Abstract

Debates about appropriate methodologies for studying public health problems have tended to be polarized. Traditionalists, advocating the use of epidemiology and other methods drawn from a reductionist research tradition have tended to devalue the potential contribution of more interpretive research methods. Those advocating the use of more qualitative methods have often established the legitimacy of these methods by criticising the contribution of quantitative techniques. These debates often mask more fundamental differences in epistemology and approaches to dealing with the issues of power raised by research which aims to be compatible with the philosophy of the new public health. This paper argues that these underlying issues are crucial to contemporary public health debates and the methods are simply tools that are used to further
knowledge and have no inherent status as sound or unsound. Public health problems result from complex social, economic, political, biological, genetic and environmental causes. A range of methods are needed to tackle these and public health researchers are most effective when they are eclectic in their choice of methods.

Keywords
qualitative research; methodology; applied research

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