
Public Health Ethics: Choosing Frames Wisely

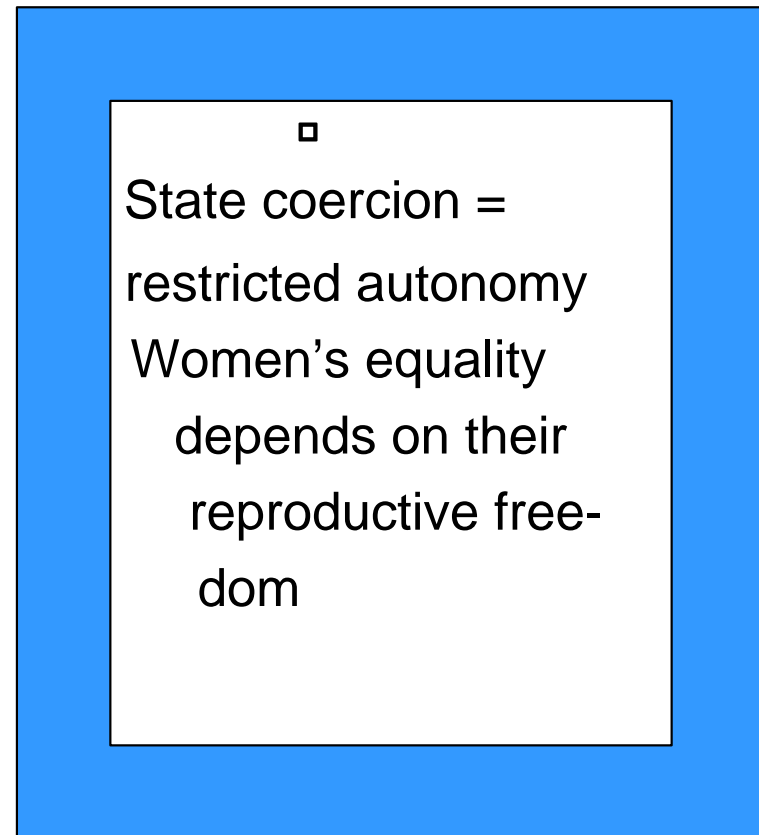
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Frames shape perceptions and responses: Abortion

■ “Pro-life”



■ “Pro-choice”



Health and illness



- Dominance of biomedical model:
 - Focus on individual bodies (minds)
 - Concerned with crisis care
 - Struggling to deal with chronic conditions
 - Most research aimed at expensive (profitable) solutions: high tech, new drugs, medical management

Prominent metaphor



- War against various diseases (especially cancer)
 - Justifies expensive, high-tech solutions
 - Hierarchically organized care, dependent on experts
 - Alienation of person from disease (“the enemy”)
 - Ideal is heroic intervention
 - Limits our ability to imagine alternative strategies
 - “Military-medical” complex (shared vision; shared technologies)

Public health

- Requires a very different frame
- Focus is not primarily on specific individuals, but on populations and communities
- Primarily concerned with averting ill health, disabilities, and premature death
- Requires cooperative, community action
- Mostly low-tech, non-profit, mundane activities
(Exception: pandemics, public emergencies)

Ottawa Charter 1986

- Identified the fundamental conditions and resources for “Health for All by 2000”:
 - peace, shelter, education, food, income,
 - a stable eco-system, sustainable resources,
 - social justice and equity
- These conditions require social and political change, not medical interventions

Challenge: change the frame for public understanding of health support

Narrow (individual)

Treating illness

Biological tools



Wide (community)

Promoting health

Social tools



58MM
NEW

Change the frame for ethics from individual to a social approach

- Account for ways in which individuals are embedded within communities
- Recognize that interests of individuals and communities are interconnected
- Address health inequalities
- Promote positive (relational) account to address these realities



Traditional conception of the individual



- Ideally independent, rational
- Self-interested, self-determining
- Pre-social (the fundamental unit)

Relational persons



- Thoroughly social
- Historically situated
- Embodied
- Interdependent
- Social group memberships affect status and opportunities (oppression matters!)



Autonomy

TRADITIONAL

- Promotes personal values (self-interest)
- Free of “outside influences”
- Individual judgment of benefit/risk/harm

RELATIONAL

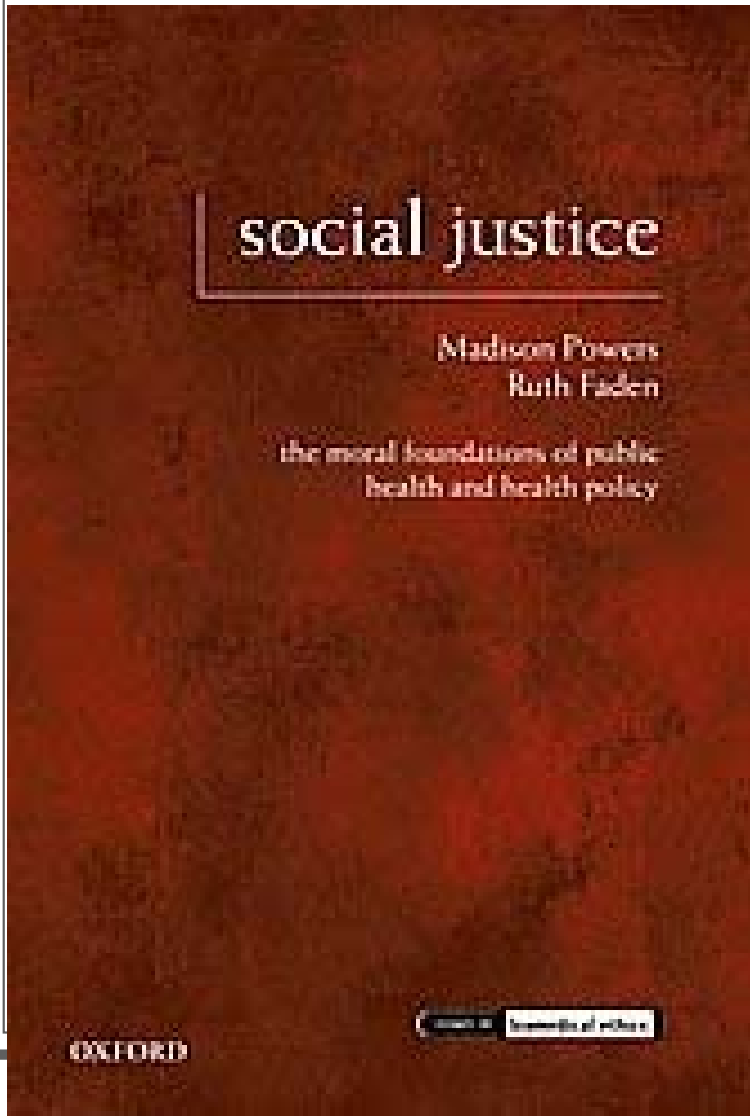
- Values and decisions reflect relational position
- Social group membership affects range of options, structure of rewards/penalties
- Sometimes autonomy is best promoted through social change



Justice

- **Traditional: Focus on distributive justice**
 - Concern is with fair distribution of quantifiable benefits and burdens among individuals
- **Relational: Focus on social justice**
 - Concerns is with fair access to social goods such as rights, opportunities, power, and self respect; focus is on groups as well as individuals (Young)

Powers and Faden: *Social Justice: the moral foundations of public health and health policy*



- “Social justice is the foundational value of public health”

Two dimensions to addressing public health problems

1. Substantive: determine moral framework and constraints it generates on acceptable outcomes
2. Procedural: determine fair procedure(s) for resolving problems

1. Substantive: A Relational Ethic for Public Health

- Attend to demands of relational autonomy and social justice
- Address needs of vulnerable groups



2. Procedural: inclusive and fair

- Develop and adapt procedures to be fully inclusive and avoid dominance by powerful groups
- Actively engage members of groups at risk



Relational solidarity



- The meaning of solidarity is found *within* public health
- We are not all equally situated or affected by public health policies
- Mutual (not equal) vulnerability

(N Kenny, F Baylis, S Sherwin. "Re-visioning Public Health Ethics: A Relational Approach." *Can J Public Health* 101(1): 9-11)

Challenges

- Shift the political agenda to attend to public health priorities (beyond pandemics)
- Shift the ethics framework from attention to duties of autonomous individuals to a relational framework of interconnected responsibilities

