Women, Power, and Addiction

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Substance Use is Ancient and Associated with Women
Addiction is Modern, an (side) effect of Modernity, Initially associated with Women

William Hogarth’s *Gin Lane* 1751
The First Opioid Crisis
The Origin of the Modern Concept of Addiction (and the Establishment of Medical Authority)
Women moved from the role of long-suffering drunkard’s wife into the discursive locus of a frightening modern self-reflection.

“Morphine had become a powerful symbol of the dilemmas over women’s roles and of this ambiguous meaning of their freedom.”
The First Era of Women Physicians
Addiction: 19th to 20th Century

19th Century
- Medical and Public Health
- Women
- White
- Upper SES

20th Century
- Criminal Legal
- Men
- Non-White
- Lower SES
Gender (and Power)

“One is not born but becomes a woman”

Gender “performative”, reproduced (and changed) through speaking and doing

Gender “a system of social hierarchy and imposed inequality of power”
20th Century: Prescribing for the Patriarchy
Addiction and Addiction Medicine, 20th Century
Addiction Medicine emerges from the work of Women
Dr Melissa Freeman: First to treat a woman with methadone
Gender and Drugs in the Late 20th Century: Stereotype and Structure Unchanged
If sexism served no function, it would be easy to eliminate
Addiction and the Current Opioid Crisis: What happened to Gender?

19th Century
Medical and Public Health
Women White Upper SES

20th Century
Criminal Legal
Men Non-White Lower SES

21st Century
Medical and Public Health
Universalizing Language – of Sameness, of Whiteness
Return to the Bedside
What are Women?
Arrows point to the anterior cingulate area, which is activated (yellow) in cocaine-addicted patients (left) but not in healthy volunteers (right) (Wexler et al., 2001).

FIGURE 9. PET: Cocaine markedly reduces dopamine D2 receptor availability

The striatum of the healthy control (left) is largely red, indicating the highest level of receptor availability, while that of the cocaine abuser has little red.

Fowler, “Imaging the addicted human brain” 2007
We are asking the wrong questions
Why addiction becomes us?
Why addiction becomes us?

- Explore the practice of medicine as radical, as transforming rather than reproducing norms
- Rethink equality NOT as a project of sameness or difference
- Imagine life after patriarchy
- Listen to and learn from women who use drugs, their lived experiences, their embodied knowledge, and that of providers who are women; explore disparate academic fields, get uncomfortable with feminist philosophy and queer theory to ask better questions, to provide better care
Thank you

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