

Women suffering from substance abuse and mental illness

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Fakultetsopponent: Professor Rolf Holmqvist
Institutionen för beteendevetenskap och lärande
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Abstract

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This thesis deals with women suffering from substance abuse and mental illness. In *Studies I* and *II* the aim was to examine how young adults defined their problems, what help they desired and what caused them to seek treatment. Seven women aged 18 to 25 were interviewed about when they first sought help. *Study I* formed a descriptive analysis of the route to treatment. The results reveal that their seeking treatment was preceded by a lengthy process of emotional frustration. They seldom possessed any clear idea of the treatment they needed, and their descriptions of reasons for seeking treatment did not differ from their descriptions of their problems. The women were ambivalent rather than lacking in motivation with regard to treatment. *Study II* comprised a narrative analysis of the women's accounts. The results suggest a degree of unintegrated self-image in the young women's narratives. Their self-image affected their narrative points. Their difficulties in describing themselves also created problems in clarifying their need for assistance. In *Studies III* and *IV* the aim, following the conducting of inquiries of 21 women, was to describe the psychological problems, degrees of addiction, living conditions and quality of life of women suffering from co-morbidity of substance abuse and mental illness, and moreover to trace any changes after a period of 18 months. The results obtained in *Study III* revealed a multiple complex of psychiatric problems in the group of women, often accompanied by physical illness and an inadequate social network. Most of the women were dependent on psychiatry and/or social services for treatment and financial support. In addition, most of them were in need of help with their physical illness, with their relations towards family and friends and with their occupation or work. The group's general level of functionality and their sense of quality of life were in both cases low. *Study IV* was a follow-up of 18 women from the same group of women after 18 months. The women displayed a still low but improved general level of functionality. 10 women had better control of their alcohol problems, and 6 of them had recovered from addiction. Their subjective experiences of mental handicap and quality of life did not change significantly over the 18 month period. The results indicated the continued need for treatment relating to their physical and mental illness, their addiction/dependency and to their relations with family and acquaintances.

Further studies are required to chart the needs and the overall complex of problems experienced by those women suffering from substance abuse and mental illness. It appears essential to pursue treatments in which both mental problems and abuse are tackled together and – for women already undergoing treatment – to identify factors beyond the purely mental problems and abuse.

Keywords: Young adults, women, addiction and mental illness, treatment, quality of life, follow-up, narrative method.

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