Social Theory and Health Promotion: A Critique of the Collective Lifestyles Approach

Objective:
The objective of this project is a critique of the ‘collective lifestyles’ approach in Health Promotion. Over the past decade a series of publications have attempted to use the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens (among others) to develop a new approach to understanding how health-relevant behaviors are socially constructed, collective phenomena. This paper subjects this literature to a social theoretical critique.

Methods:
A critical review of the relevant literature was conducted as part work on a chapter on ‘Social Theory and Health Promotion’ in the upcoming 3rd Edition of Health Promotion in Canada (Rootman et. al, 2012). This critique further develops arguments made in the book chapter by engaging in a more specific focus on the collective lifestyles literature and its implications.

Results:
The results of this critical review show that the literature on collective lifestyles, although linked as far back as Weber and other classical sociologists, has emerged in the public health literature only over the last 10-15 years.

Conclusions:
This approach offers much progress in explaining the relationships between social structures, practices and agency and health relevant behaviors. However, there is an unexamined theoretical legacy in the collective lifestyles approach and that is the attention that the key social theorists (Weber, Bourdieu and Giddens) gave to the concepts of class, status and power. It is argued that further progress in this area must pay more attention to these key concepts.