A qualitative analysis of Pål Kraft

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Judging from an interview with Pål Kraft (Meisingset, 2016), social science alcohol and drug research is a very narrow field. In fact, it is downsized beyond recognition, with no trace of its usual multidisciplinary characteristics or some important areas, such as policy studies, philosophical and sociological conceptual analyses, historical studies on problem definitions, or the development and comparison of treatment and control systems. What remains is psychological or medical causal explanatory research, a context-free remnant of what we typically mean by (Nordic) social science alcohol and drug research.

It may be this lack of context – accurately described by Matilda Hellman (2017) as a “science fictional eagerness” – that enables Kraft to position his scientific dreaming as a fresh and promising approach in contrast to the hopelessly dated qualitative alcohol and drug research. But seen from a wider and more general perspective, progress is less prominent than Kraft claims. The developments of alcohol and drug problems over the last 200 years, dominant problem descriptions and public responses have been thoroughly examined. This research has usually been conducted through document and archive studies where, for example, text analysis and systematic criticism of the sources are much more relevant instruments than EEG or “eye tracking”. These studies also show us how scientific dreams of progress regularly take root, full of confidence and without any sense of history. Repeatedly these dreams bloom and wither – and then recur.

Common to these efforts, whether we speak of the late 1800s degeneration hypothesis or the alcoholism movement of the mid-1900s, is a very selective problem description of narrow phenomena beyond context, time and space. Ever-changing etiological explanations are born and forgotten; such methods as aversion therapy, applied eugenics or vitamin injections
have all had their (scientifically motivated) heyday. This is the insight that can be learnt from qualitative social science alcohol and drug research.

We also learn that dominant descriptions of misuse problems, popular policy measures and influential research change for many different reasons, and not always as a result of unequivocal scientific progress. For example, alcohol prohibition reforms in several Western countries (including Norway) in the early 1900s were not research-based, nor was the introduction of the ration book in Sweden in the 1910s, or its abolition in the 1950s. Yet, these drastic alcohol policy reforms were partially motivated by research arguments. Then as now, there is a thin line between evidence-based policy and policy-based evidence.

This also applies to research councils steering through selective funding, an aspect of research policy that we are to investigate in a new Swedish project (generously funded by several Swedish research councils). If we were to conduct this study in Norway, analysing why some alcohol and drug research has been granted much more funding than other research, our investigations would perhaps lead us to the interview with Pål Kraft. Perhaps our contemplation would involve the observation that one of Norway’s most influential stakeholders in the research field has justified this process in a multi-step argument: first by narrowing the description of social science alcohol and drug research to a very limited field (clinical problem solving); then by giving an even narrower description of qualitative methods (“ask people about their thoughts, feelings and opinions”); and finally by making some vague and unsubstantiated allegations about how social and cultural patterns also could be examined with “more advanced technology”.

What remains is a very narrow research question regarding causes of disease. Only at this stage will the argument – that quantitative research on “big data” is preferable – become scientifically valid and relevant. Even if Pål Kraft were right about this, the road to this conclusion has in each previous step been strategic and ideological, not scientifically justified. And, to quote Pål Kraft, “the choice of method is not an ideological issue” (Meisingset, 2016, p. 22). Well, it shouldn’t be.

References