

The Contribution of the Social and Behavioural Sciences to Public Health

Public health is a complex field of practice that engages a diverse range of perspectives and approaches for researching and changing health and its determinants at a population level. According to CIHR (Canadian Institutes for Health Research), one of the four foundational knowledge pillars of public health is “behavioural and social science research applied to health”. The scientific task here is to ***understand and explain the nature and mechanisms of the individual, institutional and societal conditions and forces that determine health status, health-related behaviour, and the organization, process and outcomes of public health as a set of practices for prevention and intervention.***

Many different disciplines contribute to the knowledge base of this pillar. In the Social and Behavioural Health Sciences Division (SBHS) at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, current faculty have backgrounds in social & community psychology, sociology, geography, anthropology, history, law, and political science. The social and behavioural sciences are not a unified field, but certain key features are widely shared within SBHS Division and underlie much of its research and educational curricula. In particular:

- ‘Social relations’ are conceived as central to health. Health status, health-related behaviour, and professional and institutional practices are understood as being shaped by human social interaction and by cultural, organizational, political and societal structures and processes.
- Problems are framed and addressed at multiple levels. Perspectives range from ‘micro’ (individual/behavioural) to ‘meso’ (groups, organizations) to ‘macro’ (institutional/societal), often with reference to relationships across scale.
- Context is considered analytically important. Determinants, processes and outcomes are viewed as contingent upon the circumstances and conditions in which they are located.
- Theory is employed as a key research resource. Theory is used to explain social processes that can only be inferred from observable phenomena (e.g. social class, power, racism, social learning) and to inform and link core assumptions, research questions, methodological design, data interpretation, and findings.
- Research methodology is aligned with the distinctive character of social/behavioural phenomena. A variety of qualitative, quantitative and blended approaches, from varied disciplinary traditions, are designed to study phenomena that are mediated by human interpretation and meaning, and rooted in individual and social systems.
- A ‘critical’ approach is taken to research and professional practice. Attention is directed to identifying underlying assumptions, the role of power in health and public health practices, and the political nature of knowledge and public discourse.

The SBHS Division makes three main contributions to the Dalla Lana School of Public Health:

1. It contributes to the foundational scientific knowledge base of research and practice of the field by conceptualizing and explaining the social and behavioural dimensions of health and its determinants, and by adapting and developing the specialized theoretical and methodological approaches that are needed to do so.
2. It contributes to the multi-disciplinary character of the field of public health by providing a strong academic link between public health and the social sciences.
3. It contributes to the School’s mandate to translate and apply foundational knowledge and research to the every-day professional activities of public health and to arenas that influence public health, including behaviour change, community development, service delivery and programming, local, national, and international policy making, and organizational and societal change.