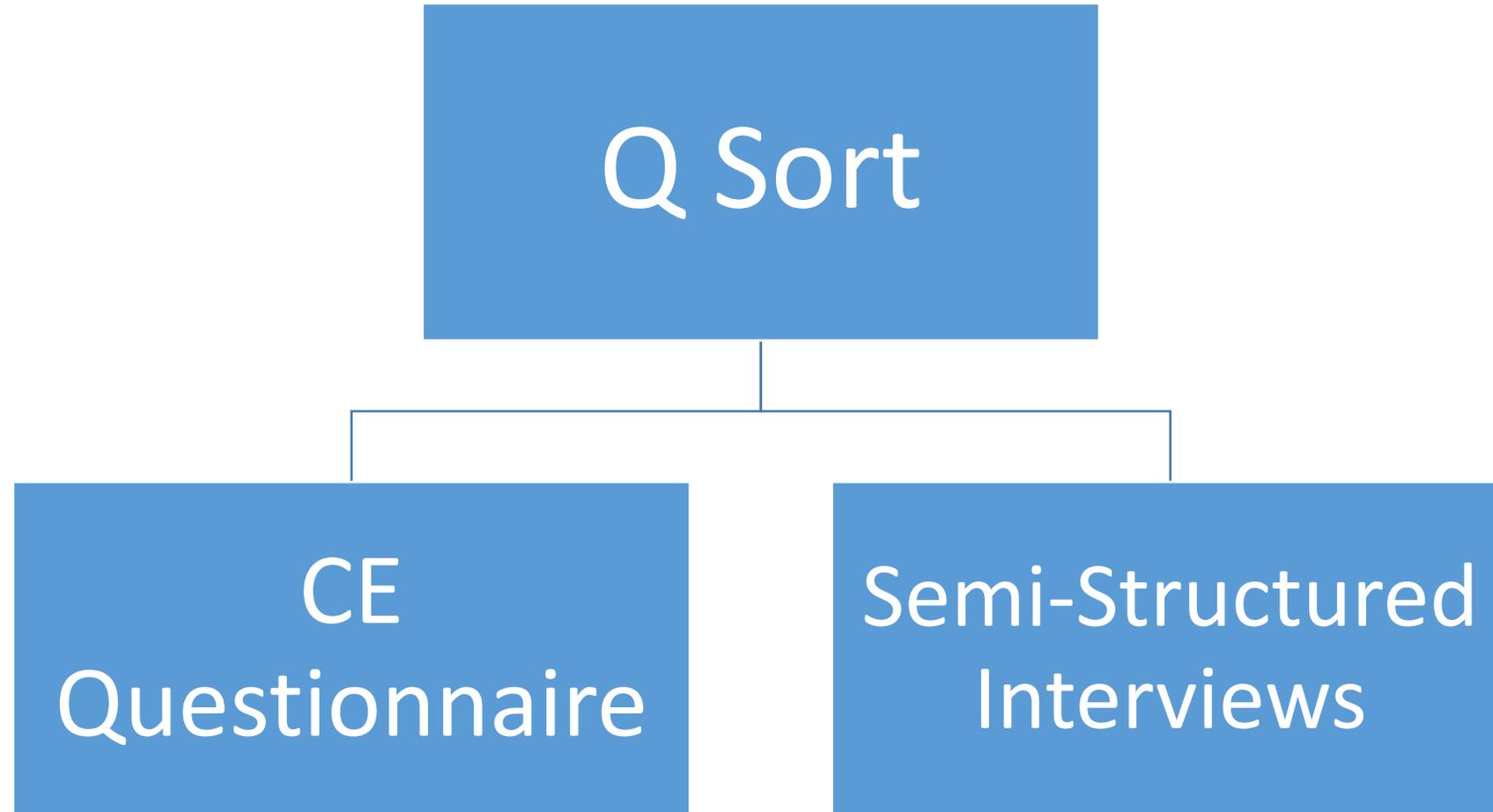
Research Question

How do McMaster MPH students perceive and understand **community engagement (CE)** principles and how are their needs addressed by the MPH program with regards to **CE**?

REB approval: Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board

Time frame: Fall-winter 2015-2016

Design and Methodology

Response

- Out of a total 25 full-time MPH students

- Community Engagement Questionnaire, N=17
- Interviews, N=7 (In-Person 4, Phone 3)
- Q Sort, N=22

Questionnaire Summary

- What is your understanding of the term 'community engagement'?
  - *Relationship building, getting involved with community, collaborating with community, setting and achieving goals with community, raising awareness within community, interacting and understanding local issues, outcome of community engagement is to improve health and wellbeing, involves building rapport*
- What has been your experience with community engagement so far?
  - *Positive, challenging and rewarding, volunteering with community organizations, participating in community events, past coursework, working in health promotion, fundraising events, none to limited experience*
- What do you want to learn about community engagement?
  - *How to foster proper community engagement, barrier and facilitators of community engagement, how to get more involved, where to find opportunities, definition of community engagement, knowledge translation, impact evaluation, sustainability, who are the different stakeholders, policies involved, initiative planning*

Interview Summary

- On education of CE
  - *Past understanding comes from volunteering and personal experiences, A mixture of didactic lectures and practical hands-on learning environments would provide a deeper understanding of CE*

- On CE concepts
  - *Transparency and communication with community is important, Most can speak to CE principles (reciprocity, social justice, cultural understanding, sustainability, transparency)*

- On preparedness
  - *Afraid of making a poor impression with community, Fear of offending others, Feel prepared to interact and build relationships with others*

Q Methodology

- Detailed instructions sheet and supplementary questionnaire
- Individual activity; sorting the 34 statements (**Q Set**) developed from questionnaire and interviews
- Data analysis performed on PQMethod 2.35

Development of Statements (Q Set)

- Statements were developed from CE Questionnaire and Interviews, a process of synthesizing information provided by participants

- Example:

"I don't know if, I feel like may there should be a course, or not a course, but Fran promoted this social work course. And from what I am understanding and from what we talked about in lectures. **Is that those two go hand in hand - community based research course and public health.** Because we are learning about, okay so, once we get the data, how do we analyse the data, biostatistics. We learned about epidemiology and the types of studies we can do. **And that they all go so well together, and I can see myself using everything that I learned from first semester into my future.**
I just feel like, **in terms of community engagement directly from the program, we might need a bit more, I don't know if it's a course or having I don't know, or having more lectures on it** or just having…you know?
Just to solidify that, as a school we are so committed to community engagement and if it's such a big part of public health itself, you know? I think it's important."

30. Community-based research and public health practice go hand in hand

11. I believe I will be able to apply the theoretical knowledge taught in the MPH program in the near future

10. The MPH program would benefit with more lectures on community engagement principles, concepts, and practice

Summary of Strong Agreement/Disagreement Results

- CE learning preferences
  - Problem based learning is important
  - CE goes hand in hand with public health practice
  - Learning on CE happens outside of the classroom
  - Media is not seen as a source of CE learning
- MPH curriculum addressing CE
  - CE can be integrated to address other populations
  - Need to consider students with diverse backgrounds (more than limited CE understanding vs. little exposure to CE in undergrad)

Summary of Strong Agreement/Disagreement Results

- CE principles and concepts
  - Humility and having an open mind is important, consider different points of views, acknowledge personal biases of community, and be willing to learn from community
  - Mutually beneficial relationships are important
  - Transparency and positivity are important for CE
  - Community's values, beliefs, and needs are important
  - Language is important, working 'with' vs. 'on' community
  - Understanding context is essential for CE

Summary of Factor Results

- The personal learning portfolio is valued by a subgroup (factor 1) and the value and applicability of their education is visible

- The problem and group based learning approach is valued by a subgroup (factor 2) and the value of the collaborative tutorials is visible

- Improvements can be made to better integrate community engagement into the MPH program understood by a subgroup (factor 3), particularly re-examining guest lectures and the introduction of the personal learning portfolio (factor 4)

Summary of Factor Results Con't

- CE perceptions (factor 1)
  - CE learning comes from the classroom
- CE perceptions (factor 2)
  - Communication and transparency are important for CE
- CE perceptions (factor 3, factor 4)
  - The process is more important than the outcome
  - Afraid of unintentionally offending others, particular populations
  - More than limited understanding of CE
  - Keeping and open mind and humble attitude are important
- All
  - CE learning did not come from the media
  - CE-research and public health go hand in hand

Strengths

- What did this method provide that a traditional survey can't?
  - Factor analysis to determine commonalities and differing ideas within the participant cohort
  - Did not predispose a biased perspective onto the cohort, rather this allowed them to provide their personal viewpoint
- Unbiased researcher conducting data collection and analysis
  - Allows students to participate freely and comfortably
- Opportune time
  - MPH program in inaugural year

Limitations

- Was the formulation of statements representative of RQ?
  - The results are highly dependent on the **formulation** of the statement set – which was a holistic representation of students' perspectives
  - Statement set was very diverse (CE principle specific, MPH program specific, learning style specific, etc.) and not all were directly answering the RQ
  - Wording of the statements – quite unambiguous (a strength), but some statements were more overly positive or negative
  - Review of the statement set by more than one investigator would be valuable
  - Trial run the statement set with a volunteer to get an idea of how many disagree/neutral/agree statements exists to find a balance

Conclusions from research

- CE is difficult to define without theoretical knowledge and practical experience

- CE learning preferences are diverse and learning happens in many different avenues and contexts

- CE values emphasized by students differ but commonalities do exist; There are distinct perceptions and perspectives, evident through Q Sort

- The CE questionnaire and interviews drew specific insight into the RQ, that the Q Sort could not provide. A similar model, with changes to the statement formulation process, can be applied to explore student perceptions in other programs.

Recommendations to MPH Program

- **Embed CE into the MPH program more deliberately** – possibly addressing the topic through a course or multiple lectures, with particular introduction to marginalized and vulnerable populations, and acknowledging a need for a balance of practical and theoretical knowledge

- **Personal Learning Portfolio** – examining the appropriateness of the delivery of this task to promote positive reflection and uptake

- **Collaborative Tutorials** – possible restructuring of the tutorial to provide a more valuable learning environment for all students

Questions or Comments?

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