Where is "society"?

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The impetus for this editorial came from a socio-logical research exchange day. After diverse presentations, my colleague spontaneously burst out: "But *where* is society in all of these inquiries?" By "society", my colleague would refer to something more tangible and structurally ordered than descriptions of individual views, interactions, identity formations, and emotions. My colleague is not alone in feeling perplexed. During the 50 years that have passed since the infancy of the so-called cultural turn, there have been plenty of attempts to update the definition of the core tasks in social sciences. The focus on cultural meaning-making in human social interaction and relationships often aim to further knowledge in terms of broader abstract ideas exposing the grammar in which human societies work and evolve. But what do we mean by "society"?

As a traditional social scientist, my colleague views society as a structure, an order, or a system. Within and through this corpus materialise such trends as economic conjunctures, stratification, or marginalisation. The societal vessel is steered and governed as a greater collective entity with the help of policies, administration, and organisational work.

Psychologisation

In the study of substance use and addictions, the 50 years since the advent of the cultural turn have witnessed a trend where intimate mental concepts such as identity and private boundary work have been integrated into both larger statistical and smaller signification-focused inquiries. This has occurred as part of a socio-cultural emphasis on therapy culture (Furedi, 2013), psychiatry and pathologies (Littlewood, 2002), and new biopolitics of lifestyles (Mayes, 2015). We apply a terminology for society that involves words such as emotion, self, trauma, and syndrome. One could claim that before the therapeutisation of society, collective convictions and feelings were called ideologies, negotiated in democracies in the political sphere.

Still, a constructionist shift away from a realist positivist epistemology has not been very forceful in the pragmatic and solution-focused addiction research field. This is also a result from a forthcoming study that *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (*NAD*) is conducting in cooperation with the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE).

Even if some journals express intentions to welcome sociological, anthropological and historical contributions, they seldom deviate from the path of reality descriptions in numbers and correlations. There seems to be a lack of attempts to discern what the ontology of society actually *is* in addiction research. So, let us apply my colleague's question to the contributions of this issue of *NAD*, an articulated social scientific journal that should live up to its promise of covering "society".

Self-evident presence of society

In his research article in this issue, Carlson (2019) discusses the almost 45% decline in total alcohol consumption among ninth-grade students in Stockholm between 2010 and 2016. Carlson explains the decline by more restrictive parental attitudes towards alcohol, and, more importantly, by decreasing alcohol consumption among the students' peers. Schools as social contexts are seen to uphold certain norms and behaviours, influenced by parents and peers.

After reading Carlson's contribution, it seems rather obvious why the declining youth consumption of alcohol is a question that holds interest for all sorts of scholars. In the study of this trend, the changing cultural circumstances in contemporary society is self-evidently present. To begin with, there is a social scientific epistemological consensus that the trends that pertain to grand developments in larger parts of the population are automatically trends that are social and therefore also societal. But in the case of explaining the declining youth drinking, we need to take into account so many different circumstances: changing youth culture, changing parental patterns, changing social interaction, and so on. The theme offers various theoretical and methodological challenges keeping all types of social scientists busy.

Societal inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are discussed by von Greiff, Skogens, and Berlin (2019), who account for a follow-up study with clients treated for substance abuse

in Sweden in the 1980s. In a piece on how the media portray eldercare facilities which serve alcohol or allow alcohol use, Jönson and Harnett (2019) unfold a depiction of residents and descriptions of the facilities as "different" in surprisingly positive notions. In both of these articles, the subjects of the study or the account of them in the media are related to their place in society as part of an institutional service provision (substance abuse treatment and elderly care). The relevance for society to investigate these groups does not need any justification in view of a social scientific scope, as they are subjects who are an integral part of the collective societal vessel which some would claim is the definition of "society".

Society in interaction

In searching for meaning-based logics (gender work and boundary work) in flirting and alcohol consumption among young people, Jensen, Herold, Frank, and Hunt (2019) allow readers access a cultural realm situated within the youth substance consumption trends that puzzle Carlson and other Nordic researchers. (In fact, these trends are occupying researchers in all of Europe and North America.) The study gives insight into the night-time economy as a commercial enterprise entity of its own, as a space where youngsters interact, perform, and act as consumers. Both youth substance use-related boundary work and the night-time economy are approached as social phenomena. The idea is to further knowledge on the social logic of the sphere of interaction that clubs and bars offer to their young clients (in current society).

The theme of night life and substance use continues in a Norwegian interview study with bartenders, in which Wigenstad (2019) shows that bartenders in "hip" venues in downtown Oslo distance themselves from the traditional understanding of the profession by strongly emphasising that they are in control over what goes on in the venues. The study suggests that this gatekeeping or steering role has been

underestimated in previous studies and discussions on alcohol consumption at restaurants.

'Society' is visible

One could perhaps conclude a discussion of the content of this journal issue with the thought that while it can fairly easily demonstrate the presence of society in all of its inquiries, the content is perhaps better viewed in the light of another "turn", namely the ontological one. Rather than reflecting differences in views on societies (other than perhaps epistemological), the contents speak to different worlds and parts of society. In such a way, one can see that Nordic research on alcohol and drugs has incorporated very much the trends of current social sciences – whatever we feel about focusing on phenomena and collateral realities. NAD covers society, and very much so. In fact, maybe this can be viewed as a strength of the substance use and addiction research field: it never loses sight of society: It is there all along.

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