



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

KUNSKAP, KONTROVERS OCH KVICKSILVER

Debatten om amalgamförgiftning i det sena 1900-talets Sverige

Jonatan Samuelsson

Akademisk avhandling

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Fakultetsopponent: Docent Ylva Söderfeldt, Institutionen för idé- och lärdomshistoria, Uppsala universitet.

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Author
Jonatan Samuelsson

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Knowledge, Controversy, and Quicksilver. Debating Mercury Poisoning
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Abstract

This dissertation in the history of science and ideas studies the Swedish dental amalgam controversy in the late 20th century. Erupting in the early 1980s, the controversy concerned the issue of whether mercury containing dental amalgams could poison those who had had their teeth filled, or whether the many patients making such claims were in fact suffering from stress, unresolved trauma, or other illnesses. Combining a contextualizing medical history approach with analytical concepts from STS and media studies, the dissertation examines how the controversy challenged and redrew cultural boundaries between science and other forms of knowledge, between science and politics, and between medicine and society more broadly.

The notion of co-production of science and social order guides the overall analysis, whereas concepts of boundary-work and biocommunicability help direct the analysis towards contexts where claims of legitimate medical knowledge are made and communicated.

One main finding of the dissertation is that the controversy was highly significant in channelling the epistemic practises and the social credos of the new social and environmental movements into organised medicine. The study also indicates that the amalgam controversy functioned as a blueprint for the way that subsequent controversies were handled publicly and discussed in the media. Furthermore, the media did not just function as platforms for actors involved, but were key actors in their own right, as news reports co-produced some of the controversy's most salient epistemological arguments. Lastly, the dissertation concludes that these processes paved the way for altered understandings of amalgam, dentistry, health, knowledge, and patienthood.

The results point toward a need for further research into the rise of the Swedish patient-consumer in the late modern period, particularly with regards to the active role of patients themselves, and to new ways of connecting the historical study of contested illnesses, diffuse symptoms and mediated scientific controversies.

Keywords

amalgam, dentistry, co-production, medical history, controversy, boundary-work, biocommunicability, 20th century, Sweden, patient-consumer, contested illnesses, patient organizations

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