

**THE STIGMA OF SUBSTANCE USE AND ATTITUDES OF
PROFESSIONALS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Submitted to: The Committee on Stigma and Addictions,
Centre For Addiction and Mental Health**

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Date: March 26, 2001



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In my first literature review [1999] finding relevant literature was very easy as numerous books and articles were available which related to the theory and process of stigmatization as well as the effects of stigma on a variety of populations. This current review explores a more specified area of stigma--the attitudes or beliefs of a variety of professions toward people with experience using drugs. Here the literature is more limited. Several electronic databases were searched including; Criminal Justice Abstracts, National Criminal Justice Reference Services, Sociofile and Medline. Search terms such as >stigma, drug users and police=, >stigma, addicts and nurses= etc. revealed few articles. Widening the search terms to be more general to include words such as >attitudes= rather than >stigma= were more successful in finding literature. Studies on attitudes of various professional groups were more prevalent in the 1960's and 1970's and because much of the literature is dated it may not accurately reflect the current situation. Hence, wherever available, recent research was selected for review, although a few of the older studies were included. This review will proceed first with a discussion of attitudes within the professions in criminal justice, then within the helping professions of medicine, nursing and social service.

Criminal Justice Professions and Attitudes Toward Drug Use and Drug Users

Fernez [1975] in an American study, surveyed police recruits, police officers, assistant district attorneys and probation officers with respect to their attitudes and beliefs about drug legislation and persons who were drug offenders. With the exception of police

respondents, subject selection occurred through a non-random convenience design. The author administered the survey instrument to two classes of police recruits at two points in time, on admission to police college [N=87] and on completion of their training [N=85] [page354]. Surveys were administered once to the assistant district attorneys [N=26], probation officers [N=30] and police [N=140] [Ibid.]. The police officers were randomly selected for participation in the study by the researcher when they were attending meetings or classes [Ibid.]. Fernez [1975] was primarily interested in attitudes or changes in attitudes within the police recruit population as a reflection of occupational socialization. His survey tapped into these changes as well as general attitudes about the connections between drugs and crime, the usefulness of drug legislation in the 1970's, whether drug legislation should be more lenient etc. Attitudes Fernez= [1975] study explored which are relevant to this review include;

- ∃ the harmfulness of the term >addict= when dealing with persons charged/convicted of narcotic offences [page 356],
- ∃ the nature of drug use as representing either criminal activity or a physical/medical condition [page 358],
- ∃ and whether narcotic offenders should be handled by the justice system or the medical system [Ibid.].

Fernez [1975] found that, with the exception of the police recruits, the respondents did not believe that the term >addict= was harmful [page 356]. This finding is not surprising

given that, at the time of the study, labeling theory was still relatively new and ideas about the harmfulness of labels may not yet have penetrated mainstream discourse. Of the respondent groups, police officers were least likely to respond favorably to drug users being sent to hospitals for addiction treatment rather than to jail [page 359]. Of note as well, was the change in attitudes of police recruits. When first surveyed [on entrance to police college] recruits endorsed the attitude that people with drug problems should be treated as people with a medical condition. When surveyed the second time after completing their training, recruits endorsed the attitude that people with drug problems should not be treated as people with a medical condition but rather as offenders [pages 359-361]. With regard to whether offenders should be treated within the justice [jail] system, the probation officers and assistant district attorneys viewed jailing offenders less favorably than did police officers [page 358]. However, the more dangerous the drug [i.e. heroin] the more likely that the probation officers and assistant district attorneys would view jailing the offender as the appropriate course of action [page 359]. Fernez [1975] concluded that:

Police recruits post-training and officers evidence attitudes which are harder than those held by other elements of the criminal justice system with regard to the various survey problems [page 362].

Of what value is the Fernez [1975] study to the issue of professionals attitudes toward people who use drugs? It is useful in getting a picture of what attitudes within the justice system were like almost 30 years ago. So, have these attitudes shifted? Three more recent

studies can shed light on the some of the current attitudes held, in particular, by police.

A study by Wilson et. al. [1985] surveyed police officers [N=88] who worked in a small city in the American mid-west [page 23]. The survey instrument utilized a Likert scale and contained questions about officer attitudes about a variety of vice crimes including those related to illicit substances [Ibid.]. Subject selection was non-random as all of the officers from the U.S. city were surveyed [N=97], of which nine of did not complete the questionnaire [Ibid.]. The results of the Wilson et. al. [1985] study discussed here are only those related to drug crimes. The researchers found that the officers generally did not view vice crimes in their community as a major problem [pages 24-25]. When surveyed about attitudes regarding the disposition of these crimes within the courts, the researchers found that A...the officers supported differing levels of state intervention for the various victimless crimes they rated≅ [pages 24-25]. Of note, the officers endorsed strong state sanctions against; drug sales, particularly with regard to drugs such as heroin and less so with drugs such as marijuana [page 25]. With regard to drug use, officers= views essentially mirrored their attitudes on drug sales. That is the respondents endorsed strong sanctions against use of drugs such as heroin or cocaine and minimal sanctions against use of marijuana [page 25]. The other finding of interest here is that when compared to older officers, the officers in the younger cohort seemed to have A...more liberal attitudes...≅[page 27]. The researchers were unclear as to whether this finding reflected an effect of the A...occupational socialization....≅ of the older officers as

was seen in the Fernez [1975] study or whether the finding simply reflected a different attitude held by members of a younger cohort [page 27].

Another study conducted by Cheurprakobkit et. al. [1998] explored police attitudes with regard to drug enforcement in Thailand. Police officers [N=672] were surveyed [page 81]. These respondents represented all three levels of policing; municipal, provincial and national [page 85]. Subject selection occurred through both simple random and random cluster sampling methods within the police population [Ibid.]. These authors had a complex research design with multiple independent variables related to the study population=s demographics, nature of technological and budgetary resources and the type and severity of drug offences in each policing catchment area [page 86]. The dependent variables were police attitudes related to drug legislation, court personnel, drug crimes and the drug war [page 86]. As was the case in the Wilson et. al. [1985] study, officers in the Thailand study held the view that strong sanctions should be enforced against the sales or manufacture of illicit substances rather than on the use of drugs [page 89]. Most officers viewed drugs as a major problem in their country [Ibid.] and identified a link between drugs and crime [pages 91 & 92]. However, these officers viewed socioeconomic problems as more serious than drugs [page 94]. As Cheurprakobit et. al. [1998] noted:

...Thai police officers believe that poverty and unemployment pose more serious social problems than drugs, yet officers believe there is a drug-crime connection [Ibid.].

The researchers also found that, among the demographic variables, the one which had the greatest impact on attitudes toward the sale and manufacture of drugs was education [page 96]. Specifically, the officers with the most education A...tend to have more punitive attitudes regarding drug trade enforcement than their less educated counterparts [Ibid.]. Other variables which influenced officers attitudes regarding the severity of the drug problem in Thailand were working in a policing catchment area where there was a high rate of drug charges and having enhanced resources to respond to the drug problem [Ibid.].

The final study found which explored police attitudes was conducted by Frank et.al. [1987]. This study focused on the attitudes held by municipal, county and state police [N=103] in Kentucky with regard to drinking and driving offences and the legislation against these offences [pages 307 & 308]. Subject selection for the municipal and county police used random sampling methods. A non-random selection of state police at one state police station was also done. Briefly, the study found that there was wide support among officers for drinking and driving legislation and for its enforcement [page 315].

The Helping Professions and Attitudes Toward Drug Use and Drug Users

Ransom [1985] conducted research on the attitudes of nursing students with respect to alcoholism. She reported that previous research on nursing attitudes had mixed findings with some studies noting highly negative attitudes among nurses toward the alcoholic patient and other studies finding positive attitudes [pages 2-10]. She noted that most of

the studies on nursing attitudes had been done in the 1960's and 1970's. Ransom [1985] surveyed nursing students [N=51], some of whom were in the first year [N=27] and some of whom were in the final year [N=24] of a baccalaureate degree at a private American university [page IV]. She was particularly interested in the influence that education would have on the attitudes of nursing students. She therefore designed her study to survey students using the AMarcus Alcoholism Questionnaire≅ [page 17] before their second year course on addictions and one year after they had completed the course. She found that the nursing students held favorable attitudes toward alcoholics whether or not they had taken the addictions course. What is interesting about this study is that it captured a positive attitude in people who were beginning their careers in health care. But what about health care professionals who have experience with substance users?

Three articles were found which addressed this question. In his theoretical paper, Ritson [1999] noted that attitudes which stigmatize people who use drugs are commonplace among the general population [page 549]. Citing research from Great Britain, he described that people who abuse drugs or alcohol are perceived by the public as potentially dangerous, hard to speak with and generally Aunpredictable≅ [Ibid.].

Among health care professionals, he reported that research has indicated that;

Clinical staff in primary care and in hospitals commonly place alcoholics and addicts very low on the list of patients whom they would like to treat. This is due in part to a feeling of lack of skill in recognizing and coping with such problems but also to a doubt about the capacity for treatment to bring about change [Ibid.].

Ritson [1999] identified several reasons why health care professionals may hold negative and stigmatizing views. First, people with experience using drugs are blamed for their health problems created by drug use because these problems are seen as essentially A...self-inflicted and evidence of self-indulgence and loss of control≅ [Ibid.]. He cited research which found in a survey of *patients* at two British family practice clinics that the respondents gave drug and alcohol users A...lower priority...≅ [page 550]. Second, as mentioned previously, the perception of dangerousness and unpredictability can contribute to negative attitudes in health care professionals [Ibid.]. Third, professionals can be unsure or feel unable to help someone with experience using drugs and the relapsing nature of recovery from drug or alcohol abuse adds to this uncertainty [Ibid.]. As Ritson [1999] stated, AProfessionals do not like feeling deskilled and some addicts can have this effect≅ [Ibid.]. Fourth, professionals can hold the same kind of negative stereotype of the drug or alcohol abuser as the general public does and this stereotype can influence how the professional responds to the patient who uses drugs or alcohol [Ibid.]. Fifth, Ritson [1999] argued that the feelings of disappointment and Afrustration≅ experienced by professionals when a patient has a relapse can add to the professionals= negative attitudes [Ibid.]. As he stated;

We all recognise it is very hard to change a habit and yet are surprisingly intolerant when others who have firmly established habits to the extent of addiction can achieve this only after prolonged effort [Ibid.].

Finally, Ritson [1999] expressed that the patients= denial can be exacerbated by

professionals= own stigmatizing attitudes and that health care workers need to be aware of this interaction [page 551].

The work of Farrell and Lewis [1990] explored attitudes within the psychiatric profession. These researchers randomly selected psychiatrists [N=144] who practiced in the United Kingdom. They were sent a questionnaire to complete with the questions focused on a case history vignette. The vignettes given to the respondents varied by the gender of the hypothetical patient with one mentioning a history of alcoholism and one describing the case with no mention of alcoholism [page 884]. Demographic information particularly with respect to areas of psychiatric specialization of respondents was also gathered [Ibid.]. A statistical analysis was done and the researchers found that:

...=cases= once given the diagnosis of alcohol dependence were judged unlikely to complete the course of treatment or to comply with advise, would not be liked in the clinic, would not arouse sympathy and would annoy the doctor [page 886].

Gender had a statistically significant effect in two of the items which explored whether the >patient= in the vignette should be admitted to hospital and whether the patient was responsible for the financial debts, which constituted one of the >patient=s= stressors in the case history. Male >patients= were more likely than females to be offered admission to hospital and were also judged to be more responsible for their financial problems than female >patients [Ibid.]. Furthermore, within group comparisons found that:

...male alcoholics were regarded as meriting less NHS time but this was not so for female alcoholics. Surprisingly, male alcoholics appeared to be judged less of a suicide risk while women alcoholics were thought to be at increased risk of suicide [Ibid.].

Farrell and Lewis [1990] also found that the respondents' attitudes varied depending on whether they specialized in treating addictive disorders. Those psychiatrists who had training in addictions were A..less rejecting...≅ [page 887]. This may relate to Ritson's [1999] discussion, in that, specialized addiction training may mitigate against professionals feeling de-skilled when treating patients with a substance abuse problem.

The conclusions Farrell and Lewis [1990] drew were that;

- ∃ psychiatrists can share≅[page 888] the same biases against alcoholics which are commonly held in society,
- ∃ the >alcoholic= diagnosis is essentially a stigmatizing label [Ibid.],
- ∃ psychiatry programs require more emphasis on education about addiction [page 889],
- ∃ and that psychiatrists' negative attitudes may actually function to impede recovery in patients with addictive disorders [Ibid.].

By far, the most thorough study of professionals' attitudes toward people with experience using drugs that I was able to locate was one conducted by Biener [1983] on attitudes of staff in emergency rooms. Despite the fact that this study is almost 20 years old, its findings were too interesting to exclude. Biener [1983] surveyed emergency room

staff [N=220] at 11 hospitals in an American city [page 266]. Staff surveyed represented a variety of professional and non-professional occupational groups including medicine, nursing, orderlies and ward clerical staff [Ibid.]. As in the Farrell and Lewis [1990] study, case history vignettes were used. The case histories varied along four factors; acuity/seriousness of the presenting medical problem, >patients= gender, whether or not the >patient= caused their medical problem and whether the >patient= had a history of drug/alcohol abuse [page 267]. The data were analyzed through multiple regression methods [Ibid.]. Biener [1983] found that:

...patients with self-caused problems are perceived as being more responsible for their illness, being more chronically ill, having a more serious illness, being less cooperative, and being less similar to staff. On each of these dimensions, substance-abusers have more extreme ratings than non-substance-abusers...substance-abusers were rated as less rewarding to work with than non-substance-abusers [page 268].

Another interesting result was that there was a significant difference between the professional groups [physicians and nurses] and the non-professional groups [orderlies and ward staff] with the former viewing work with >patients= who had a substance abuse problem as less rewarding and the latter as more rewarding [Ibid.]. The most important variable for all staff groups in influencing how rewarding it was to work with >patients= who abused substances was whether or not the >patient= was judged to be Acooperative [page 271]. The author concluded that:

...the present study provides empirical support for the widely held belief that substance-abusers are still strongly disliked by ER staff. The factor most responsible for the negative attitude

is the staff=s expectation that the substance-abuser is going to behave in an uncooperative manner [page 273].

Biener [1983] suggested that emergency room staff need skills training in management of patients who are not cooperative [Ibid.].

Thus far, this review has examined relevant literature related to criminal justice professionals and health care professionals. What about the attitudes of social workers toward people with experience using drugs? My previous literature review [1999] discussed Boyd=s [1999] qualitative research which found that the women in her study [N=28] experienced negative attitudes from social service providers in both welfare and child welfare agencies. For this present review I specifically looked for research which compared social workers attitudes with the attitudes of other helping professions and two studies were found. Canadian researchers Ogborne et. al. [1986] surveyed a variety of health and social service professionals [N=130] including; social workers and social service workers, public health nurses, family doctors, psychiatrists and EAP counselors [page 1052-3]. They found that:

Over half of the respondents [57.6%] viewed such persons as difficult and uncooperative clients and indicated that they would not like to work with a large number of them [59.7%]. Also 43% indicated that they personally found it difficult to deal with clients/patients with drinking problems [page 1054].

These results are strikingly similar to those found by Biener [1983] and Farrell and Lewis [1990]. Ogborne et. al. [1986] also found that respondents held generally positive attitudes of alcoholism treatment despite their negative attitudes toward alcohol users

[page 1056]. Unlike respondents in Biener=s [1983] study, occupational group in the Ogborne et. al. [1986] study did not exert any unique effects [page 1054].

O=Neill=s [1997] dissertation research explored attitudes of psychiatrists [N=63], psychologists [N=45] and social workers [N=66] toward patients who were dually diagnosed [page 73]. The respondents all worked in the Psychiatry department of a large New York City hospital [page 66]. All of the respondents completed the ADual Diagnosis Attitude Survey≅ [page 67]. O=Neill [1997] found that;

- ∃ positive attitudes toward dually diagnosed patients across disciplines was related to the amount of work experience the respondents had [pages 128-9],
- ∃ all three occupational groups had favorable views toward A...integrated treatment...≅for patients with a dual diagnosis [page 134],
- ∃ and respondents generally liked working with the patient population [page 141].

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has reviewed literature related to the attitudes of criminal justice professionals and health/social service professionals toward people with experience using drugs. Several themes emerged in this review. Within criminal justice professions, the literature indicates that the use or illicit sale of some substances, notably heroin and cocaine are seen as more serious criminal acts than the use or sale of other substances such as marijuana. Also, the selling or manufacture of illicit substances is viewed as a much more serious crime than the use of illicit substances. The Fernez [1975] study

highlighted some differences in attitudes between different professions within the criminal justice system but the fact that it was conducted over 25 years ago does limit its generalizability to the present day. Within health care professions in particular, the literature points to the importance of the perception of adequate skill-sets as having a strong influence on professionals' attitudes. Given this finding, it would be interesting to examine the number of hours of specific training in addition that is provided in the curriculums of the various health care professions. It may be that the best time to influence attitudes is at the point where professional education and beginning clinical experience overlap.

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