Towards a common understanding of the health sciences based on WHO‘s ICF

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Health Sciences

- Defining the field of study of “health”
- Defining “sciences”
Field of Study - Health

• Is it futile to define health?

• What we need is not a definition but an operationalization suitable for the scientific study of health
Normative Definition of Health Aspiration

• Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization April 1948. The Definition has not been amended since 1948.
Operationalization of Health
Purpose

Describing, understanding, influencing health

1. Conceptualization
   - NOT a theory, NOT true or false

2. Classification
   - Domains
     - universal, etiologically neutral
     - mutually exclusive and cumulative exhaustive
WHO’s Operationalizations

• Traditional focus
  – compression of morbidity
    • “absence of disease or infirmity”

• New focus
  – optimal functioning
    • “complete physical, mental and social well-being”
Is the ICF a suitable Operationalization of Health?

Jerome Bickenbach’s claim

The ICF is the best model for operationalizing the complete domain of the lived experience of health by an individual, and by extension a population, understood in terms of the outcome of an interaction between biological health status and the environment, and personal resources.
# Rethinking the Health Strategies in light of the ICF

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**Optimal Functioning**

The health goal of the 21st century
Is the ICF a suitable Operationalization of Health?

Practical Requirements

- A **conceptual framework** that specifies relevant dimensions of health;
- A **classification** of the mutually exclusive and cumulatively exhaustive entities representing the ontological domain of health
- Availability of suitable **data collection tools**
- **Common metrics** for the standardized description and comparative analysis of data collected by the wide range of currently used data collection tools
Functioning profile of the SwiSCI study population

0=no problem; 1=mild problem; 2=moderate problem; 3=severe problem; 4=complete problem

Field of Study based on the ICF

Person Health

Biological Health - Capacity
Lived Health - Performance

Response
Opportunity

Society
Health System
Related Systems
“The health sciences are a scientific field that studies
(I) the individual’s functioning in terms of health and lived health in interaction with the environment, in light of health conditions and given a person’s psychological resources, and
(II) the response by society to individual and population health needs through its health system and related social systems including labor, social affairs and education.”

Health Sciences

• Defining the field of study of “health”
• Defining “sciences”
2 Organizing Principles

- Scientific disciplines
- Shared methodological approaches
3 Scientific Meta-Perspectives
to categorize relevant disciplines contributing to
the field of health research

• Biological
  e.g. Life Science, Pharmaceutical Sciences

• Clinical
  e.g. Physical Therapy, Speech therapy

• Socio-humanistic
  e.g. Economy, Political Sciences, Sociology
4 Methodological Approaches

• Critical thinking
• Research design
• Qualitative methods
• Quantitative methods
“The health sciences are a scientific field that studies
(I) the individual’s functioning in terms of health and lived health
in interaction with the environment, in light of health conditions
and given a person’s psychological resources, and
(II) the response by society to individual and population health
needs through its health system and related social systems
including labor, social affairs and education.

This is accomplished by
relying on and integrating mutually recognizable scientific
disciplines rooted in the biological, clinical and socio-humanistic
meta-perspectives and
applying a shared set of methodological approaches, specifically,
critical thinking, research design, qualitative and quantitative
methods.”

Universität Luzern

Der Mensch in der Gesellschaft

Mensch

Gesundheit, Funktionsfähigkeit, Well-being

Gesellschaft

Gesundheitssystem, Sozialsystem, Bildungssystem
• A common understanding of the health sciences based on the ICF can facilitate collaborative communication.

• It can help overcome both disciplinary and cultural barriers created by the increasing fragmentation of health research.