



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTH EQUITY: A CURATED LIST

Health equity and social justice are both concepts with strong roots in ethical theory. As a result, there are many competing views about how we might think about them and apply them to our work in public health. While philosophers and others have begun to help us consider what these values require in the public health context, their contributions are theoretically dense and largely inaccessible to policy-makers and practitioners.

To complicate matters further, there is a tremendous amount of literature that discusses concepts that should be considered when thinking about justice in this context (e.g., intersectionality, exploitation, domination, discrimination, etc.). For these reasons, it is exceedingly difficult to produce a comprehensive curated reading list of key resources that speak to the ethical foundations of health equity.

Choosing resources

With that said, the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH) has compiled a list of resources to support public health practitioners in engaging with the ethical foundations and dimensions of health equity. The goal for choosing resources was to identify works that met three main criteria:

1. Resources that speak to the foundational theoretical contributions to this area
2. Resources that attempt to discuss the practical considerations and implications of these theoretical contributions
3. Resources that engage with key related concepts and considerations

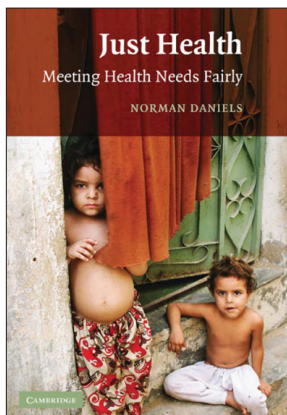
In doing so, we hope this list will promote consideration and discussion of the ethical objectives that our work in health equity should aim to achieve.

This curated reading list complements other resources available from the NCCDH, including *Let's Talk: Ethical foundations of health equity*,¹ *Let's Talk: Values and health equity*² and *Living health equity values in health organizations*.³

The list organizes resources into the following five categories: **prominent theories of justice in public health, advancing the concept of justice in public health practice, key related concepts and considerations, public health competencies and practice tools.**

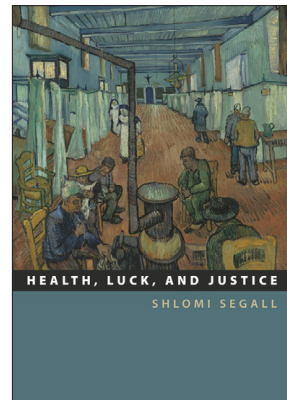
PROMINENT THEORIES OF JUSTICE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

The following five books represent the most prominent philosophical contributions to thinking about how social justice should be conceptualized in the context of public health practice and decision-making. While they are written by philosophers and engage in in-depth philosophical analysis, they provide compelling, comprehensive and theoretically robust justifications for the emphasis on placing social justice as the foundation for public health and, ultimately, work in health equity.



Just health: Meeting health needs fairly⁴

Daniels N. [2007].



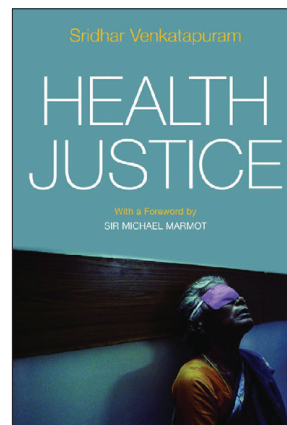
Health, luck, and justice⁷

Segall S. [2009].



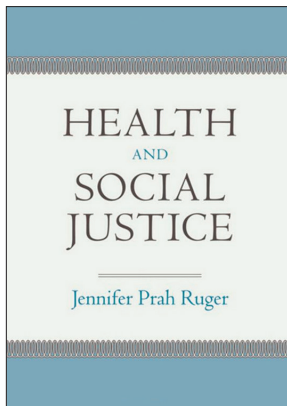
Social justice: The moral foundations of public health and health policy⁵

Powers M, Faden R. [2008].



Health justice: An argument from the capabilities approach⁸

Venkatapuram S. [2011].



Health and social justice⁶

Prah Ruger J. [2010].

ADVANCING THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE IN PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE

The following resources aim to advance how we should think about social justice in the public health context. They focus on applied social justice strategies rather than theoretical accounts of justice.

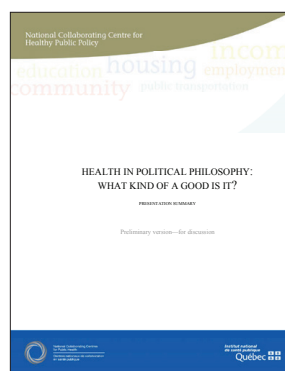


Public health as social justice

Beauchamp DE. [1976].

This article by philosopher Dan Beauchamp represents one of the most widely cited and most prominent calls in favour of orienting public health toward the aims of

social justice.⁹ In it, Beauchamp argues that our fundamental attention in public health policy “should not be directed toward a search for new technology, but rather toward breaking existing ethical and political barriers to minimizing death and disability.”^{9(p3)} Beauchamp frames this as an issue of justice, and proceeds to sketch a vision for the practice of public health as a practice of social justice — hence the concept of ‘public health as social justice.’

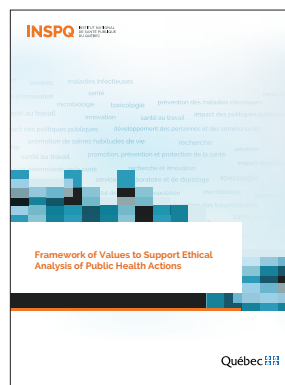


Health in political philosophy: What kind of good is it?

Weinstock D. [2010].

This resource is a summary of a presentation that Professor Daniel Weinstock (McGill University) gave as part of a collaborative project

between the [National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy \(NCCHPP\)](#) and the [Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal \(CRÉUM, Research Centre on Ethics, University of Montréal\)](#).¹⁰ The presentation maps out several of the central issues in current research on distributive justice as they relate to public health policies that aim to promote health equity.



Framework of values to support ethical analysis of public health actions

Filiatrault F, Désy M, Leclerc B. [2017].

This document provides brief definitions of key values in public health, followed by illustrations of the potential

challenges of putting those values into practice.¹¹ The resource lays the groundwork for a vocabulary around key values, including equality, equity and justice, that can serve as a basis for dialogue among public health practitioners.

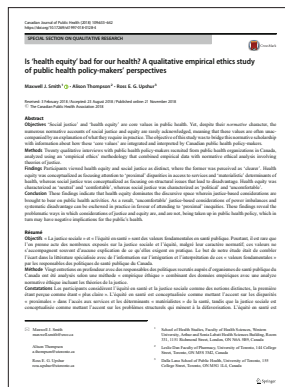


Health disparities and health equity: The issue is justice

Braveman PA, Kumanyika S, Fielding J, LaVeist T, Borrell LN, Manderscheid R, Troutman A. [2011].

This seminal article proposes an operational definition of

health disparities and health equity.¹² The definition, which is explicitly grounded in ethical and human rights principles, makes an argument that the health differences that should matter to us ethically are those that are a result of social injustice. The authors explain their definition; its underlying concepts, values and principles; the challenges it addresses; and the rationale for applying it to public health policy.



Is 'health equity' bad for our health? A qualitative empirical ethics study of public health policy-makers' perspectives

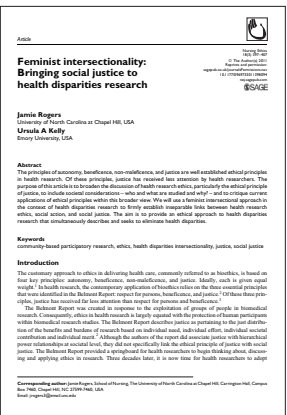
Smith MJ, Thompson A, Upshur REG. [2018].

The ethical foundations of public health's role in

reducing health inequities are rarely stated explicitly. In response to this tendency, the study described in this article sought to engage Canadian public health policy-makers in order to better understand their perspectives on the meanings and roles of health equity and social justice in their work. The authors describe the link between these perspectives and other ethical discussions on the topic.¹³ The study found that health equity and social justice are used in different ways in practice, and in fact are used to surface different considerations of justice. The findings of the study reveal the problematic ways that considerations of justice and equity are — and are not — being taken up in public health policy. They also suggest ways to better incorporate explicit considerations of social justice in public health work in health equity.

KEY RELATED CONCEPTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The following resources discuss key issues and ideas that are critically relevant to any consideration of social justice and health equity in public health. This includes intersectionality, feminist ethics and Indigenous health.



Feminist intersectionality: Bringing social justice to health disparities research

Rogers J, Kelly UA. [2011].

This article uses a feminist intersectional approach to establish the inseparable links between health research ethics, social action and social justice.¹⁴



Feminism and public health ethics

Rogers WA. [2006].

This article describes an account of public health ethics that is informed by scholarship in feminist ethics. Specifically, it discusses how a feminist approach to health inequities

requires that we examine not only the connections between gender, disadvantage and health but also the distribution of power in public health policy-making, programme delivery and practice.¹⁵



'We don't tell people what to do': ethical practice and Indigenous health promotion

McPhail-Bell K, Bond C, Brough M, Fredericks B. [2015].

This article begins with the acknowledgement that

health promotion imposes a particular, health promotion-sanctioned version of what is 'good.' The authors explore how this notion sometimes comes into tension with health promotion's goal of supporting people to increase control over their health.¹⁶ They go on to say that this ethical tension is arguably amplified where colonial processes of control over Indigenous lands, lives and cultures are indistinguishable from contemporary health promotion interventions. The article calls for systematic ethical reflection in order to address health promotion's general failure to reduce health inequalities experienced by Indigenous Australians.

PUBLIC HEALTH COMPETENCIES

Broad and discipline-specific public health competencies set the minimum requirements for practice and education. In doing so, competencies denote the knowledge, skills and attitudes recommended for practitioners. This set of resources highlights equity and social justice considerations for Canadian public health competencies.



Social justice and core competencies for public health: Improving the fit

Edwards NC, Davison CM. [2008].

Despite social justice being described as a core value of public health, in this

commentary Edwards and Davison¹⁷ argue that the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada: Release 1.0*¹⁸ does not contain any explicit reference to the essential attributes of social justice within the competencies themselves.^{17(p1)} The authors point out that social justice considerations should be integrated into the core competencies, proposing several examples of potential social justice core competencies for public health.



Core competencies for public health in Canada: An assessment and comparison of determinants of health content

NCCDH. [2012].

This resource explores how, and the extent to which, determinants of health

are reflected in the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada: Release 1.0*.¹⁸ The Canadian competencies are then compared with four sets of competencies for public health from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.¹⁹



Do public health discipline-specific competencies provide guidance for equity-focused practice

NCCDH. [2015].

This NCCDH resource explores how different public health disciplines have incorporated knowledge

about determinants of health and health equity into their competencies.²⁰ The analysis shows that population health and determinants of health are present in all discipline-specific competencies. However, there is variation in how health equity and social justice are included. Where present, health equity and social justice are often in the preamble and not stated as clear competency statements.



Review of core competencies for public health: An Aboriginal public health perspective

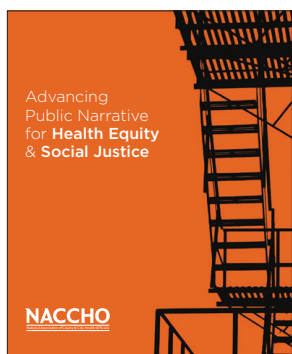
Hunt S. [2015].

Dr. Sarah Hunt provides a review of the Public Health Agency of Canada's *Core Competencies for*

*Public Health in Canada: Release 1.0*¹⁸ from an Indigenous public health standpoint.²¹ The review demonstrates that issues that are central to Indigenous public health such as colonialism; First Nations, Inuit and Métis governance; and Indigenous Knowledges are absent in the 2008 competencies. The author provides recommendations for revising the competencies, including listing First Nations, Inuit and Métis governance systems alongside federal, provincial and territorial governments, as well as naming colonialism as a key influence on public health in Canada.

PRACTICE TOOLS

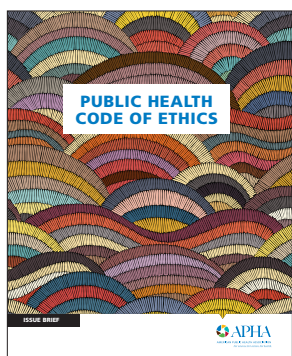
The following resources provide insight on how to strengthen social justice narratives in public health and apply ethical principles in practice and decision-making.



Advancing public narrative for health equity and social justice

National Association of County and City Health Officials. [2018].

This handbook, developed by the US National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), aims to provide guidance on how to identify, examine and address dominant public narratives around health equity and social justice.²² It is also designed to equip public health practitioners in becoming effective narrative strategists when pursuing health equity. In particular, the handbook uses exercises, examples and probing questions for reflection and dialogue in order to support public health practitioners in promoting a social justice narrative in their work.

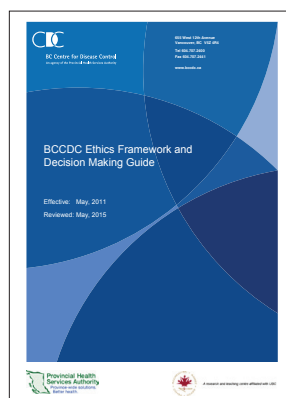


Public health code of ethics

American Public Health Association. [2019].

Grounded in the social determinants of health as key foci for public health, the code of ethics outlines the professional standards of diverse public health practitioners and organizations.²³ The code defines public health values that guide public health practice, including equity and health justice. In addition, it describes a process to support ethical analysis in decision-

making. The code of ethics further articulates guidance for ethical action in broad domains of public health policy and practice. Generally, the code supports practitioners and organizations to bring values-based and ethical principles to public health decision-making.



BCCDC ethics framework and decision making guide

BC Centre for Disease Control. [2015].

This document describes the code of ethics for the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC).²⁴ Taking an aspirational stance, it highlights the ethical values, beliefs and principles that serve as the basis for action at BCCDC. Of specific note, the framework includes distributive justice and proportionality as ethical considerations for public health. The framework is accompanied by a series of questions that help identify and resolve ethical problems in public health practice and programs.

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy has an ongoing program of work on public health ethics.²⁵ Visit <http://www.nccchpp.ca/55/Ethics.ccnpps> for more resources.

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