

The ethics of motivating population health intervention research

Jason Robert

School of Life Sciences
Arizona State University

OUTLINE

Population health intervention research aims at improving the effectiveness of interventions designed to achieve population health outcomes. To date, population health has been a largely descriptive enterprise involving the detailed characterization of social and community determinants of individual, public, and population health. Population health intervention research builds on this strong empirical foundation by designing, implementing, and evaluating practices, programs, and policies to address these larger determinants of health. The goal of population-level health interventions is to "shift the distribution of health risk by addressing the underlying social, economic and environmental conditions" that foster the patterns of illness and disease we experience (Hawe and Potvin 2009). Remarkably, many population-level health interventions emanate from beyond rather than within the health sector: educational, employment, urban planning, and housing initiatives are key agents of population-health change. Population health intervention research raises ethical issues at micro, meso, and macro scales. At the micro and meso scale, the issues include the ethics of research design and implementation, especially in the context of community-based participatory research. I will touch upon these issues briefly along the path to a more macro-scale ethical assessment of the motivation for population health intervention research. Why do we engage in population-level health research in the first place? For some, the description of patterns of health inequities due to social organization leads to an ethical imperative, namely to redress those inequities in the name of justice. But for others, it would be at best supererogatory, and at worst misguided and wasteful, to attend to health inequities at the population level. What, if any, is the morally appropriate response to the description of patterns of population health? More generally, what does it mean to build healthier communities through population health intervention research and what, if any, is the ethical rationale for such efforts? As population health intervention research takes its place alongside other forms of translational research from bench to bedside to barrio, from margins to center, from analysis to action, what are the key challenges for bioethics and bioethicists?

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