

Tracing Addiction Cross-culturally: A Constructionist Approach

Michael Egerer:
Institutional footprints in the
addiction image. A focus-
group study with Finnish and
French general practitioners
and social workers. Helsinki:
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As Helen Keane (2002) noted
addiction is a core concept in
the field of alcohol and drug re-
search. The concept is seen to
provide a reason for seemingly

irrational behavior by positing
the existence of some kind of
force or drive which overpowers
the individual's will compelling
people to act in ways counter to
their own interests. Addiction
can be thought of as a specific
set of ideas and practices that
attempt to shape varied alco-
hol and other problem behav-
iors into an abstract and unified
entity. From this view addiction
and the addict are created as
culture bound categories rath-
er than natural types. Hence
the medical and scientific pro-
ject of identifying the universal
truth of addiction is in part the
process by which the phenom-
enon itself is brought into be-
ing. Given this process, it is not
surprising that despite its best
efforts, addiction studies have
been unable to stabilize addic-
tion into single clear-cut entity.

It is within this context that Mi-
chael Egerer has situated his
PhD thesis *Institutional foot-
prints in the addiction image*.
Moreover, given the extent to
which the concept of addiction
has become increasingly ap-
plied to understanding an in-
creasing range of problematic
behaviors, additional research
on the concept and the way that
it is perceived, especially from
a comparative perspective, is
therefore called for.

The aim of Egerer's thesis is to
examine the conceptualizations

of addictions between different professional groups – doctors (GPs) and social workers in two different countries by analyzing narrative group discussions. The addiction topics on which these professional groups are asked to explore are alcoholism, pathological gambling, and eating disorders. In exploring these narrative discussions, the author's aim is to evaluate the appropriateness of a unitary concept of addiction by investigating its cultural embeddedness.

To create these narratives, Egerer organized 27 Reception Analytical Group Interviews, or focus groups in which film clips were shown. Each of the chosen clips was related to different portrayals of addiction. In showing the clips, he sought to challenge the participants to question their taken-for-granted understandings of addiction.

A total of 136 participants were involved with 35 GPs and 31 social workers recruited in Finland and 43 GPs and 27 social workers in France. This study is different, Egerer argues, from many other cultural studies on addiction in two ways: first, because it focuses on exploring the addiction images of what he calls “gatekeepers of the modern welfare state” (in other words, GPs and sws), and second because it examines these images by explor-

ing the institutional framework of these professions as opposed to exploring more general notions of culture.

In focusing on France and Finland, Egerer emphasizes the significant differences that operate within both countries' institutional positions and their overall approach to alcohol and drug problems. For example, while in Finland GPs have only peripheral involvement in the treatment of addiction, in France the medical profession has a much stronger role. Likewise, in France, social workers play only an auxiliary role, whereas in Finland they play a key role. Also whereas in Finland a “non-medical” model is the primary perspective, where alcohol and drug problems are seen as primarily social problems, in France there operates a medical model, which views these problems as primarily individual medical issues.

However, Egerer's analysis does not remain at the institutional level alone, as he also argues that notions of addiction are also related to more general cultural differences. More specifically, he argues that previous research on the collective images of addiction has shown that the Finnish population perceives alcohol to be the biggest threat for their society. Finland's alcohol policy became a matter

of public health targeting a decrease in alcohol consumption for the entire population. Moreover, responsibility has become more and more delegated to the citizen – this delegation can be seen as a shift from the external towards internal control, a perspective often viewed as a core attribute of modernity or maybe more precisely of neo-liberalism. In contrast, alcoholism in France was first seen as a “*fléau social*”, a social plague, but unlike Finland where alcohol policy was strongly interwoven with general welfare policy, alcohol policy remained a project of professionals in the medical field. Hence, a medical understanding of alcoholism gained a strong foothold, and consequently the medical sector has remained a strong player.

Overall this is both a well-written and ambitious thesis. It examines notions of addiction across not only two countries and two professional groupings, but also between three different addictions. Given both the scope of the project and its size, a total of 136 participants, a number much larger than in most qualitatively based studies, Egerer is to be congratulated on having successfully pulled it off. Given the increasing globalization of addictions and their treatment, he is also to be applauded for having undertaken a cross-national project. However, having

said that, there are nevertheless a few limitations that are worth noting even within this excellent thesis. These limitations are centred on his decision to examine three contrasting addictions – alcoholism, pathological gambling, and problem eating. While I have no complaint about choosing these contrasting addictions (in fact I believe that comparative work on different addictions is an important area of research), I felt that his central focus and main interest is within the alcohol arena and consequently the other two addictions are given much less attention. This is especially true for the problem eating addiction, which is given relatively short shrift. Although Egerer argues that he included this form of addiction as “a breaching experiment,” challenging informants’ addiction images in relation to problem eating, we are provided with little information. In fact there existed a marked discrepancy between the discussions based on the available literature on issues of social context in examining the three addictions. This is particularly unfortunate given the possible comparisons that could have been undertaken between notions of eating and problem eating between France and Finland. For example, Egerer notes the extent to which in “Protestant” Finland there has only recently been a turn from rural meal norms, with a strong

emphasis on the nutritional aspects of food. In comparison in France, he argues that it can be seen as the proverbial country of “haute cuisine”, where eating is a pleasurable activity – an idea that might have been intriguing to pursue. Unfortunately, while he does provide some fascinating tidbits of information, we are merely given the *hors d’oeuvres* and never get to the main course.

Nevertheless this does not take away from a particularly insightful thesis, which I would recommend especially for those researchers who are interested in comparative research.

Geoffrey Hunt