

Non-Time and Non-Sense: Temporalities of Addiction for Heroin Users in Scotland

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Abstract : This study draws on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017 with heroin and poly-substance users in Scotland and explores experiences of time and temporality as factors in continuing drug use. The research largely took place over the year in which drug-related deaths in Scotland reached a record high, and were statistically recorded as the highest in Europe. This qualitative research is therefore significant in understanding both evolving patterns of drug use and the experiential lifeworlds of those who use heroin and other substances in high doses. Methodologies included participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, and unstructured conversations with twenty-two regular participants. The fieldwork was conducted in two needle exchanges, a community recovery group and in the community. The initial aim of the study was to assess evolving patterns of drug preferences in order to explore a clinical and user-reported rise in the use of novel psychoactive substances (NPS), which are typically considered to be highly potent, synthetic substances, often available at a low cost. It was found, however, that while most research participants had experimented with NPS with varying intensity, those who used every day regularly consumed heroin, methadone, and alcohol with benzodiazepines such as diazepam or anticonvulsants such as gabapentin. The research found that many participants deliberately pursued the non-fatal effects of overdose, aiming to induce states of dissociation, detachment and uneven consciousness, and did so by both mixing substances and experimenting with novel modes of consumption. Temporality was significant in the decision to consume cocktails of substances, as users described wishing to sever themselves from time; entering into states of 'non-time' and insensibility through specific modes of intoxication. Time and temporality similarly impacted other aspects of addicted life. Periods of attempted abstinence witnessed a slowing of time's passage that was tied to affective states of boredom and melancholy, in addition to a disruptive return of distressing and difficult memories. Abject past memories frequently dominated and disrupted the present, which otherwise could be highly immersive due to the time and energy-consuming nature of seeking drugs while in financial difficulty. There was furthermore a discordance between individual user temporalities and the strict time-based regimes of recovery services and institutional bodies, and the study aims to highlight the impact of such a disjuncture on the efficacy of treatment programs. Many participants had difficulty in adhering to set appointments or temporal frameworks due to their specific temporal situatedness. Overall, exploring increasing tendencies of heroin users in Scotland towards poly-substance use, this study draws on experiences and perceptions of time, analysing how temporality comes to bear on the ways drugs are sought and consumed, and how recovery is imagined and enacted. The study attempts to outline the experiential, intimate and subjective worlds of heroin and poly-substance users while explicating the structural and historical factors that shape them.

Keywords : addiction, poly-substance use, temporality, timelessness

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