

# WHEN TIME FALLS APART

IN ORDER TO explore new dimensions of the relationships between heroin use and unemployment, it is helpful to forget about heroin for a moment and to focus on the lives of the unemployed. Marie Jahoda's study of the town of Marienthal during the US slump of the 1930s can offer an inroad. One more subtle effect which emerged with particular clarity was the impact which unemployment had on the experience of the passage of time, in that unemployment seemed to have the effect of destroying the habitual time-structures by which we order so much of our everyday lives.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us fortunate enough to be in work will often curse these same time-structures — the need to get up every morning at the same time, to catch the same bus or train, to clock in and clock out at certain hours, to work to the strict timetable of the factory or the office, and so on — which are experienced as a burden and a strain. And so they are. But if these routine time-structures are suddenly removed, through unemployment or retirement, then people are often left feeling bewildered and rudderless.

One of the findings of the Marienthal study was that everything seemed to take twice as long for unemployed men as it did when they were in work. It was observed that people even walked at a measurably slower pace in the streets. And yet, although these men had so much time on their hands, they seemed quite unable to meet deadlines effectively, and their wives would complain that they seemed unable to turn up punctually at meal times. It was as if without a routine time-structure which broke up the day, time and the passage of time became quite meaningless.

Marie Jahoda suggests the unemployed are required to carry a "heavy psychological burden" resulting from "the destruction of a culturally imposed time-structure". Moreover, "to blame the unemployed for their inability to use their time in a more satisfactory way . . . would amount to asking that they single-handedly overthrow the compelling social norms under which we all live and which provide a supportive frame within which indi-

viduals shape their individual lives".

What I now wish to suggest is that heroin use within the contexts of unemployment can take on a new significance, as an effective resolution of the problem of de-routinised time-structures. Dependence on heroin, quite literally, imposes its own rigid time-structure involving a necessary cycle of events if withdrawal sickness is to be avoided. This cycle was described to us repeatedly in interviews with heroin users and ex-users in northern cities. The rhythm of a heroin user's day was often described as if it were dictated by the beat of a metronome: getting up, hustling for money, buying heroin, smoking it, and then hustling for the next bag:

"Like you get up, you've gotta go out, get your money, get your smack, come back, use it . . . You're alright for ten minutes, go back out again, get money . . . you're turkeying after a couple of hours, can't get nothin', whatever, back out again . . ."

— Colin, 23 years of age, Manchester

These busy cycles of activity were commonly experienced as all-consuming pre-occupations. So

much so that if and when someone attempted to 'come off' and 'stay off' heroin, the question of how to break from the routine and replace it with a new and different pattern of daily activities could be experienced as a more difficult obstacle to overcome than actually withdrawing from heroin. In common with many other accounts from ex-users, 'coming off' was seen as relatively easy compared to 'staying off', and it was sometimes felt that the problem of 'staying off' was made all the more difficult by the absence of employment possibilities which would be able to supply alternative routines and rewards. On the one hand, these daily routines of a heroin habit can be seen as a dismal compulsion from which the user cannot escape. But at the same time they offered to people meaningful structures around which to organise their lives in an eventful and challenging way.

In the absence of competing routines and structures of meaning and identity — such as might be supplied by work commitments — it will not only be more difficult to 'come off' and 'stay off' heroin: it will also be more likely that a novice user will establish a pattern of habitual heroin use in the first place. Heroin is not instantly addictive: it is necessary to work quite hard at becoming a heroin addict. That is to say, the drug will need to have been taken regularly on a daily basis for some length of time before the onset of dependence. There will be different time-scales for different people, but it seems highly likely that this transition will be accelerated where there are no competing claims on the user's time and attention, such as the possibilities of work commitments. □

**Despite the consequences, heroin — financing it, buying it, using it — can re-structure a life de-structured by the dole.**

**Geoffrey Pearson**

1. Jahoda M. et al. *Marienthal: the sociology of an unemployed community*. Tavistock, 1972.  
2. Jahoda M. *Employment and unemployment: a social-psychological analysis*. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

*The author is Professor of Social Work at Middlesex Polytechnic. This article has been edited from his paper "Social deprivation, unemployment and patterns of heroin use" in A land fit for heroin? edited by Nicholas Dorn and Nigel South (Macmillan Education, 1987). Copyright © Geoffrey Pearson, 1987.*

# JOINING T

**Adventure, challenge, an absorbing way of life in the army, but arguably the attraction of a unemployed young people in pre-'90s Britain is the absence of alternatives, they have**

**Mark**

I STOOD AT THE bar in a local pub, I overheard a conversation between two young men. The one I knew to be a heroin 'addict' listened politely as his old school friend excitedly told of his challenging life in the army. When the heroin user seemed unimpressed with some part of the monologue, the squaddy would take a large gulp of his pint and say, "Anyway, anything's better than the dole!"

At first I thought about the obvious differences in their lifestyles — and then the similarities. In a week's time, when the squaddy was clambering over an obstacle course somewhere in Germany, 'the addict' might be clambering over a backyard wall with a red-hot microwave.

By definition, soldiering is a risky business which can end in death. Because of the risks, heroin 'addicts' also sometimes meet untimely ends. Both deaths are equally futile and avoidable. Many ordinary soldiers wouldn't be in the army if they could have got a job at home. Like these soldiers, most of today's heroin 'addicts' are psychologically normal but unemployed, their 'addiction' a way of life adopted in the absence of anything better.

Just as 15 years ago young people might have experimented with the army and left soon after joining, so young people experiment with the drug scene for a short time and leave once something more interesting turns up. Why people join the army or start taking drugs are not the real issues. Why they stay in, or carry on using drugs to the level of 'addiction', are.

One thing is clear: for unemployed, working class people, adoption of a heroin addicted lifestyle is not a 'retreat' from the world. Many well meaning commentators have jumped to the conclusion that unemployment = heroin. For them, unemployment causes psychological despair and, as a potent analgesic, heroin alleviates the pain of this despair. Heroin 'addiction' is seen as a retreat from the harsh realities of Britain in the late 1980s: "Pass the gear and close the curtains, man!"

This analysis misses the point. If you are on the dole or on a training scheme, it is impossible to use heroin daily and 'retreat'. Even a modest habit is too expensive for people on £30 a week to maintain while

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# THE PROFESSIONALS

of life — it's not a recruitment ad for the heroin-based lifestyle for thousands of in. Are they addicted — or is it just that in chosen drug use as a profession?

Gilman

unproductively slumped in front of the TV.

In the North West, normal, unemployed heroin 'addicts' are not running away from 'life'. On the contrary, in sustaining their heroin habits they display talent, innovation and an entrepreneurial energy that would put them at risk of receiving the Queen's Award to Industry in any legitimate endeavour. It is the hectic and challenging lifestyle that attracts unemployed and under-employed working class youth. In working class neighbourhoods, the classic drugs of retreat are alcohol and benzodiazepines, not heroin.

It is said addicts cannot imagine themselves without heroin. Yet there will be people reading this article who are dissatisfied in their work. However, most are unlikely to leave their jobs until a more attractive alternative offers itself. Many of today's normal heroin 'addicts' are exactly the same. In the current economic climate, it is not that addicts cannot imagine *themselves* without their drug. Rather, they cannot imagine a *life* that does not revolve around the drug.

MUCH OF THE frustration experienced by drug workers has its roots in our failure to recognise how fundamentally the drug using population has changed. Before the 1980s, theories of 'addiction' in Britain were formulated around a small number of homeless and rootless in major cities. Drug workers' folklore has it that these 'addicts' were using drugs as an answer to their intra- and inter-personal problems.

These were the people who wanted to retreat from reality and often used the perfect drug of surrender to do so — barbiturates. Maintenance prescribing and 'junkie doctors' also meant that — though financially disadvantaged — addicts in the '60s and early '70s could have a passive relationship to opiates. Such emotionally scarred individuals are still around the drug scene, but they are a minority.

One such recently bemoaned the fact that the harsh reality of monetarism had changed the heroin scene beyond recognition: no more jazz clubs or long discussions about existentialism as you swapped your pharmaceuticals, just an impersonal cash transaction, carried out on hostile territory. He described going to score and the disgust he felt at the company he found himself in: "Spotty kids clutching video recorders and copies of the *Sun*." (Even in the 1960s, normal working class amphetamine users preferred to break into chemists and take their drugs rather than to politely ask doctors for them.)

If there is so much difference between

'addicts' who frequent the same score, imagine the diversity at a national level.

At this point one begins to realise the futility of trying to formulate grand theories of 'addiction'. As total explanations, disease models, psychological models or 'visitation from Venus' models are equally misguided. They suggest 'addiction' magically wipes out differences between rich and poor, male and female, black and white, young and old.

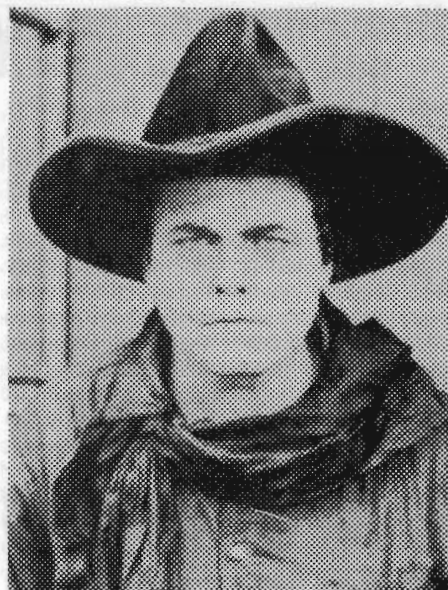
Repeated heroin use causes problems because of its legal status, its cost, its image in the eyes of family and friends and its associated risks to health. The biggest problem, however, is none of these, but the fact that together they present users with a series of challenges that must be met and overcome every day of their 'addict' careers. Potholers only explore existing holes: heroin addicts have to dig the hole, explore it, and then get out. Whether the tools are ropes and pitons or KitKat wrappers and syringes, the name of the game is adventure.

By definition, the legal status of heroin introduces the user to criminality. The drug's cost compounds their involvement, forcing contact with wider circles and higher levels of the criminal world, where, no matter how unsuccessful you have been at school, at some level you can be of use to someone. Whether legal or illegal, a job well done provides all the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. And in the criminal world, one can determine one's own moral code (eg. only steal from businesses) — another empowering experience.

To finance their habits, 'addicts' become more and more adept at larceny. Soon their exploits become legendary in the drug subculture and status is given accordingly. Many young male heroin 'addicts' I speak to remind me of Jesse James. A typical day involves securing some item, preferably small and electrical. Jesse then transforms this into ready cash. At a hastily convened meeting, Jesse and the gang pool money and information about the best buy. A 'scout' is sent out to secure the drug. If this exciting and risky procedure is successful and the scout is not headed off at the pass by the sheriff or bushwacked by renegades, it's back to the hideout for a nice relaxing toot or fix with the rest of the gang.

It is during this period that one's outlaw status in relation to the rest of 'Hicksville' is confirmed. Depending on the quality and quantity of the day's cache, the whole process may be repeated several times before retiring to bed exhausted — always remembering to save a little taste for tomorrow morning's 'kick start'.

LEARNING WHAT our views on 'addiction' are and so what we want to hear is now part of the 'addict's' self-administered training scheme. But for me a drug 'addict' is a drug 'user' who has chosen to 'Join the Professionals' — "anything's better than the dole!" □



▲ Which image is closest to the reality of heroin use in Britain today — the desperado, the 'professional', or the government advertising campaign's pathetic addict 'screwed up' by heroin?