

# 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.

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# 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**

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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