

Variations in the accomplishment of persistent heroin use: A typology of users' lifestyles

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The aim of this paper is to offer a qualitative typology of heroin using lifestyles. Although some previous literature has described variation within the careers of heroin users or between different heroin users little of this is relevant to the United Kingdom or the 21st century. The paper aims to use thick description to understand subtle variations of the lifestyles of heroin users, including those who might be hidden from the view of the public as well as drug and criminal justice services. It is hoped the paper can help to illuminate variations of heroin user's lifestyles beyond stereotypical depictions.

Data gathering involved 51 interviews with long term heroin users conducted at a harm reduction service where the researcher was volunteering. The participants were sampled purposively by identifying heroin users from service users at a needle exchange. Whereas previous qualitative typologies of heroin users have been opaque regarding their methods of classification, a system of validation utilising two members of the research team is outlined to show the process is reliable.

Four distinct types were identified on the basis of user's narratives concerning: levels of drug use; repertoire of drugs used; social environment; housing; and income. 'Domestic users' attempted to maintain a somewhat conventional lifestyle despite being dependent to a highly stigmatized drug. 'Top boys' sold drugs in a profitable manner despite their excessive use of heroin. Users living 'On the wander' formed part of a community of homeless heroin users who inhabit the city centres, users living 'On the run' lived a little differently as they were primarily crack users and shunned the city centre community.

The conclusions suggest that one size fits all approaches to drug policy are misguided in the case of heroin use. Heroin users living different lifestyles are exposed to differing risks as well as possessing different capital which could be utilised in recovery or harm reduction.

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