Subjectivity and Moral Personhood: An Ethnography of Addiction Treatment in the United States

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Abstract

The treatment of drug addiction is now a central concern in the U.S. due to the rapid rise in opioid use and overdose death. This trend is taking place amidst significant healthcare shifts including increasingly biomedicalized treatment. This project examines client experience in and after residential addiction treatment at one center in Northeast Ohio that merges biomedicine with longstanding psychological, 12 Step, and juridical approaches. This hybrid challenges cultural beliefs about “addiction” and “good” (moral) personhood. Using longitudinal ethnographic methods and drawing on moral economy, biological citizenship, and embodiment theories, this research explores how local moral concepts in daily life in and outside of treatment shape client experiences of self and socio-political belonging. Specifically, this study examines how clients who are socially positioned in diverse ways engage multiple moral frames of treatment, kin, and drug use networks and how biological discourses emerge (or not) in these practices. Treatment models of moral personhood conflict with not only one another, but also those of peer and kin networks. Clients must negotiate these conflicts to survive in everyday life, yet these processes simultaneously reproduce and challenge socio-economic inequalities. Study findings contribute to social theory of addiction, subjectivity, and biomedicine, and inform efforts to tailor interventions to the daily realities of clients’ lives.