

# **Risk behavior in a long-term perspective: the significance of non-risks aspects**

**Peter Meylakhs, Laboratory for Comparative  
Social Research, National Research University  
Higher School of Economics, Russia**

**Samuel R Friedman, National Development and  
Research Institutions, USA**

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- **Colleagues and participants who have died of HIV/ AIDS and hepatitis C over the years**

## **Background:**

- **Various studies show that though prevalence of HIV and especially HCV is high among injection drug users in New York, about 30% remain uninfected with either virus despite long-term drug use.**
- **The Staying Safe study sought to formulate grounded hypotheses about how they managed to do this.**

# Long-term non-infection vs risk factors

- Epidemiologic theory that focuses on recent injection practices as infection risks cannot help much in explaining how these users “stayed safe” in the long run
- By focusing all attention on drug users’ risk behavior, it distracts researchers’ attention from other important areas of drug users’ lives that are not in themselves risks but may be extremely important in having consequences on various risks people who use drugs face. In short, we need to go beyond epidemiological risk theory to understand risk behavior in the long run.
- We argue that analysis of non-risk related aspects of the lives of the risk-takers is very important for understanding their risk-taking behavior and its outcomes

## Methods

- The study subjects were 35 long-term drug injectors, of whom:
- 21 were antibody negative for both HIV and hepatitis C – double-negatives
- 3 double positives - HIV + Hepatitis C
- 11 positive for HCV but not HIV.
- We conducted life history interviews with participants, which covered both drug-related and non-drug related aspects of their lives.

## Theoretical background

- Role using (Callero): roles are resources, which can be *used* for attainment of different benefits, both material and non-material; for instance, availability of the drug dealer role as a *resource* allows someone to *use* it to get money, drugs, or sexual favors.
- the term 'resources' means a distinct type of social relationships and a set of roles associated with it.

## Three types of resources

- **Work-related resources** are available for the individual set of roles related to his working social environment (in legal or illegal economy) that allows him to attain various benefits such as money or drugs by performing working roles (e.g. 'worker,' 'drug dealer').
- **Social resources** refer to the individual's immediate social environment (such as relatives, sex-partners, friends, neighbors) through which he can get certain benefits by performing role of a 'son,' 'friend' etc.
- **Institutional resources** are set of roles available for the individual when she engages in interaction with various institutions (syringe exchange programs, methadone programs, detoxes) that enables her to get various kinds of services and benefits by using the role of a 'client,'

## Two types of roles

- By drug-using roles we mean roles directly related to drug consumption – roles involved in finding and buying drugs, injection skills, managing dosage, interacting with other users in the process of joint drug intake, procuring access to needles, etc
- Non-drug using roles are all other roles in the life of a person who uses drugs: family roles – son, partner; working roles – both in legal and illegal economies; institutional roles – client of rehab, detox, methadone program.



# Results

- **Most double-negative informants** “took care of themselves,” both as physical bodies, and as social selves by successfully integrating and performing various drug using and non-drug using roles
- **Roberto explains:** *‘try to get high successfully. Getting high without getting broke, without getting sick, without people telling you what the fuck to do. Be successful at getting high. Getting high and still maintaining, your appearance, taking care of your bills, and you stay with money in your pocket, and you still have all the heroin...’*

# Successful performance non-drug using roles

- These informants not only managed to avoid high-risk practices but also took pride in maintaining their worker and family roles (in legal or illegal economy).
- *Enrique tells about his work:* 'I'm a good carpenter. And we're talking about ten thousand square foot home and up. They are like ten million dollar homes and up and you got a fucking heroin addict fucking running the whole show...'
- *James tells how he was able to take care of his family:* 'To me, if I was working, then it was okay, cause I was still putting money in my pocket and I was still taking care of my family...That was the important things for me. Maintaining a proper image and taking care of them.'

## Importance of stable income strategies

- Stable income strategies plays a pivotal role in maintaining double-negatives' lives by allowing them to perform various drug using and non-drug using roles successfully.
- Stable income strategy is itself a product of performing some non-drug using role (usually working role) in legal or illegal economy
- It helps them maintain access to drugs, and provides them with a possibility to borrow money based on their ability to return it (e.g. receiving credit from drug dealers if the informant temporarily lacks cash).
- It provides money to buy syringes in pharmacies or off the street.
- It lets them avoid pooling money with other users.

## **Importance of stable income strategies (cont.)**

- **A stable income strategy thus reduces risky situations such as withdrawal, lack of sterile syringes, and the necessity of injecting with other users.**

# Negatives vs. Positives

- Double-negative informants differed from positive participants in many ways other than risk practices. Most double-negatives had different relationships with their social environment, were more concerned about their health and personal outlook, were able to sustain income strategies for prolonged periods, and had goals apart from using drugs.

# Conclusion

- **Consideration of drug users only in terms of their risk practices is insufficient for understanding how they remained uninfected in the long run.**
- **Successful performance of non-drug using roles stabilizes their lives, strengthens their self-concept, and sometimes directly influences their drug intake and risk behaviors.**
- **Analysis of their biographies as complex life-trajectories involving non-drug using aspects is indispensable for comprehending long-term risk trajectories.**

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