



Policy analysis

Conceptual carpentry as problem handling: The case of drugs and coercive treatment in social democratic welfare regimes



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ABSTRACT

Background: The drug and alcohol fields are characterised by continuous contestations of key concepts and the competing uses of concepts by various actors, in different geographies and over time. This study investigates the political processes leading to legislation enabling coercive treatment of (non-psychotic) drug users in Finland and Sweden from the 1950s until the early 1980s. The drug treatment policies are analysed through conceptual changes and innovations.

Methods: The article analyses conceptual discussions in public reports in Finland and Sweden, focusing on the work preceding the first legislations where both alcohol and drug treatment were included (in Finland 1961, in Sweden 1982). Theories from conceptual history are applied.

Results: The Finnish and Swedish discussions carry arguments from two periods of the Nordic welfare state: in an early development stage and a fragile situation in Finland, and in a more mature and affluent time in Sweden. The paternalistic arguments vary over time and between countries. Still, in both countries and time periods, the view of the drug problem as a youth issue, as particularly enslaving and on society's obligation to protect drug using individuals from damaging their future give enough motivation for coercive treatment. The conceptual work included avoidance of certain terms but in other cases, a broadening of their meaning, to adopt them to the political goals.

Conclusion: Close analyses of conceptual history can reveal new features of drug policy struggles and show how central concepts in drugs and alcohol field are continuously contested.

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Introduction

Finland and Sweden are neighbouring countries with much in common, including similar alcohol-drinking cultures and a social democratic welfare model. In the building of the welfare state, drinking symbolised a lack of morals, a threat to the social order and a road to poverty. The control of alcohol has changed with the development of the welfare state, but until the 1980s there was strong consensus about the central values in society and the norms that good citizens should follow (Sulkunen, Sutton, Tigerstedt, & Warpenius, 2000). Finland and Sweden encountered the more modern-day drug problem at different times and in somewhat different ways. In Finland as early as 1961, a law was passed aimed at taking care of problem drug users. More than 20 years later, in 1982, Sweden passed legislation to regulate the treatment of problem drug users. This article investigates the historical background of the concepts used to describe drug use and drug users in these

first legislations regulating the treatment of drug users in Finland and Sweden. This is examined with a particular emphasis on the motivations for coercive treatment.

Here Finland and Sweden represent two versions of the Nordic welfare state. Analysis of the central arguments about drug treatment in two slightly different phases of the welfare states can help shed further light on why the Nordic welfare systems have handled norm breaching behaviour in the way they have. It is a tale of persistent paternalism within social rather than medical care and treatment legislation. As a social, a public nuisance and/or medical problem, drug use during these periods is called “narcomania” (both in Finland and in Sweden with a root in medical conceptualisation), or “drug abuse” (in Sweden) and “intoxicant use” (in Finland), with more social connotations.

Historical background

The traditional social framing of substance use problems in Finland and Sweden can be traced to several factors. The more important ones include the connection between (alcohol) misuse and poverty and the local municipalities' responsibility for solving both these issues. A comparative study of the development

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of Finnish and Swedish alcohol treatment from 1937 until today (Stenius & Johansson, 2009), has documented the lack of political and social rights of alcohol misusers, and the central role of coercive measures in both countries until the 1950s. The prevailing view was that these were “unworthy citizens” whose drinking behaviour threatened their ability to support themselves and their families. Alcohol treatment is an illustrative example of the persistence of social control as one side of the generalist, tax-based, welfare regimes (Janoski, 1998). Universal and relatively extensive rights are accompanied with often strict and normative control, mostly at the local level, of those non-deserving poor citizens who do not contribute to the tax funded welfare costs, are an economic burden and cause law-and-order problems. Even as the welfare system developed into a universalistic model, there were and are features of earlier, less generous and more controlling welfare phases, including in relation to alcohol and drug treatment (Kaukonen & Stenius, 2005). From the mid-1950s, with growing affluence and extended welfare and with increased medicalization, however, the main focus of alcohol treatment changed. Problem use was considered more and more as a disease or caused by weak will, and possibly curable. The belief in voluntary and professional treatment grew, at the same time as the target group for treatment widened to include people who did fulfil their part of the social contract, by being productive citizens. The first steps towards regarding treatment of problematic alcohol use as a social right were taken, although in Sweden today, access to treatment may imply the loss of freedom (Palm & Stenius, 2002).

This study starts from the point when the welfare state became consolidated and the view on problematic drinking began to become more treatment oriented and “medicalized”. We will analyse to what extent this changed perspective included drug abuse. It continues until the early 1980s and the heydays of the social democratic welfare state, when the belief in structural solutions to social problems was at its peak. We will look at how these phases are mirrored in the conceptual work around the handling of drug problems.

Aims, questions, conceptual framework and method

A central dimension of this investigation is to examine under which conditions the (welfare) State has been motivated to restrict an individual’s drug consumption and liberty, especially through coercive treatment, and how this has been mirrored in conceptual changes and innovations. We aim to analyse the processes leading up to these laws from a conceptual historical point of view. The concepts used to describe drug consumption and drug consumers do not constitute an uncomplicated progression towards a consensus on how these phenomena should be regarded, but rather a continuous struggle between conceptualising the problem as a vice, a disease, or an unfortunate consequence of unjust societal conditions. The process testifies to how the handling of this social phenomenon has required delicate work on central concepts.

Several questions need to be answered to clarify the conceptual work linked to the handling of drug problems. These include studying how narcotics and those who use them have been labelled from the 1950s until the early 1980s in Finland and Sweden, what the notions implied, and how they connected to more comprehensive concepts such as a “problem” or a “disease”? What role does the formulation and reformulation of concepts play in drug politics and drug treatment solutions? Which actors were involved in the definitional processes and why? How does the development in Finland in an earlier period compare to that in Sweden at a later point? What are the similarities and differences in the conceptual and problem handling developments, and how do these relate to general perceptions of the drug problem and different and conflicting political intentions in this area? What can a comparison

of the conceptual history of two administratively and politically similar social democratic welfare state countries add to our understanding of how drug problems, and similar intractable problems, are conceptualised more generally?

We aim to analyse the political processes leading up to the laws of 1961 and 1982 through a close reading of written and mostly public material. We look for descriptions and re-descriptions of central concepts in accordance with our theoretical understanding of the role of concepts in political processes as outlined below. We then move on to empirical investigations of the Finnish and Swedish case respectively. The article concludes with a summarising and comparative analysis.

Concepts and politicisation

The theoretical focus in this article lies in the political meaning and function of concepts. In a political context, in political debates and legislation, drug consumption is described by concepts that influence the ways in which the phenomenon is dealt with. The official reports and legislation examined here also have repercussions for how the concepts and their range of meaning relate to larger systems of concepts. We want to present our view on concepts and conceptual change, and on the relations between conceptual change, various actors and political actions or problem handling.

We sympathize with the approach to conceptual history outlined by British historian Quentin Skinner, where concepts are treated as tools of specific moments. “There is no history of concepts, only histories about how concepts have been used in situations of argument”, as Swedish historian of ideas Bo Lindberg (Lindberg, 2005, p. 8) summarises the Skinnerian view. In order to achieve some analytical precision in conceptual historical investigations of these situations of arguments, we have to keep the concept apart from the attributed words. Different words can – especially over time – be attributed to the same concept; different concepts can (preferably at different points of time) be accommodated under the same word. Even in smaller conceptual historical studies it is necessary to cover more than a single concept or word in order to turn the focus towards groups of mutually referential concepts and words. As has been acknowledged by political scientist Robert Martin (1997), it is especially interesting to observe the process of a concept attaining the kind of name-compelling status, when the concept is baptised, so to speak. The concept now functions as a tool; what can be said (*das Sagbare*) structures what can be done (*das Machbare*), as historian Willibald Steinmetz (2002) has put it.

In this sense and in this study, the work with concepts becomes a work of politics. In accordance with Skinner (1999), every attempt to settle a normative vocabulary is regarded as a highly ideological action. The point of departure is a certain linguistic constructionism where naming is seen as a work on categories, not as a pinpointing of actual phenomena. Concepts are political tools and Skinner describes the political work with concepts as a strategic work on conceptual shifts of signification where the innovative ideologist has to connect to concepts and moral connotations generally agreed on, after which a “redescription” or a “reinterpretation” of concepts could bring them a new meaning (Aarnio & Pekonen, 1999, p. 181; Palonen, 1999, p. 48). In this respect, conceptual reformulation is to be regarded more as a way of reaching agreement on a topic than as a battle with words, more as conceptual handicraft than as conceptual warfare. Conceptual or logical contradictions – originated in an argumentative inconsistency or in conflicts between ideology and perceived practice – often lead to conceptual reformulation or a launching of new concepts. It can be seen as a basic conceptual historical task to identify these contradictions and their contribution to conceptual reformulation.

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