

Is gender still a non-field?

Prof. Ettorre teaches Sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Plymouth

*To mark 1975 as the International Year of Women, Orianna Josseau Kalant's edited a now classic text, *Alcohol and Drug Problems in Women*. In her Introduction, she argued that research in this area was a "non-field". She stated that the subjects of choice in research areas were most frequently males, ranging from rats to college students (Kalant 1980:1). Her point was not to replace male with female rats or male with female college students in research designs. Rather, Kalant was capitalising on how sex differences tended to be overlooked and this was extremely frustrating. Almost 30 years on, it is still extremely frustrating because in comparison to studies of men substance users, studies of women substance users are relatively rare (South & Teman 1999). Women's issues need to be explored as well as the overall impact of gender on substance use. Here, I characterise two existing approaches, the classic and postmodern approach, to begin the debate on how we can move forward and become more gender sensitive especially to women who have been the traditional underdogs. How will we transform traditional ideas and practices which are capable of being transformed?*

A classic approach focuses on disease aspects of substance misuse. Experts concentrate on the spread of the disease: addiction. Psychiatrists have had a major hand in confirming this idea of addiction and in turn, have developed an epidemiological focus. Psychiatrists are the key, biomedical players in treatment, care, and prevention. Grand theories or narratives explain substance use as deviant behaviour that stigmatises and marginalises users. Substance users are morally reprimanded. They have the disease of addiction that they embody or that is genetic.

Moral panics are created not only to remind the general population of the deviance of drug users but also to help society continue to separate these "deviant users" from the mainstream. Ultimately "Wars on drugs" are media-stimulated and their armistices extend the borders of containment and control. Issues such as class, sex, age, ethnicity, or racial

differences are overlooked because most experts are interested in maintaining the hegemony of the "West over the rest". This means that middle class, young, white, male, Western concerns take priority over other ones. There is a tendency to "treat" single substances within a hierarchy of drugs. Abstinence is the key issue in rehabilitating users and bringing them back to society's fold. Drug users will have "rights" only if they stop using drugs. Only ex-users have rights and even these rights are very limited.

Side by side the classic approach is the postmodern approach within which very useful ideas and concerns have arisen. This approach more than the classic one has the potential to deal with "stable" systems of inequality. For example, social differences based on class, gender, ethnicity, ability, etc. are recognised, if not valued. Thus, this approach begins to deal with ethics and users' basic human rights and focuses on substance use as a social issue that is culturally shaped into a social problem. Professional experts are needed as much as drug users themselves – the lay experts. These lay experts have a voice because they experience drug use and the problems related to it. Users are also seen as the consumers of drugs that become intertwined with the cultures of everyday life. Consumption cultures are poly-drug cultures where users may or may not consume their drugs of choice, but at least they consume a substance that makes them feel high or provides psychotropic effects. Howard Parker and his colleagues (Parker et al. 1995) have called this the pick n' mix scene.

Local narratives of normalisation that focus on consumers with specific needs and demands may conflict with local policies of containment and control, shaped by surveillance systems such as the police, customs and social services (Neale 2002). Community-based services within the context of multi-agency responses become the order of the day (Tee-man et al. 1999). Within this approach, substance users may be transgressors but only in as much as their rule breaking is part and parcel of being poor, unemployed, homeless, victims,

and/or perpetrators of violence. Thus, social exclusion is viewed as a key factor in shaping the transgression of substance use (Pearson 1999). In this approach, safer sex and harm minimisation strategies are buzzwords as well as practices that aware users will exploit with their significant others, within their peer groups and/or in public, rave, dance, or consumer settings. All users have human rights that are not contingent on whether or not they stop using drugs.

These two approaches, representing two bodies of thought, co-exist today. The postmodern approach appears as the most humane given that the voices of users tend to be heard rather than silenced and furthermore, inequalities, in particular class, gender, and ethnic ones are more readily recognised.

Elizabeth Ettorre

References

- Kalant OJ* (1980). Introduction, In: Kalant OJ, ed. Alcohol and drug problems in women. New York: Plenum Press. (Research advances in alcohol and drug problems; vol. 5).
- Neale J* (2002). Drug users in society. Houndsmill: Palgrave.
- Parker H, Measham F, Aldridge J* (1995). Drug futures: changing patterns of drug use amongst English Youth. London: ISDD.
- Pearson G* (1995). Drug policy dilemmas: partnership, social exclusion and targeting resources. In: Marlow A, Pearson G, eds. Young people, drugs and community safety. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publ.
- South N, Teeman D* (1990). Young people, drugs and community life: the messages from research. In: Marlow A, Pearson G, eds. Young people, drugs and community safety. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publ.
- Teeman D, South N, Henderson S* (1999). Multi-impact drugs: prevention in the community. In: Marlow A, Pearson G, eds. Young people, drugs and community safety. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publ.