



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé



LET'S TALK
VALUES AND
HEALTH EQUITY

PART OF THE LET'S TALK SERIES

This document is designed to support discussion, reflection and action on values and health equity.

KEY CONCEPTS

VALUES AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Public health is made up of multidisciplinary actors who have an ethical responsibility to take a health equity approach.¹⁻⁵ Shared values provide the “high-level moral justification”^{1(p1)} for public health action, guiding how priorities are set, how resources are allocated and how success is measured.^{1,5-8} While the concept of a value has many definitions,⁶⁻⁸ in public health, a value can be thought of as an important “way of being or believing”^{9(p186)} and, by extension, *doing*.

FEATURES OF VALUES:

All values share six features:¹⁰

1. Values are linked to feelings.
2. Values motivate action because they are connected to larger goals.
3. Values are more than any one action or situation.
4. Values “serve as standards or criteria.”^{1(p4)}
5. Values are assigned different levels of importance.
6. The “relative importance of multiple values guides [priorities and related] action.”^{1(p4)}

TYPES OF VALUES

Values can be divided into two categories: **instrumental** and **terminal**. Instrumental values are behavioural, whereas terminal values are end states of existence.^{11,12} Instrumental values such as acting in solidarity and fairness support the pursuit of terminal values such as health equity and self-determination.

VALUES AND HEALTH EQUITY

Health equity is about justice and, as such, is a value-laden concept.^{3,4} In order to determine whether a health difference is inequitable, a value judgement must be made as to whether the difference is systemic, avoidable and unfair.^{3,4}

Because values guide our attitudes, beliefs and ethical decision-making,^{4,13} they are structural drivers of health equity. Certain values (e.g., health equity and justice) promote a fair distribution of power by motivating actions that disrupt oppressive structures and systems.

NAVIGATING DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

As practitioners, we navigate organizational, community and societal contexts.^{5,9} As we do, we hold our own set of values, and we are guided by ethical principles.^{4,5,9,10} Organizations tend to reflect the values and ethics of the wider society. However, our individual values may not always be congruent with those demonstrated by our workplace, or by larger society. For example, a public health nurse who holds justice as a core value may experience moral distress while working in a health system that does not prioritize equity-focused work.

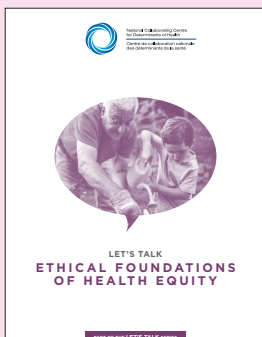
GAPS BETWEEN INTENDED VALUES AND HEALTH EQUITY ACTION

Many health organizations state that their values include social justice, equity, fairness and inclusion. Yet, these values do not always play a strong role in policy and program approaches, planning and decision-making.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

Two theories of action can help to explain this disconnect: the **espoused theory** (the beliefs and values thought to be motivating actions) and the **theory-in-use** (what is actually happening, based on observation).^{18,19}

When a person or group is faced with complex issues, such as those related to health equity, they are socially programmed to want to be in control and to 'win'.^{18,19} They also strive to suppress negative and uncomfortable feelings, to be rational and to minimize emotions. This can result in defensive behaviour, inhibiting productive feedback, discussion, problem-solving and learning.^{18,19}

As a result, a gap can develop between the intention to value health equity (**espoused theory**) and the practice of taking health equity action (**theory-in-use**). By intentionally building an open and responsive culture of equity, continuous learning and related action, public health leaders at all levels can help to bridge this gap.¹⁴⁻¹⁹



RELATED RESOURCE

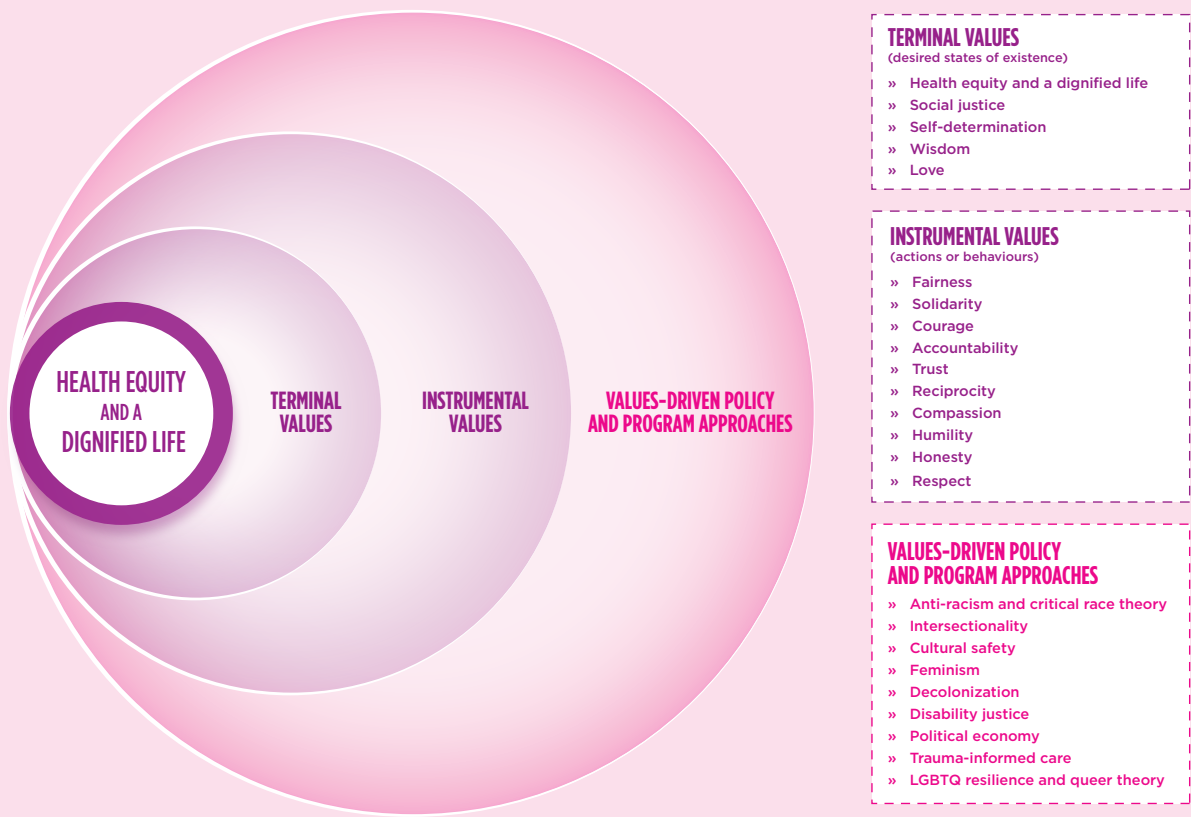
[Let's Talk: Ethical foundations of health equity⁴](#)

This Let's Talk document provides a complementary exploration of justice as the ethical basis of health equity. The resource considers how justice applies in public health practice.

VALUES THAT SUPPORT HEALTH EQUITY ACTION

The concept of health equity — a value in and of itself — is associated with a range of supportive values.^{1,2,10-12,14-17,20-30} The framework below (Figure 1) identifies examples of terminal values (such as social justice, love and self-determination) and examples of instrumental values (such as solidarity, fairness and humility). To achieve “health equity and a dignified life,”^{26(p6)} several critical approaches can be applied to public health policy and practice.³¹⁻⁴⁰ These value-driven approaches bridge the gap between stating health equity as a value and engaging in health equity action.

FIGURE 1: AN APPLIED POLICY AND PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR LIVING HEALTH EQUITY VALUES



SOCIETAL VALUE TENSIONS, PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH EQUITY

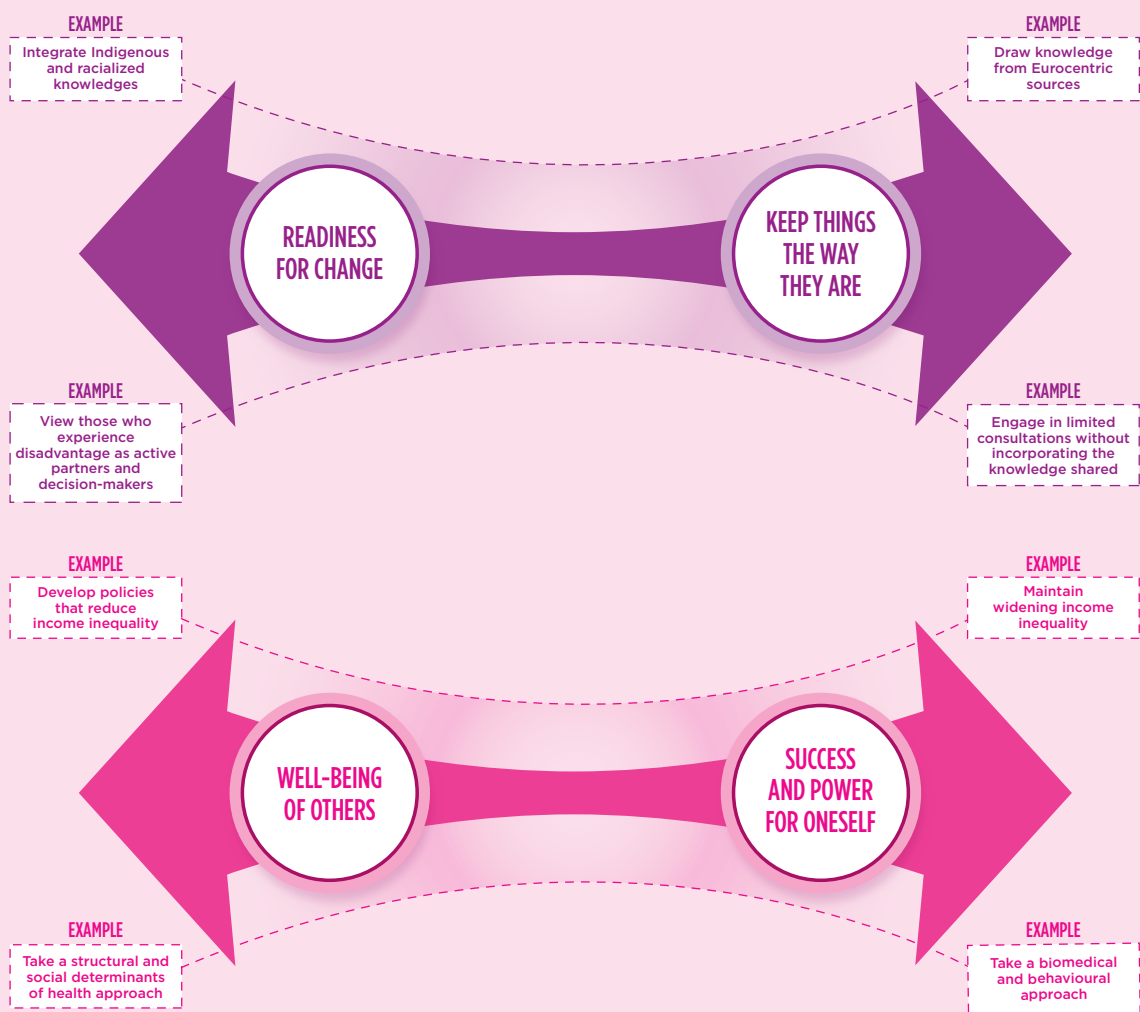
A variety of factors contribute to value tensions in public health practice.^{1,5,13,15-17,41-43} Canadian public health organizations operate within a colonial, market-based health system in a society that privileges tradition, liberty and individual responsibility over collective good, change and solidarity. Health equity action requires the application of ethical principles that value family and community relationships, as well as the equitable distribution of power and resources.^{4,5,13,42}

The value tensions that surface while taking this action can be considered within two larger societal tensions:¹⁰

- 1. A readiness for change versus a desire to keep things the way they are
- 2. Wanting the well-being of others versus wanting success and power for oneself

Examples of these tensions are explored in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLES OF HOW SOCIETAL VALUE TENSIONS CAN SHOW UP IN PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE



A VALUES-DRIVEN FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH EQUITY ACTION

Connecting values to concrete actions is an important part of building a culture of equity.¹⁵ Opportunities to apply values and build a foundation for health equity action¹⁴ are listed below.

FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH EQUITY ACTION	CONCRETE STEPS
Strengthen public health leadership commitments and related action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicitly identify health equity and other related values in organizational mission statements and strategic plans¹⁵• Connect specific policies, programs and practices to these values• Provide regular (e.g., annual) reports on activities taken to:⁴³<ul style="list-style-type: none">» advance social and structural determinants of health;» share what is working to reduce health inequities (best practices);» increase staff competence with regard to health equity action; and» engage in advocacy for health equity.
Increase public support and political will to invest in policies and programs to improve the social determinants of health and health equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use values to shape memorable narratives that present concrete policy and program approaches designed to improve the social and structural determinants of health.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹
Build the capacity of public health organizations and systems to act on the social determinants of health and improve health equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunities to reflect on and discuss values that support health equity action, as well as how to operationalize these values.^{43,49}• Develop mechanisms to ensure accountability to these values.^{43,49}• Promote alignment between intended values and practice by creating an organizational culture of equity that promotes fairness, feedback processes and learning^{14-20,50}

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Which values tend to inform health equity decision-making, programming and policy?
- Have you experienced or observed gaps between intended values and health equity action? If so, what contributed to these gaps? What would facilitate better alignment between intention and practice in the future?
- Think of a time when you were involved in a public health decision. What tensions were present? Which values were given priority over others? What impact did this have on health equity?
- Collecting and sharing values-driven stories can be a useful way to increase public support and political investment for action on the structural and social determinants of health. In your work, how can you develop a compelling story that connects values to a concrete health equity-focused program or policy?

REFERENCES

- American Public Health Association. Public health code of ethics: issue brief [Internet]. Washington [DC]: APHA; [date unknown] [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 31 p. Available from: https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/memborgroups/ethics/code_of_ethics.ashx
- Public Health Agency of Canada. Core competencies for public health in Canada [Internet]. Ottawa [ON]: PHAC; 2008 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 24 p. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/public-health-practice/skills-online/core-competencies-public-health-canada.html>
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Let's talk: health equity [Internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2013 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 6 p. Available from: <https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/health-equity>
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Let's talk: ethical foundations of health equity [Internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2020 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 6 p. Available from: <https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/lets-talk-ethical-foundations-of-health-equity>
- MacDonald M. Introduction to public health ethics 1: background [Internet]. Montréal [QC]: National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy; 2014 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 11 p. Available from: https://www.nccchpp.ca/127/Publications.ccnpps?id_article=977
- Torres CV, Schwartz SH, Nascimento TG. The refined theory of values: associations with behavior and evidences of discriminative and predictive validity. *Psicologia USP*. 2016;27(2):341-56. doi: 10.1590/0103-656420150045
- Shams L, Sari AA, Yazdani S. Values in health policy – a concept analysis. *Int J Health Policy Manag*. 2016; 5(11): 623-630. doi: 10.15171/ijhpm.2016.102
- Giacomini M, Hurley J, Gold I, Smith P, Abelson J. The policy analysis of 'values talk': lessons from Canadian health reform. *Health Policy*. 2004;67(1):15-24. doi:10.1016/S0168- 8510(03)00100-3
- Brown B. Dare to lead: brave work, tough conversations, whole hearts. New York: Random House; 2018. 320 p.
- Schwartz SH. An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. Online readings in psychology and culture. 2012;2(1). doi: 10.9707/2307-0919.1116
- Rokeach M. The nature of human values. 1973. New York: Free Press; 1973. 438 p.
- Tuulik K, Õunapuu T, Kuimet K, Titov E. Rokeach's instrumental and terminal values as descriptors of modern organisation values. *Int J Organ Leadersh*. 2016;5:151-61.
- MacDonald M. Introduction to public health ethics 3: frameworks for public health ethics [Internet]. Montréal [QC]: National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy; 2015 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 28 p. Available from: http://www.nccchpp.ca/docs/2015_Ethics_Intro3_Final_En.pdf
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Common agenda for public health action on health equity [Internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2016 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 38 p. Available from: <https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/common-agenda-for-public-health-action-on-health-equity>
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Building a culture of equity in Canadian public health: environmental scan 2018 [Internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2018 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 60 p. Available from: <https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/building-a-culture-of-equity-2017-environmental-scan>
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Evidence backgrounder: organizational health equity values. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2018. Internal document.
- Ndumbe-Eyoh S, Betker C. Living health equity values within public health organizations [video on the internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University; 2019 Jul [cited 2020 Aug 23]. 1 hr. Available from: <https://nccdh.ca/workshops-events/entry/webinar-living-health-equity-values-within-public-health-organizations>
- Argyris C, Schon D. Organizational learning: a theory of action perspective. Reading [MA]: Addison-Wesley; 1978. 344 p.
- Christensen K. Thought leader interview: Chris Argyris [Internet]. Toronto [ON]: Rotman Magazine; 2008 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 4 p. Available from: https://www.rotman.utoronto.ca/-/media/Files/Programs-and-Areas/Rotman-Magazine/Thought-Leader-Articles/ThoughtLeader_Argyris
- National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Living health equity values within public health organizations [Internet]. Antigonish [NS]: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University. Forthcoming 2021.
- Health Promotion Canada. Pan-Canadian health promoter competencies [Internet]. [location unknown]: HPC; 2015 [cited 2020 Aug 23]. 4 p. Available from: <https://www.healthpromotioncanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2015-HPCComp-Statements2-new-logo.pdf>
- Community Health Nurses of Canada. 2019 Canadian community health nursing professional practice model & standards of practice [Internet]. Midland [ON]: CHNC; 2019 Jan [cited 2020 Aug 23]. 58 p. Available from: <https://www.chnc.ca/standards-of-practice>
- World Health Organization. Ottawa charter for health promotion [Internet]. Ottawa [ON]: WHO; 1986 Nov [cited 2020 Aug 23]. 5 p. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/ottawa-charter-health-promotion-international-conference-on-health-promotion.html>
- Canadian Index of Wellbeing [Internet]. Waterloo [ON]: University of Waterloo; [date unknown] [cited 2020 Aug 23]. Available from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/>
- Lee LM, Zarowsky C. Foundational values for public health. *Public Health Rev*. 2015;36(2). doi:10.1186/s40985-015-0004-1
- Pan American Health Organization. Just societies: health equity and dignified lives. Report of the Commission of the Pan American Health Organization on equity and health inequalities in the Americas [Internet]. Washington [DC]: PAHO; 2019 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 285 p. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/51571>
- Seven sacred teachings [Internet]. [location unknown]: Alberta Regional Consortia; c2020 [cited 2020 Aug 23]. Available from: <http://empoweringthespirit.ca/cultures-of-belonging/seven-grandfathers-teachings/>
- Indigenous Health Committee of the Royal College, Office of Research, Health Policy and Advocacy. Indigenous health values and principles statement [Internet]. Ottawa [ON]: Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada; 2019 Jun [cited 2020 Aug 27]. 39 p. Available from: <http://www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/documents/health-policy/indigenous-hvp-statement-e.pdf>
- Filiatrault F, Déry M, Leclerc B. Framework of values to support ethical analysis of public health actions [Internet]. Montréal [QC]: Institut national de santé publique du Québec; 2017 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 20 p. Available from: https://www.inspq.qc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/2285_framework_values_ethical_analysis_public_health_actions.pdf
- Massé R, Saint-Arnaud J. Éthique et santé publique. Enjeux, valeurs et normativité. Québec [QC]: Les Presses de l'Université Laval; 2003.

REFERENCES

31. Corbin JH. Health promotion research: thinking critically about knowledge production. *Health Promot Int*. 2016;31(4):739-41. doi: 10.1093/heapro/daw095
32. Mantoura P, Morrison V. Policy approaches to reducing health inequalities [Internet]. Montréal (QC): National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy; 2016. 20 p. Available from: http://www.nccphp.ca/141/publications.ccnpps?id_article=1548
33. Jampel C. Intersections of disability justice, racial justice and environmental justice. *Environ Sociol*. 2018;4(1):122-35. doi: 10.1080/23251042.2018.1424497
34. Curtis E, Jones R, Tipene-Leach D, Walker C, Loring B, et al. Why cultural safety rather than cultural competency is required to achieve health equity: a literature review and recommended definition. *Int J Equity Health*. 2019;18(174). doi: 10.1186/s12939-019-1082-3
35. Chandanabhumma PP, Narasimhan S. Towards health equity and social justice: an applied framework of decolonization in health promotion. *Health Promot Int*. 2020;35(4):831-40. 10.1093/heapro/daz053
36. Argüello TM. Fetishizing the health sciences: queer theory as an intervention. *J Gay Lesbian Soc Serv*. 2016;28(3):231-44. doi: 10.1080/10538720.2016.1191407
37. Colpitts E, Gahagan J. The utility of resilience as a conceptual framework for understanding and measuring LGBTQ health. *Int J Equity Health*. 2016;15(60). doi: 10.1186/s12939-016-0349-1
38. Levy-Carrick NC, Lewis-O'Connor A, Rittenberg E, Manosalvas K, Stoklosa HM, Silbersweig DA. Promoting health equity through trauma-informed care: critical role for physicians in policy and program development. *Fam Community Health*. 2019;42(2):104-8. doi: 10.1097/FCH.0000000000000214
39. Ford CL, Airhihenbuwa CO. Critical race theory, race equity, and public health: toward antiracism praxis. *Am J Public Health*. 2010;100(Suppl 1):S30-5. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.171058
40. Ford CL, Airhihenbuwa CO. Commentary: just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a progressive field like public health? *Ethn Dis*. 2018;28(Suppl 1):223-30. doi: 10.18865/ed.28.S1.223
41. Morley G. What is "moral distress" in nursing? How, can and should we respond to it? *J Clin Nurs*. 2018;27(19-20):3443-3445. doi: 10.1111/jocn.14332
42. MacDonald M. Introduction to public health ethics 2: philosophical and theoretical foundations. Montréal (QC): National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy; 2015 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 7 p. Available from: https://www.nccphp.ca/127/publications.ccnpps?id_article=1424
43. Brassolotto J, Raphael D, Baldeo N. Epistemological barriers to addressing the social determinants of health among public health professionals in Ontario, Canada: a qualitative inquiry. *Crit Public Health*. 2014;24(3):321-36. doi: 10.1080/09581596.2013.820256
44. O'Brien S. Better storytelling for the public health workforce. *J Public Health Manag Pract*. 2019;25(1):98-9. Available from: https://journals.lww.com/jphmp/Fulltext/2019/01000/Better_Storytelling_for_the_Public_Health.26.aspx
45. Williams CR. Compassion, suffering and the self: a moral psychology of social justice. *Current Sociology*. 2008;56(1):5-24.
46. Wallack L. Building a social justice narrative for public health. *Health Ed & Behavior*. 2019;46(6):901-4. doi: 10.1177/1090198119867123
47. Ganz, M. What is public narrative: self, us & now [public narrative worksheet]. 2009 [cited 2020 Aug 25]. 7 p. Available from: <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/30760283/Public-Narrative-Worksheet-Fall-2013-.pdf>
48. Working Narratives. "Storytelling and social change" guide [Internet]. Wilmington (NC): Working Narratives; c2013 [2020 Aug 25]. Available from: <https://workingnarratives.org/project/story-guide/>
49. Raphael D, Brassolotto J, Baldeo N. Ideological and organizational components of differing public health strategies for addressing the social determinants of health. *Health Promot Int*. 2015;30(4):855-867. doi: 10.1093/heapro/dau022
50. Schminke M, Arnaud A, Taylor R. Ethics, values, and organizational justice: individuals, organizations, and beyond. *J Bus Ethics*. 2015;130:727-36. doi: 10.1007/s10551-014-2251-3.



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health
Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE FOR DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, NS B2G 2W5
tel. (902) 867-6133
fax. (902) 867-6130
nccdh@stfx.ca www.nccdh.ca
Twitter: @NCCDH_CCNDS

Written by Pemma Muzumdar. Special thanks to internal reviewers Claire Betker, for support and guidance throughout each stage of writing, and Sume Ndumbe Eyoh, for contributions to Figure 1: An applied policy and practice framework for living health equity values. Additional thanks to external reviewers Hannah Moffatt and Sarah Viehbeck for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts.

The NCCDH is hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

Please cite information contained in the document as follows: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2020). *Let's talk: Values and health equity*. Antigonish, NS: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University.

ISBN: 978-1-989241-39-4

Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada through funding for NCCDH. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

This document is available electronically at www.nccdh.ca.

La version française en format PDF est également disponible au www.ccnds.ca sous le titre *Valeurs et équité en santé : Parlons-en*