IMPLICATIONS OF LONG-TERM HEROIN USE AMONG MEXICAN AMERICAN USERS: THE “MATURING OUT” PARADOX

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AGING ILLICIT DRUG USERS

• Understanding of career trajectories for subpopulations of chronic long-term heroin users during the aging process has been limited.

• Recent increase in attention to illicit drug use among older adult U.S. population.
  • Evidence shows among adults 50-59, current rates increased to 6.3% in 2011 from 2.7% in 2002.

• Elderly Hispanics in the U.S. represent one of the fastest growing cohorts of aging Americans

• Mexican Americans have consistently had the highest rates of injecting heroin use in the U.S. when compared to other groups

Intersection of drug-related conditions, natural age-related impairments and cognitive functioning make the aging population increasingly susceptible to adverse health consequences.
HEROIN USE AMONG MEXICAN AMERICANS

• Heroin among Mexican American’s in south Texas and large cities such as Houston and San Antonio can be traced back to the 1930s

• The use of heroin among Mexican Americans gave rise to a distinct heroin subculture among Mexican-American users (“tecatos”)
  • Chronic or career heroin user with a criminal orientation and continual involvement with the criminal justice system
  • Highly exclusive social support networks with emphasis on familismo means that family may be important for shaping drug use behaviors and patterns and facilitating the distinct phases the heroin injecting lifestyle
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Life Course Perspective on Drug Use
• Series of life stages and events from birth to death that are normatively prescribed and partly age-driven
  • Transitions and turning points
  • Career trajectory
  • Longitudinal dynamic approach from the perspective of the natural history of a person’s life

Maturing Out Theory
• Winick’s landmark study (1962) identified the term “maturing out” among heroin addicts
  • With the increase of age there is a tendency toward the cessation of heroin use
• Phases of the heroin career (the “maturing out” process) (Waldorf 1983):
OBJECTIVE

Explore the trajectory of these men’s heroin career phases that range from initiation to maintenance, yet paradoxically never reaching a maturing out phase.

1) What do the phases of the heroin career look like for this population of Mexican-American men?

2) How is this career influenced by Mexican-American culture and the environment that these men reside in?

3) Finally, how are these aging men able to maintain a long-term heroin career? That is, why have they not “matured out” of heroin use?
METHODS

- Snowball sampling methodology combined with field-intensive outreach methodology

- Current injecting heroin users who have been using steadily for past year and are not currently in treatment (n=20)

- In-depth qualitative interviews in English and 1-1.5 hours in length
STUDY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- Mean age 56
- Mean age first time heroin use 19, mean years use 38
- All males of Mexican decent
- 22% single/never married.
- Mean years school 9, 3/20 high school graduates
- 25% employed
- 2 homeless
- Average 10 years incarcerated, 6.5 times
RESULTS
INITIATION PHASE “ONSET OF HEROIN USE”

• Initiating heroin use through direct interactions with immediate and extended family members, friends and/or neighborhood acquaintances
  • for many, family members were the primary individuals influencing these men’s initial experimentation
  • influence was found to occur either directly through communication or indirectly with the men picking up on signals associated with the heroin’s effects from hanging out with heroin using family members
Chuco, a 60-year-old described his initial heroin injecting experience at the age of 15 and recalled hanging out with his cousins and noticing them nodding out and coasting (euphoric mellow state). He later learned that they were using heroin. He recounted his initial experience:

I got started with my cousins. First time I saw [someone injecting], I said, “Man, I ain’t never sticking no needle in my arm.” A week later, I was doing the same thing. I was 15. Yeah, been doing it now for 45 years. I was curious. I just wanted to see how it felt because I’d see them and I’m like, “Hey, man, these guys, you know, it ain’t killing them.” That’s what I thought. Well, by the time I was 17, shit, I was using and selling dope (heroin).
For most of the men in this study, dependence to heroin did not take long after their first use.

A connection to family and friends involved in the heroin trade escalated heroin use.

Many respondents reported that their families supported them financially and socially.
Heroin use became normalized and accepted within families with histories of heroin dealing and use. One mother cleaned up after her son, Joe, a heroin dealer who was in his late 40’s:

“As she looked on the table where her son had nodded out, she spotted the heroin. There was no look of surprise on her face. She looked over at me and said, “This boy just leaves his stuff out and the police could just come in and everything is on the table” [in Spanish]. She then reached over and started to scoop the heroin into the container and put it up in a cabinet.”
MAINTENANCE PHASE – 
“TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS”

• Once respondents started using heroin regularly, regular maintenance of their habitual use or scoring became an issue
  • If they were not employed, were not dealing, were recently released from prison, or had no other source of steady income to support their habits, many sought assistance from their families, peers, or communities
Other illegal activities such as burglary, theft and fencing stolen goods were commonly used to support heroin habits. Diego engaged in armed robberies for money to buy heroin before being sentenced to 36 years in prison:

“Man, I was hitting every place and everybody that had money. And even though I sometimes made some big scores, the money just did not last. I was fixing between six and eight times a day and each syringe was loaded. It wasn’t just a little dope, it was a full load every single time I hit. I just did not care how I had to support my drug habit. I was going to get my next fix.”
DYSFUNCTIONAL PHASE – “GOING THROUGH CHANGES”

- Many experienced several life experiences that were negatively influenced or caused by their heavy heroin use
  - Death of friends
  - Overdosing
  - Arrest and Incarceration
  - Legal Supervision

- Despite negative life experiences, men did not transition to recovery because of the social and financial support from family and friends
Although all men in the study experienced these dysfunctional events, the pervasiveness of heroin in neighborhoods made it difficult to stop using heroin. Carlos discussed how neighborhood influences facilitated his continued heroin use despite these negative experiences:

“I’ve overdosed 3 times. I woke up one time in the back of an ambulance. They said, “He’s getting his color back.” I didn’t know what had happened. I remember just standing there, next thing I know I’m in the back of an ambulance. After this I said, “I’ll chill for a while.” Then somebody come around, “Hey, we got some good shit.” Normally, people would say, “Oh, no. No, I’d rather stay away.” But an addict, they say, “It’s good shit, well, hey—I gotta try it.”
FROM DYSFUNCTIONAL AND BACK TO MAINTENANCE–THE MATURING OUT PARADOX

• Challenges a simple linear conception of the maturing out hypothesis that as heroin addicts age the dysfunctions, stresses and strains of the heroin lifestyle become too much to manage for leading to an eventual cessation of heroin use

• More complex view of maturing out: **paradoxical maturing out**

• The dysfunctions that emerge in the heroin lifestyle lead not to cessation, but rather to a “**maturing in**” by which a specific process of social readjustment takes place that returns the heroin user to a stable maintenance pattern of use
MATURATION PARADOX UNDERSTOOD IN LIGHT OF:

• Historical heroin subculture and peers
  • Generational use has created peer networks that maintain long-term bonds and provide resources and support that transcend distinct heroin career phases

• Influence of family social networks (familismo)
  • Histories of remaining integrated into the family, more so than those users from other groups
  • An intergenerational closure among these segments of Latino families may affect heroin careers in aspects desensitizing the maturing out process.

• Socio-cultural context and urban spatial isolation
  • Structural factors - scarcity of meaningful employment and social opportunities within the community
  • Social networks characterized by high drug use reinforced by the social isolation
  • Maintenance of heroin use may be more likely influenced by community level structural factors rather than individual characteristics.
IMPLICATIONS

• Understanding barriers to transitioning into recovery can be developed targeting this aging population.

• Importance of specifically tailored community based interventions to provide greater resources and access to services for aging drug users residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods.
THANK YOU

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