



## Research paper

## Politics of prevention: The emergence of prevention science



Filip Rومeliotis\*

Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD), Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 17 December 2014

Received in revised form 26 March 2015

Accepted 30 March 2015

## Keywords:

Prevention science

Politics

Governmentality

Ideology

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This article critically examines the political dimension of prevention science by asking how it constructs the problems for which prevention is seen as the solution and how it enables the monitoring and control of these problems. It also seeks to examine how prevention science has established a sphere for legitimate political deliberation and which kinds of statements are accepted as legitimate within this sphere.

**Methods:** The material consists of 14 publications describing and discussing the goals, concepts, promises and problems of prevention science. The analysis covers the period from 1993 to 2012.

**Results:** The analysis shows that prevention science has established a narrow definition of “prevention”, including only interventions aimed at the reduction of risks for clinical disorders. In publications from the U.S. National Institute of Drug Abuse, the principles of prevention science have enabled a commitment to a zero-tolerance policy on drugs. The drug using subject has been constructed as a rational choice actor lacking in skills in exerting self-control in regard to drug use. Prevention science has also enabled the monitoring and control of expertise, risk groups and individuals through specific forms of data gathering. Through the juxtaposition of the concepts of “objectivity” and “morality”, prevention science has constituted a principle of delineation, disqualifying statements not adhering to the principles of prevention science from the political field, rendering ethical and conflictual dimensions of problem representations invisible.

**Conclusion:** The valorisation of scientific accounts of drugs has acted to naturalise specific political ideals. It simultaneously marginalises the public from the public policy process, giving precedence to experts who are able to provide information that policy-makers are demanding. Alternative accounts, such as those based on marginalisation, poverty or discrimination are silenced within prevention science.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

In the 1990s, prevention science emerged as the dominant paradigm in the prevention field, bringing with it promises of a scientific and rational response to a wide range of health and social problems, including issues of mental health, alcohol and drug use, and criminality (France & Utting, 2005, p. 79). During the same period, the Society for Prevention Research was established in the United States, dedicated to the dissemination of prevention science worldwide. Prevention science has attracted a host of followers, including the Prevention Science Network within the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth ([www.aracy.org.au](http://www.aracy.org.au)), the U.S. National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA, 1997/2003), the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (Andréasson, 2008) and the European Society for Prevention Research ([euspr.org](http://euspr.org)).

The year 2000 saw the publication of the first issue of *Prevention Science*, the official journal of the Society for Prevention Research. In the inaugural editorial, the editor stated that prevention had grown to be more important during the past two decades and that

the growing stature of prevention is a result of the application of rigorous research methods and the steady accumulation of scientific data regarding the causes of many health and social problems along with evidence supporting the efficacy of specific preventive interventions. In short, it has been the emergence of the *science of prevention* that is responsible for growing interest in the field of prevention and its credibility (Botvin, 2000, p. 1, emphasis in original).

In this account, the field of prevention owes its growing credibility to the emergence of prevention science. The argument constitutes prevention as a rational-technological endeavour dependent upon the advancement of evidence supporting the efficacy of specific interventions. However, what is left out is an understanding of prevention as a social and above all as a political

\* Tel.: +46 8 6747370; fax: +46 8 6747686; mobile: +46 707 136554.  
E-mail address: [filip.roumeliotis@sorad.su.se](mailto:filip.roumeliotis@sorad.su.se)

practice highly emblematic of modernity. As such, it is founded upon calculations on causes and effects and the predictability of the social world which are seen as the basis for governmental interventions. Furthermore, this understanding of prevention relies upon a universal value base and the authority of professional expertise and science (Freeman, 1999; Petersen & Lupton, 1996, p. 6).

Textbook accounts of prevention science view its emergence as a continuous, rational process of applying “research findings to the improvement of practice” (Bukoski, 2003, p. 3). The scientific validity of prevention science is depicted in terms of landmark studies that add to existing knowledge about the problems at hand and the successful uptake of these findings in the political field. These accounts tend to view problems as objectively given and the practices that seek to prevent or moderate these problems as more or less rational-technological responses to them.

It is however possible to locate the emergence of prevention science within a wider political project seeking solutions to various societal problems through what has variously been labelled “the paradigm of risk and protection-focused prevention” or simply the “risk factor paradigm” (Armstrong, 2004; France & Utting, 2005). “Risk” has in this context been conceptualised as a “tool of governmentality” that has had a major influence on government policies and prevention strategies in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere from the 1990s onward. It has functioned as a tool for the governance of specific populations by enabling the identification of “high-risk” individuals and groups. Through calculations of risk factors and their potentially negative effects on the behaviours of specific populations, “risk” has legitimised state interventions into these populations (Armstrong, 2004, p. 103f). This influence has partly been enabled by political demands for evidence-based approaches to a wide range of issues for which the risk-factor paradigm has been seen as a useful model (France & Utting, 2005, p. 1194). As some commentators (e.g. Lupton, 1999, p. 93) have pointed out, the monitoring of risks has been authorised as a new mode of surveillance; it draws on the identification of members of risky populations through calculations on population characteristics that widens the horizon of possible interventions.

This article expands upon these analyses by situating prevention science within the context of political governance. The aim is to analyse prevention science as a normative rather than as a descriptive term. It is seen as constitutive of specific values and goals that link it to the political sphere in which prevention is situated. Of special interest is the political space, seen as a field of practices aimed at the governance of society, within which prevention science enables the constitution of prevention as a *political technology*.

The underlying values and goals of prevention will be stressed in order to examine how the legitimacy of a field of knowledge has been established. This means looking into the formation of the knowledge practices of prevention science and the things they have made thinkable and practicable and which concepts, assumptions, explanatory models and evidence are established as legitimate and which are excluded from the prevention field. It is therefore highly relevant to study how these knowledge practices are linked to the political governance of society.

The questions guiding the analysis are: (1) How is the problematic of prevention constituted within prevention science? (2) How does prevention science enable the constitution of prevention as a political technology (involving how society is rendered thinkable and constituted as a governable domain through specific forms of control and supervision, and the delimitation of a legitimate sphere for preventive interventions)? and (3) How is the political constituted within prevention science? The last question concerns the symbolic space that is constituted for legitimate political discourse and practice; how it is structured

and what kinds of utterances are accepted as legitimate (cf. Mouffe, 2005).

In what follows, some theoretical and methodological considerations are discussed before the analysis. The analysis is divided into three parts, reflecting the questions posed above. The article ends with a discussion of the findings.

## Understanding prevention science

This article is concerned with how prevention is constituted as a political technology. As such, prevention constitutes a domain of activity through which certain political programmes are rendered operational (cf. Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 183). This is to say that prevention is never neutral but acts as a political technology, shaping political possibilities and with political effects.

Prevention can be described in terms of its technical and programmatic dimensions. The technical dimensions refer to the concrete analytical methods, sampling techniques and practices that make prevention operational, while the programmatic dimension of prevention covers the ideas, values and concepts that give meaning to it and attaches the prevention field to objectives and programmes located in the political sphere. In short, focusing on the programmatic level of prevention means extending beyond technical/methodological concerns in order to make visible the values and goals that attach prevention to political programmes (cf. Power, 1997, p. 6f). This is more important in light of the insight that the appeal of prevention is based not merely on perceptions of its efficiency, but above all on its “appropriateness to particular ends”. Such appropriateness is established in the political programmes that demand it (O’Malley, 1992, p. 258).

Political programmes are formulated around specific problematisations such as problematics of mental health, drug use or criminality. These become ways of problematising a territory for politics to act upon (Osborne, 1997, p. 174f). As Bacchi (1999, 2009) have argued, politics not simply reflects a concern for empirically known problems situated outside political processes and separate from the ways in which they are represented. Problems are instead constituted through discursive practices. This does not translate into a denial of the negative experiences that people can have of a wide range of phenomena but rather, in Osborne’s (1997, p. 174f) words, “that policy cannot get to work without first problematising its territory”.

Knowledge – of mental health, drug use, poverty – is an essential part of political programmes that seek to address specific problems. Through knowledge practices, a sphere is delimited and constituted for political calculation, providing a problematic for political programmes to act upon. These practices simultaneously supply a kind of “intellectual machinery” for governance by providing it with a sphere of intervention (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 182). At this point it is useful to introduce Fleck’s ([1935] 1979) notion of “thought style”. In Fleck’s account of science, scientific facts always emerge within a socially and historically situated thought style that organises and establishes the limits for acceptable ways of thinking. Similar to Hacking’s (1992, p. 11) use of the term “styles of reasoning”, it settles the question of what it is to be objective since “there are neither sentences that are candidates for truth, nor independently identified objects to be correct about, prior to the development of a style of reasoning”. Rose (2007, p. 12) offers a helpful description of thought styles:

A style of thought is not just about a certain form of explanation, about what it is to explain, it is also about what there is to explain. That is to say, it shapes and establishes the very object of explanation, the set of problems, issues, phenomena that an explanation is attempting to account for.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7513227>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7513227>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)