

# Concepts and conditions for knowledge production

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Since the beginning of 2017, when I stepped in as editor for *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs (NAD)* the editorial material of the journal shows a clear pattern: we are increasingly focusing on the conditions of knowledge and their conceptual consequences. At the editorial office we have, both in editorials and in commissioned material, paid special attention to circumstances of knowledge production. This refers for example to the space of action and claims of relevance by social science research in view of “a giant isomorphic wheel of public health” (Hellman, 2018a); the greater interest in funding research by commercial forces intent on skewing the science agenda (Hellman, 2018b); new approaches to explaining trends in use patterns (Hellman, 2018c; Kataja, Tigerstedt, & Hakkarainen, 2018); how we are to understand the epistemic project of the addicted brain (Hellman, 2018d); and circumstances that pressurise the qualitative research agenda by demands of availability and applicability in a

narrow sense (Edman, 2017; Hellman, 2017; Järvinen-Tassopoulos, 2017), to name just a few.

For rigorous advocates of realism and objectivity, such a discussion appears sometimes unsettling. Why focus on the deconstruction of research production instead of discussing knowledge about how to deal with addiction-related questions and problems? Does not the latter task fall within the scope of scientific journals in this area of research? I would argue that the circumstances for knowledge production is one of the most important yet most neglected focuses in the addiction research field.

Claims and beliefs of a post-truth era and a general lack of respect for scientific conduct are seen as distancing us from a firm link to reality and counteracting societal progress: after all it has been in the era of systematic institutionalised sciences that human societies have developed crucially and witnessed prosperity and

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good public health. Science is Western societies' compass in policies and action.

While the lack of respect for authority of science might have become more prominent in some ideological and political communities, this should not discourage us from continuing to unfold and question the concepts that we develop, breed and reproduce in scientific practice. Society only progresses when there is *not* a great consensus in technics of systematics and conceptualisations of reality. To see postmodernity, or posthumanism or poststructuralism as counteracting societal progress is downright incorrect. Science is less truthful and reliable when the reflection on conceptual, ideological and interpretative assumptions is missing. This reflection is a difficult skill of its own that needs to be allocated resources and professional engagement from specialized experts in this area. For the addiction research field, critical discussions on science making has been a job conducted by anthropologists, historians and knowledge sociologists in the margins of the mainstream.

To support this path of inquiry is all the more important given the changing realities of societies conditioned by mass media, global networks, and market thinking. However, a firm distinction needs to be made between unsubstantiated denial of scientific facts and the important path of critically exposing ways in which our scientific ordering of reality is impacting political action and societal developments.

### Modelling norm systems

In this issue, readers can enhance their understanding of gendered relationships to substances (Rolando et al., 2020), preferences of beverages (Lintonen, Ahtinen & Konu, 2020), definitions of those in need of help (Stanesby et al., 2020), and maternal alcohol intake during and after pregnancy (McDonald & Watson, 2020). These are all examples of the kind of moving targets that we are dealing with in social science research. The study of these themes entails a need for continuous conceptual adjustments, and the legitimation and

requirement of such adjustments need to be reformulated over and over again. This is how scientific knowledge proves and re-asserts its accountability over time.

This issue of *NAD* prompts us once again to take up the thread on *concepts* – a theme that has long roots in the journal's history. Swedish researchers David Karlsson and colleagues (2020) have created a structure for interpreting survey material through the modelling of hypotheses regarding how people relate to alcohol policy. They investigate such hypotheses as narrow self-interest (own drinking, more liberal views on accessibility); left–right ideology (the political right feels more negatively about restrictions on freedom); personal experience of problems (the more problems experienced, the more support for restrictive alcohol policies; “accuracy of knowledge” (the more accurate knowledge of alcohol consumption in society, the more support for restrictive alcohol policies); problem perception (first-hand micro-social experience breeds more scepticism than an abstract understanding of “societal harm”).

While all of the above sounds commonsensical and logical, I can come up with many arguments that challenge these hypotheses. In Finnish society there is now a cross-partisan political line of reasoning that favours liberalisation, and the public health framing is being depreciated by green and left-wing citizens and politicians alike. Global capitalism is displacing people's views on themselves and their problems in driving national policies towards liberal consensus thinking. And what IS “accurate knowledge”?

What Karlsson and colleagues are doing is what we all do when we approach reality: we construe conceptual holds and lenses that we view matters through. Self-reflexivity in doing so is the crucial element for the analysis to hold as a credible and valuable entity. The authors keep their project together through normative use of the constructs of “solidarity” and “self-interest”. While these are fluent concepts in themselves, the declaration of the structure that the analysis is working within makes it

functional, winning reviewers over, and worth publishing. Without such self-reflexivity the study would fall apart like a house of cards.

This is also true for the article on experts' views on how to develop surveys on alcohol's harm to others (AHTO). Stanesby and colleagues (2020) problematise the agenda of measurements by arguing that the amount of measurements of different kinds of harms (for example "caused by stranger", "caused by co-worker", or "affecting victim under 17 years") does not provide much information as long as we do not know their relative value in terms of amount of harm. This is why we should make a distinction between aspects that are more problematic and those that are less so.

For our long-term readers this discussion may be familiar from another conceptual discussion: In an article (2012a) and a commentary (2012b) published in *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* in 2012, Klaus Mäkelä discussed the use of monetary metrics in describing alcohol-related problems. Mäkelä concluded that the only function that cost studies serve is drawing attention to alcohol-related problems. He pointed out that the essential problems related to cost-of-alcohol estimations are conceptual – not technical – and using money as a measure for a complex assemblage of problems creates a false sense of precision.

We should get very restless when researchers stop questioning their own concepts and approaches. To move on two simultaneous levels – a realist and a self-reflective constructionist – is the essence of all reliable and valid science making.


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