

FROM EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY-MAKING TO EVIDENCE-BASED PARENTING?

The ambiguous role of facts in Danish alcohol prevention

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how a certain type of scientific evidence is put to use in public health policy-making and practice. Drawing on empirical examples from an ethnography of prevention targeting teenage drinking in Denmark, the chapter points at a parallel between the use of causal knowledge claims by public health experts for policy-making purposes, on the one hand, and by public health practitioners in their interaction with target groups, on the other. It is argued that the rationalistic thinking involved in current notions of 'evidence-based policy-making' also appears to be at work in an intervention aimed at changing parental behaviours with respect to their children's drinking. In both of these instances, it is suggested that scientific evidence takes on a highly ambiguous significance. While generally accepted as being based on value-neutral and authoritative facts that at least in principle are taken to override moral and political arguments, such evidence does not translate directly into the decisions envisioned by its proponents. In Danish alcohol prevention there seems to prevail a political and moral ambivalence towards teenage drinking. The chapter suggests that a misfit exists between the simplified causal knowledge claims, which are taken to constitute the evidence base for public health policies and interventions, and the more complex and constantly changing realities that all social actors face in their everyday interaction and practices.

KEYWORDS: Evidence, policy-making, public health practice, alcohol, Denmark