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Images and theories of addiction

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THIS THEMATIC ISSUE STEMS from the work of the international research consortium ‘Theories of addiction and images of addictive behaviours’ and its continuation, the Helsinki Centre for the Study of Addiction, Control and Governance (CEACG). In the Introduction, Pekka Sulkunen (2013) summarises the aims of the consortium and argues for the relevance of integrating the social sciences into the addiction debate.

The research articles in this thematic issue can be divided under three subthemes: historical and philosophical reflections; professional and lay perceptions; and images of addiction in popular culture. The articles offer insights into theoretical conceptualisations and images of addictions – understood broadly as behaviours that are deemed problematic and share the element of excessive consumption. Apart from the theoretical value of such endeavours as discussed in Sulkunen’s introduction, the articles provide food for thought at the most pragmatic level as well. Given the lack of consensus over these issues, the views that various stakeholders and lay people have, for example, on the causes of and the solutions to addiction problems may also bear upon the arrangement of treatment systems and policy measures.

The first two articles fall under the category of historical and philosophical reflections. Arto Ruuska (2013) discusses a significant period in the history of medical thought on alcohol. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the adverse health consequences of excessive drinking as well as excessive drinking itself became established as objects of medical inquiry. The article puts into perspective the common view of contemporary doctors as forerunners of the ‘disease concept of addiction’ which gained prominence in the 20th century. At the core of the disease concept is the notion of an addict’s loss of control over the problematic behaviour. This notion has been and continues to be subject to much theoretical and ethical debate. Susanne Uusitalo, Mikko Salmela and Janne Nikkinen (2013) contribute to this discussion by providing a philosophical critique of the disease concept and its in-
fluential rival, the rational choice model. Uusitalo et al. then propose what they call an ‘affective choice model’ as an alternative to both.

At another level, views on the phenomena of addiction vary both among the laity and the treatment professionals, who deal with the issues hands-on. Three empirical articles in this thematic issue explore these views by means of both quantitative and qualitative research. The articles examine three national contexts: Sweden, Finland and France. In their article based on survey data, Eva Samuelsson, Jan Blomqvist and Irja Christophs (2013) discuss the views of Swedish social services, health care and criminal care professionals on different substance and non-substance based addictions and recovery from them. The authors argue that the professionals’ understanding on the severity of different addictions is to a major extent in line with the perceptions that lay people have and the media cherish in Sweden. Hard drugs and smoking occupy the opposite ends on the spectrum of addictions as regards the danger they pose to society, the individual risk to get hooked and the possibility of self-recovery versus need for professional treatment. On a related theme, Tanja Hirschovits-Gerz (2013) scrutinizes Finnish lay understanding on the obstacles to recovery from addictions to alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, hard drugs, prescription drugs, gambling and internet. The analysis of population survey data reveals a tendency among Finns to attribute the perceived intractability of addictions to the personal properties of the addict and of the substance or behaviour itself, rather than to the socio-cultural factors in which these behaviours are, nonetheless, inescapably embedded. Michael Egerer’s (2013) article on Finnish and French social workers’ images of problem drinking, gambling and eating touches upon this individualist emphasis as well. Based on qualitative analysis of focus group interviews, the article shows that while the Finnish social workers see all these forms of problematic excessive consumption as having their roots in the society, it is still within the individual that the solution to these problems is seen to reside. The French social workers differ from the Finnish in their views especially on problematic gambling.

Popular culture is an influential source of images on addiction in the mediated world we live in. Two articles of this issue enlarge on these images. Using the methods of thematic qualitative analysis and narratology, Atte Oksanen (2013) analyses how addiction and rehabilitation are portrayed in the autobiographies of female rock stars. In the narratives of female artists who have personal experiences of addiction, the process of recovery is given notable emphasis. The narratives take the form of survival stories that reflect the challenges that women have traditionally had to face in the male-dominated rock world. The predominant objects of addiction in rock culture, as they appear in the autobiographies, remain alcohol and hard drugs. However, cultural images of non-substance based addictions are becoming more prevalent. Varpu Rantala (2013) analyses the visualisation of non-substance based addictions – sex, gambling and shopping – in contemporary American cinema. Rantala’s analysis of the cinematic techniques through which the inner experience of being addicted is
made visible and affectively engaging to the spectator exhibits the ambiguities of pleasure and decay very essential to the addiction problematic in the contemporary consumer societies.

REFERENCES


