

AUTONOMY AND PROTECTION IN THE WELFARE STATE

Finnish social workers' views on alcohol problems

ABSTRACT

Since the establishment of the state alcohol monopoly in 1932, alcohol policy in Finland has shifted from a paternalistic towards a more liberal stance. Tensions between individual autonomy, on the one hand, and the protection of the innocent, on the other, have become a conflict zone for the handling of alcohol problems. How, then, do social workers in Finland negotiate the two contrasting ideals in the case of alcohol problems?

We used a stimulated focus group method, Reception Analytical Group Interview RAGI, to interview eight groups of Finnish social workers who did not specialize in addiction. In our inquiries we employed the Greimasian actantial model for narrative analysis. We identified the actors and values expressed by our interviewees as associated with the process of becoming addicted and recovery.

The social workers considered heavy drinking as a wrong way of coping with family dysfunctions and with life in modern society. Heavy drinkers were not held responsible for their drinking, but rather as subjects of the solution. The social worker took the role of facilitating recovery. Alcoholism is the end point of heavy drinking, discussable only by referring to risks and harm, but no longer explainable and understandable by taking the position of the alcoholic. In this story of the alcoholic, the social worker occupied the position of subject in protecting the innocent harmed ones.

This study shows a) the importance of the institutional and cultural context in understanding alcoholism and b) that social workers are keen to respect their clients' autonomy, but prefer patriarchal measures when innocent citizens are at risk.

KEYWORDS: Alcoholism, social work, focus group, actantial model, Finland