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EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY OF FEMALE DRUG USERS

In my presentation I will discuss the theoretical as well as methodological background of research concerning empowerment and agency of female drug users, which is also the topic of my doctoral thesis.

Female drug users as a specific group are in the focus of drug research already for several decades. Much has been written about their specific situation, especially concerning their unequal gender position, higher stigmatization or harder access to treatment or social services (Stocco 2000, 2002, Ettorre 1992, 2007). On the other hand not that much attention has been given to their ways of dealing or coping with this life situation. I argue that while doing research as well as working in practice we need to be aware not only of various forms of oppression and discrimination, but focus also on the drug users themselves, their strengths, power and agency they use to influence and take control over their lives, negotiate their needs, interest and world around them. In the same time, by focusing on empowerment and agency I do not deny the oppression and inequalities which female drug users might encounter in everyday lives, or the fact that these women are in the society often marginalized. In my point of view the structural as well as the individual level are equally important, however I give more attention to the agency as it still remains neglected area within the drug research as well as in the social work theory. Last but not least I believe that focus on agency allows us to understand life situation of these women in broader, less stereotypical and pathological context and identify not only their needs but also preferred possibilities of interventions, solutions or forms of help.

Although taking into account client as well as his or her environment as equally important might be seen as the common basis for a good practice in social work (e.g. Bartlett 1970), I discuss how focus on agency and empowerment, rather than coping place the issue in the context of feminist social work (Dominelli 2002).

As drug use include very wide range of ways and substances which can be used, and this significantly differs also in various countries, the female drug users I focus on in this presentation are 'problem drug users', defined by EMCDDA¹ as injecting drug users or long duration/regular users of opioids, cocaine and/or amphetamines, in the context of the Czech Republic this is concerning particularly users of methamphetamine and heroin.

In the presentation I will discuss various theoretical approaches concerning women and substance abuse and also critically reflect their contribution to the practice of social work with these women as clients (Anderson 2008, Maher 1997). Furthermore I use the postmodern feminist perspective (Fawcett 2000) as a methodological background for the research of female drug users. On this basis I also identify and discuss several pitfalls we can encounter while researching agency and empowerment.

References:

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¹ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions

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