Working for the Common Good Through Prevention

A Review of
Realizing Social Justice: The Challenge of Preventive Interventions
by Maureen E. Kenny, Arthur M. Horne, Pamela Orpinas, and Le’Roy E. Reese (Eds.)
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The editors and authors of the chapters in Realizing Social Justice: The Challenge of Preventive Interventions have taken on the task of reorienting the field of prevention to the mission set forth by one of the pioneers of the field, George Albee, to use prevention efforts in the service of creating a more just society (Albee, 1986). Health professionals from many disciplines are engaged in the work of prevention; however, not all, and perhaps only a minority, may see social justice as a guiding force in their careers. This book highlights the ways in which all prevention efforts, including those conducted at the individual, family, community, and societal levels, may ultimately be used to achieve the goal of promoting the common good.

As stated in Chapter 7, terms such as social justice can have polarizing political connotations. In this review and the volume itself, social justice and common good instead denote ideas of basic human rights and the democratic process that can promote them. The thesis of this book is that prevention can lead to a more equitable distribution of opportunity to fully participate in society and achieve health and well-being. The authors present a framework for understanding the interdependence of individuals and their social context and a solid rationale for the ways in which prevention efforts can ameliorate societal inequities.

The book begins with a concise narrative account of the history of prevention with a focus on defining social justice and its relation to prevention. The authors define the hallmarks of a just society as one in which all groups have full and equal participation and all members are psychologically and physically safe and secure. From this perspective, prevention efforts should serve to equip individual members of a society to cope with adverse contextual conditions, as well as to eliminate inequities in social structures and policies that impact the multiple ecologies of human development directly.

In so doing, prevention efforts that build individual skills and resources may ultimately empower disadvantaged populations. As stated in Chapter 3, "Psychologists can both work toward the intermediate goals of easing individual suffering and preventing problems in at-risk groups while simultaneously seeking the ultimate goals of system change and social justice” (p. 65).

A strength of this book is the careful attention to explicating key theories that guide prevention efforts in psychology, such as Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, and the developmental contextual framework (Lerner, 1995). Other core concepts given coverage in this book include resilience (Masten, 2001), logic models (Chapter 9, p. 198), and theories of health behavior change (p. 191). Developmental psychology, risk and protective factors, positive psychology and positive youth development, multicultural psychology, and prevention research are all represented.
For students as well as more experienced health professionals just beginning to work in the area of prevention, such coverage of fundamental concepts and theories will provide a solid overview of the field and its evolution. From a health promotion perspective, the authors extend a call to preventionists to create a climate more appreciative of the diversity that exists in society (p. 165). For the preventionists who are less familiar with theories and practical applications of social justice, this book will offer insights into how they can extend their work to target the prevention of oppression in its various forms, such as institutional and interpersonal racism and homophobia.

While the book is geared primarily toward psychologists, an important topic touched on by the authors is the need for interprofessional and interdisciplinary collaboration in prevention. Preventionists from different professions diverge in their stated core missions. For example, social workers have social justice as their mission (Chapter 3, p. 65), while psychologists may focus on proximal determinants of mental health, and medical and public health professionals often view prevention with the goal of preventing physical disease. Social, mental, and physical health are interrelated, as evidenced by research on the health effects of stress and racism (e.g., Brondolo, Brady Ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002), and there are a myriad of ways in which prevention efforts in the social and behavioral sciences can intersect with other disciplines to advance health promotion and risk reduction.

If this work is carried out in isolation, opportunities for creating more powerful, multilevel prevention programs are missed. Even if specific preventive interventions do not directly target cultural and social influences on development, culturally sensitive and culturally competent approaches will at least acknowledge these forces. A salient illustration of the value of expanding preventionists’ awareness of their clients’ ecological demands and barriers is presented in Chapter 9 with a case study.

Another element of the need for interprofessional collaboration in prevention is touched on in Chapter 5, which covers program evaluation. Few social justice-oriented prevention programs have been the subject of rigorous research, and there can be a tension between researchers and practitioners when evaluation efforts are made. A researcher perspective might be that we cannot know if a prevention program works without high-quality evidence, a view that has significant scientific merit.

However, the gold standard of research designs, the randomized controlled trial, may be aversive to practitioners motivated by social justice ideals who are attempting to serve populations in great need. These competing motivations must be reconciled—a substantial ethical challenge to the field of prevention that has not yet been resolved. This book contains a chapter on ethics in prevention, a critical topic for ongoing learning by preventionists from all disciplines.

A topic for deeper investigation in future volumes is the idea that current research paradigms and methodologies may at times be viewed as oppressive or as contributing to injustice by some cultures. Studying alternative viewpoints and case histories of historical injustice in psychological and medical research is one avenue for preventionists to gain deeper insight into the moral and philosophical issues underlying their work. For further learning, interested readers may wish to explore accounts of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment (Jones, 1981), the story of Henrietta Lacks (Skloot, 2010), and critical theory on engaging indigenous peoples in research (Smith, 1999).

In addition to the chapter on ethics, Chapter 7 on training prevention researchers makes a major contribution to laying out the various prevention-related knowledge areas and skill sets. The later chapters of the book give relevant examples of prevention interventions delivered in a variety of contexts such as school (Chapter 10), family (Chapter 11), workplace (Chapter 12), and community (Chapter 13) settings. These chapters offer selected illustrations of prevention work being carried out in diverse contexts, but thorough coverage of the large body of literature on school-, family-, work-, and community-based interventions is appropriately left to other books. For example, a recent Institute of Medicine/National Academy of Sciences report (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009) has offered systematic analysis of the evidence base for prevention with young people.

**Summary**

Beyond challenging preventionists to consider the role of their work in promoting social justice, *Realizing Social Justice* serves as an excellent foundational text for prevention trainees and their instructors. Not only is there a chapter...
dedicated to methods and topics for educating the next generation of prevention scientists, but also a number of chapters provide a solid grounding in the history of prevention and core concepts, practices, and ethical issues central to understanding and engaging in prevention work in a wide array of contexts.

Areas of current debate in prevention are given evenhanded consideration, which could provide source material for stimulating discourse in graduate-level courses. The chapter authors push their readers to consider diverse viewpoints stemming from different theories, potentially divergent researcher and practitioner perspectives, and, most important, the diverse viewpoints of the varied cultural groups who are offered prevention programs.

For such a vast topic, this treatment is well rounded and useful for the reader interested in gaining insight into the historical lineage, current best practices, and future challenges of the dynamic and complex interdisciplinary field of prevention. Realizing Social Justice fills an important gap in the literature on prevention and serves a vital purpose in providing a holistic view of how prevention may promote the common good.

References