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# Contextual Perspectives on Heroin Addiction and Recovery: Classic and Contemporary Theories

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Classic and Contemporary Theories

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## Abstract

Drug use and recovery have received considerable attention from social scientists over the past few decades. However, many studies involving heroin use continue to focus on person-centered risk factors surrounding use and, to a lesser extent, recovery processes. There is a need to further develop and use theories that focus on contextual approaches that include opportunity structures and behavioral economic factors. In this article, two classic criminological theories (Differential Opportunity and Subcultural) are reviewed as well as the more recent Social Resource theory (SRT). Differential Opportunity theory focuses on the fact that those involved in illegitimate means of opportunity require a set of learned skills as do those involved in legitimate means. Subcultural theories suggest that deviance is the result of individuals conforming to the values and norms of a social group to which they belong. SRT focuses on the resources embedded within a social network. These theories have helped better understand the microeconomic behaviors of heroin users, and those recovering from heroin addiction. This article provides a review of the application of these theories for researching heroin use and recovery.

*Keywords:* heroin, addiction, theory, microeconomic, recovery

## Contextual Perspectives on Heroin Addiction and Recovery: Classic and Contemporary Theories

Since 2000, opioid and heroin use has continued to escalate in the United States. Approximately 22.5 million citizens (9.4% of the population) struggle with a substance abuse disorder, and 7 million American use opiates (Centers for Disease Control, 2010), which is now represents the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. The alarming increase in heroin related deaths each year necessitates renewed ways of interpreting and understanding extant heroin and opiate research and theory. Given the unique processes and perspectives associated with heroin and opiate use, it is possible that heroin use and recovery show different patterns than what prior research and theory has shown with alcohol and other illicit drugs (Callahan & Jason, 2017). Multidisciplinary investigations using theories that include contextual factors could help provide a better understanding of heroin addiction and recovery.

Considerable research that has involved heroin use and recovery have focused on the proximal factors immediately preceding or most directly linked to substance use behaviors, and have tended to be clinical, linear, and person-centered in nature. When distal causes have been investigated, they used these broader concepts to explain drug and alcohol use more generally, rather than in application to a specific drug-using group (i.e. heroin users). Yet, when using a distal lens, the causes of individual drug use can become more difficult to establish, particularly as one considers such issues as economic inequality and stigma (Seth, Murray, Braxton, & DiClemente, 2013). Faupel, Horowitz, and Weaver (2004) have maintained that researches have not extensively dealt with the social context of drug use, and a broader sociological perspective is needed.

The research on substance use and, more specifically heroin abuse, has not reduced the number of heroin users, or heroin related deaths in the United States. Thus, it is possible that a different approach is needed, using a more contextual perspective, to delineate the functions by which individuals sustain abstinence, and multidisciplinary approaches provide researchers with the tools to consolidate contextual theoretical approaches. In this article, we will try to provide reasons why this contextual perspective is needed.

Theories serve three purposes—describing, explaining, and predicting phenomena, and each of these functions are important as will be illustrated in this article. Most frequently, theories are used to describe a phenomenon, and this first effort at description can then be used to explain why the phenomenon occurs, allowing for possible inferential predictions. Good theories also provide guidance about under which circumstances and conditions a given set of propositions apply (Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, & Gleason, 2016). In terms of the field of sociology, macro-level theories refer to society- or group-level causes and processes, whereas micro-level theories address individual-level causes and processes (University of Washington, 2015-2018). In the article below, we will try to show why there is need to incorporate more of these macro-level approaches in the study of heroin addiction. As such, this article aims to assess the usefulness of three established theories (Differential Opportunity theory, Subcultural theories, and Social Resource theory) in order to build upon and add to theoretical contextual conceptualizations of behaviors of heroin users.

### **Differential Opportunity Theory**

Robert Merton's (1957) theories of anomie and strain are among the most widely examined theories of criminality. In addition, Messner and Rosenfeld's (1994) theory of institutional anomie built on Merton's conception of anomie, and delineated how specific

institutions lead to conditions of anomie and criminality. Building on these ideas, Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) theory of differential opportunity focused on the fact that those involved in illegitimate means of opportunity require a set of learned skills as do those involved in legitimate means. They suggest that people's access to both legitimate and illegitimate means are socially structured. This means that there is a "differential opportunity" to reach economic goals by legitimate means, but that there is also a "differential opportunity" to use illegitimate means to reach those goals. This theory focuses on the discrepancy between what marginalized groups want, and what is available to them.

One way to better understand differential opportunities is by examining the microeconomics of substance use (Bickel, Johnson, Koffamus, MacKillop, & Murphy, 2014), social cognitive (Bandura, 1999; Davis & Jason, 2005), and psychosocial lenses (McClellan, Farabee & Crouch 1997). These all have implications for differential opportunity theory. Established routes to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of substance users are unemployment (Uggen, Manza & Thompson, 2006), a lack of marketable skills, and barriers to economic opportunities and mobility (Callahan, Jason, & Robinson, 2016). For example, unemployment is related to drug use and relapse. Data from 405,000 people in the 2002 to 2010 U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health compared substance outcomes among unemployed and employed persons. Strong associations were found between unemployment and drug and alcohol use, and this relationship was not diminished by race or gender (Compton, Gfoerer, & Conway, 2014).

Other studies have consistently found employment to be a moderator of the relationship between treatment and length of sobriety (Dutra et al., 2008), a mediator of treatment setting effect and sustained abstinence (Finney, Hahn, & Moos, 2006), and a predictor of sustained

abstinence in a longitudinal study of alcohol and drug users (Rollins, O'Neill, Davis, & Devitt, 2014). Employment aids in preventing relapse by providing structure and reinforcement to the lives of people who use drugs that discourages continued harmful use (Magura et al., 2004; Vaillant, 1988).

Though employment is central to sustained recovery, people with a history of heroin use encounter challenges with obtaining employment due to social and personal deficiencies (Platt, 1995). Again the notion of differential opportunity appears to be critical. Given the rising number of heroin users and related deaths each year (Wakeman, Bowman, McKenzie, Jeronimo, & Rich, 2009), it is important to focus on the socioeconomic characteristics of these users and their environments. This aids in developing specific strategies to prevent heroin use, and to reintegrate current users into mainstream society. For example, Levy and Anderson (2005) used a life-course model to explore the gradual embedding of heroin users within a drug lifestyle. They found this lifestyle lead to increased marginalization, and decreased possibility of abstinence. These findings illustrate how social routines like illegal income-generating activities and drug-use behavior (i.e., cooking, injecting, and smoking rituals) are a key route to social marginality, as well as a means of enduring it. They view addiction along a continuum of the use of the drug itself, and the lifestyle that accompanies and sustains the drug use. The results from this study imply that social resources and differential opportunity facilitate the use of illegitimate means to reach income-generating goals. Accordingly, studies have focused on employment as a central mediator to sustained abstinence (Melvin, Davis, & Koch, 2012), and employment has been viewed as an important factor in the successful rehabilitation of individuals with heroin dependencies in treatment programs (Platt & Metzger, 1987).

These notions of opportunity theory have been supported by a number of studies regarding heroin addiction and recovery. For example, Dekel, Benbenishty, and Amram (2004) studied heroin addicts from three therapeutic communities 15 months after leaving the programs. About half of the clients were not using at follow-up, and over 90% of those who completed the program were abstinent (longer stays were related to higher rates of abstinence). Gendreau, Grant, and Leipziger (1979) found treating self-esteem in correctional settings was of importance, as changes in self-esteem during incarceration were predictive of recidivism after release. Koo, Chitwood, and Sánchez (2007) found that employed users were less likely to use crack cocaine than unemployed users, suggesting that there is a need to find ways to increase and sustain opportunities for employability of persons who misuse heroin, as this functions to enhance human and social capital. Roddy, Steinmiller and Greenwald (2011) found that participants indicated they would significantly decrease heroin daily purchasing amounts if they encountered a 33% decrease in income, family/friends no longer paid their living expenses, or they faced greater likelihood of police arresting them; suggesting that very strong environmental changes involving income reductions or increased legal sanctions may impact heroin use. These studies are directly related to different opportunity theory, and indicate the importance of treatment services and economic support for these at risk individuals.

Heroin users have specific treatment needs such as employment services to help become able to successfully re-enter mainstream society (Callahan & Jason, 2017). Heroin users might be more in need of such types of services than others, given that they are more likely to be out of the legal economic system due to their addiction. Thus, differentiating heroin users as a sub populace of those with a substance use disorder is important so that the needs of these



individuals can be appropriately addressed rather than making assertions that involve possible overgeneralizations from the drug using population.

As another example of the importance of opportunity theory, Callahan, LoSasso, Olson, Beasley, Nisle, Campagna, and Jason (2015) found heroin users were less likely to be employed and reported lower mean employment income than non-heroin users. These users were also significantly more likely to engage in illegal income generating activities, and outcomes showed higher illegal income. Because unemployment increases the likelihood of heroin use, as indicated earlier, treatment efforts should integrate employment services within a continuum of care. Aftercare models should provide employment services to combat the engagement in illegal activities.

Broadening this argument, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) claim there are disparities in opportunities to learn, and opportunities to perform due to the social structure of a community. Like Merton (1957), Cloward and Ohlin focus on social-structural factors that facilitate income generating crime and create barriers to economic and class mobility. A more complete theory might incorporate micro-level social structures that involve subcultural theories, which could involve access to resources to investigate behavior changes when presented with legitimate income generating opportunity, and/or access to social and human capital and resources.

### **Subcultural Theory**

Subcultural theories builds upon the work of Merton (1957), as these contextual theories suggest that deviance is the result of individuals conforming to the values and norms of a social group to which they belong. In other words, if one belongs to a social group whose norms differ from those of the main society, then one will become likely remain a part of that sub-populace. This provides a subcultural basis for the study of heroin use and recovery.

Significantly, Baumrind (1983) criticized the claim that marijuana use causes heroin use, and suggested these strong, causal claims are often made from a rather weak version of the regularity model of cause. Too frequently, as Reuband (1977) points out, those with substance use disorder are described as individuals escaping from the problems of everyday life through their drug use. Furnham and Thomson (1982) examined lay people's implicit theories of heroin addiction, and found moralistic, psychosocial, sociocultural and drug treatment domains, which reflect coherent views on the nature of heroin addiction. Heroin addiction was perceived as due to psychological and social pressures, but not biological, or a lack of morality. The results also suggest a more psychological model of addiction treatment.

In contrast, subcultures have been theorized as distinct from and in opposition to the dominant culture and ways of thinking about drug initiation (Blackman, 2014). Subcultural theories have been used by sociologists and criminologists to understand deviant behavior and it has often been applied to youth cultures. For example, Kaplan, Martin, and Robbins (1984) tested a model of the adoption of substance use by adolescents, and investigated self-derogation, peer influence, weakening of social controls, and early substance use. They found these four theoretical perspectives complemented each other in terms of predicting subsequent adoption of drug use. For these theorists, drug use and addiction is much more than the ingestion of a substance in order to experience its effects.

In other words, heroin users have demonstrated specific and sometimes exclusive social activities, routines, use patterns, and income generating activities that can impart a greater significance to the actual drug using behavior. Heroin use occurs within a cultural context establishing a sub-populace; therefore, creating a clear need to explicate central aspects to the nature of this relationship. Further, this extension of subcultural theory is primarily based on an

empirical literature review on heroin use in the United States. These theories provide a critical analysis of subcultural theories regarding crime and addiction. For that reason, there is a need to refine the general subpopulation theory of crime and delinquency to provide a concise framework that integrates many of the most important features of heroin use in context; to identify potentially important understudied topics for further research; and to formulate public policy recommendations.

Recently, attention has been gravitating toward a more subcultural perspective, in contrast to older models and theories explaining drug use (Lettieri, Sayers, & Pearson, 1980). For example, Best, Irving, and Albertson (2016) explored the concept of recovery involving changes in personal identity that required not only internal changes in values, but also recognition by the surrounding social environment. Lempens, Van de Mheen, and Barendregt (2003) used the subcultural theory in order to explore why some substance users are homeless and others are not, as they described their immediate social environment. These researchers found homeless users often had no identity papers, no health insurance, and had serious deficits in basic services. The researchers concluded social care centers and assistance were crucial in reducing homelessness and substance use.

In another study, Friedman and Alicea (1995) examined 30 heroin/methadone users, using a resistance and subcultural framework. Their study helped illustrate how women rejected gender and class expectations, helping them reinterpret their experiences with drugs. Gourley (2004) found subcultural theories of deviance provided an important understanding of ecstasy use, which needs to consider the broad social involvement in a subculture of drug use. Therefore, she recommended that when researchers are looking at why individuals use substances, they

should take into consideration the context, behavioral norms and the subculture assigned to the drug of choice.

Gorsuch (1976) suggested that disruption of normal child-parent relationships, lack of involvement in organized groups, and few effective peer relationships could predispose some individuals to initiate use of illicit drugs. Other important family-cultural factors in initial use included socialization to nontraditional norms, parental modeling of illicit drug use, involvement with drug-using peers, and positive experiences with drugs. As accounts of youth culture have downplayed more class-based accounts of young people's experiences, Shildrick (2006) suggested that neighborhood residence and other structural factors can shape the cultural identities and experiences of some youth. According to Golub, Johnson, and Dunlap (2005), the subcultural basis of drug use comes from a dialectic between drug subcultures with individual identity development. The prevailing subcultures do affect drugs' popularity, and subcultures do change over time due to historical events and individual choices. This perspective provides insight into the use of licit drug and the dynamics of drug epidemics, as well as the formation of drug generations. Martin (2002) even suggests that subcultural and social movement studies can learn from each other and be employed in empirical research. Calluori (1985) suggests that youth subcultures are collective solutions to the contradictions and pressures youth experience due to their socioeconomic class and age. These subcultures provide strategies for surviving the degradations of everyday life in society.

In summary, subcultural theory considers macro-level matters, such as social structural issues (Anderson, 1995). This recognition suggests that it is necessary to have theories that focus more on drug subcultures instead of individual addicts, and in doing so, the consequence is

the introduction of more macro-level matters, such as economics, social inequality, and cultural values.

### **Social Resource Theory (SRT)**

A different contextual perspective is offered by those subscribing to a SRT, which focuses on the resources embedded within a social network, and has its origins in economic sociology (Lin, 1981). Social environments, as manifested in friendships among dyads, can be represented by a social network. Using this approach, researchers have a much better understanding of the role of peer affiliations in substance use among adolescents (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011; Dishion, 2013), for whom schools provide natural social laboratories. Using the SRT approach, different ties can enable a person, who is called an ego, to reach connections or associates that are called alters, different types of resource that an individual might need to meet his or her needs (Lin, 1981). There are mutual expectations that are assumed within social relationships for this type of support and access to resources. Such resources are collectively called “social capital.” Access to and use of this capital has been found to aid individuals in employment attainment and economic mobility (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

Three propositions have been formulated in SRT: 1) resources accessed in social networks affect outcomes such as employment; 2) social resources are subsequently affected by the person’s demographic factors; and 3) the use of weaker rather than stronger ties affect access to social resources. These three propositions focus efforts on better understanding access to resources embedded in social networks, and allow a better understanding of how resources embedded in social networks can help provide educational, employment, and social opportunities. Furthermore, network resources, education, and initial positions are expected to affect attained statuses such as employment or earnings. In addition, SRT encompasses the

mobilization of social capital, the use of social contacts and the resources in the job-search process. In SRT analyses, it is possible to also add other factors to the basic model, (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and employment history) as control or opportunity/constraint factors.

Prior research has investigated the social capital of individuals in the labor market. In one study, better access to social capital was found to aid in the employment process (Sprengers et al., 1988). Strong ties increased optimism about jobs, which in turn intensified the job search, leading to more and better jobs. Participants with better social capital among strong ties also had better employment outcomes. The Sprengers et al. study also found that those with more education tended to have better social capital. Boxman, De Graaf and Flap (1991) found both education and social capital had direct effects on income, and that men had higher income and employment.

Other studies grounded in SRT have found demographic groups vary in the types and amount of ties in their personal social networks. Research has found this influences the effectiveness of social ties for obtaining employment (Wegener, 1991). Specifically, men tend to have larger male networks, and greater weak ties, while women have greater strong ties in their networks. African-Americans have been found to have less diverse networks than Caucasians, thereby limiting access to new information (Lin, 1981). As a result of these patterns, women and minorities tend to receive significantly fewer job leads than white men from their social networks (McDonald & Siegall, 1992).

Increasing attention has been provided to these types of social networks in the field of addiction. A number of studies have examined the networks of those in substance use recovery, and have established their relevance as facilitators of treatment entry (Davey, Latkin, Hua, Tobin, & Strathdee, 2007; Kelly et al., 2010) as well as mediators of ongoing sobriety

(Humphreys & Noke, 1997; Humphreys, Mankowski, Moos, & Finney, 1999; Kaskutas, Bond, & Humphreys, 2002; Longabaugh et al., 1995). From adolescence to young adulthood, Hahm et al. (2012) were able to find an association between social network characteristics and binge drinking. In another study, Weerman et al. (2011) found the average delinquency level of someone's friends in the school network does have a significant effect on delinquent behavior of the respondents. In addition, leaving or joining informal street-oriented youth groups had a substantial effect on changes in delinquency. As another example, Mercken et al. (2012) found that similarity in smoking behavior among adolescent friends could be caused by selection of friends on the basis of behavioral similarity, or by influence processes, where behavior is changed to be similar to that of friends. Thus, social network methodologies have been used to measure and explain the dynamic interplay among friendship and mentoring relationships and recovery-supporting attitude and behavior change. These types of studies can simultaneously identify the active possible social ingredients of recovery, as well as proposing changes to broaden the beneficiary population.

Social resources embedded in social networks affect the outcomes of employment and are affected by the demographics of an ego. Social resources are also affected by the use of weak and strong ties. Although the application of SRT to employment attainment has been demonstrated in the general population, little is known about these associations in mutual-help settings. Additionally, there few studies that specifically looks at heroin users through an SRT lens. Given the role of employment for recovery from heroin addiction, it is important to understand these relationships in recovery communities.

Some recovery houses provide comprehensive social environments for residents, and illustrate the importance of social networks (Callahan, & Jason, 2016). As an example of this approach with heroin users, Callahan and Jason (2017) studied five women who had been heroin users and followed their changes in social networks over a two year period of time, after entering Oxford House recovery homes. This study found an increase in the number of alters of a two year period, while the number of heroin users in their networks decreased. The percent of the network of family members was also found to increase as the number of alters increased. This study suggests Oxford Houses can facilitate the increase of network density by affording individuals access to large supportive networks where people make new friends and associates. This study also provides some insights about the retention of family members, which provide social, emotional and financial capital for people in recovery.

### **Discussion**

As is evident in this review, social resources and differential opportunity can influence the use of illegal ways to generate income. And because heroin users use illegal means for their primary source of income, it is critical to understand employment as a mediator to sustained abstinence (Melvin, Davis, & Koch, 2012). If successful rehabilitation is to occur, opportunity theory points to employment as a necessary goal to achieve. Thus, opportunity theory suggests there is a need to explore changes in patterns of income generating behaviors of substance users, specifically heroin users, when presented with increased opportunities for economic learning, From a subcultural theoretical perspective, where heroin users conform to the values and norms of their social group having a hazardous lifestyle revolving around drugs, thus, subcultural theory of heroin use has considerable appeal in understanding a broader notion of recovery from a contextual point of view. Finally, we tend to feel that SRT has the most appeal, as it can both



graphically and mathematically demonstrating the importance of context of both initiation and continuation of heroin use.

As indicated in this article, people in recovery from substance use disorders, particularly those with heroin addiction, face many obstacles to maintaining abstinence (Montgomery, Miller, & Tonigan, 1993). For example, many people who finish heroin use treatment relapse within a few months (Vaillant, 2003). This phenomenon may be due to the lack of longer-term community-based housing and employment support (Jason, Olson, & Foli, 2008). A number of self-help organizations provide support to individuals following treatment, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). However, these programs do not provide much needed safe and affordable housing or access to employment. For these needs, a variety of professionally-run and resident-run residential programs are available in the United States (Polcin et al. 2010), including the Oxford House model referred to in the prior section (Callahan & Jason, 2017). Although such recovery programs are important sources of housing and employment support, they do not work for everyone (Moos & Moos, 2006; Zywiak, Longabaugh, & Wirtz, 2002), and it is important to understand the reasons for these differential outcomes (Moos, 1994).

These theories all bring in the notion of context, which has also been at the forefront of the field of Community Psychology. This discipline emerged at the 1965 Swampscott meeting (Anderson et al., 1966). In one of the key addresses at this meeting, Glidewell (1966) commented that we needed to shift the attention of psychologists from individuals to their interactions within small groups, and then to other small groups that form social organizations. It was within these types of inter-connections that Glidewell argues we have the potential to alter values, motives and feelings that shape behavior and thus adaptation. Similar work had been occurring in sociology (e.g., Homans, 1950), and in social psychology who saw group contexts

as good ways to study attribution and social exchange (e.g. Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). But the field of community psychology has tried to go beyond groups to study communities as a geospatial/geosocial entity, and this work had direct relevance to the study of heroin use, as indicated in this article. Approaches reviewed have involved context, whether it was within Differential Opportunity, Subcultural or SRT, in an effort to better understand heroin use disorders.

The important point is that complex contextual factors and systems surround heroin use, and theories that incorporate these issues could provide enormous benefits for addressing those with heroin use disorders. Jason, Stevens, Ram, Miller, Beasley, and Gleason (2016) found that the field of Community Psychology has also encountered significant challenges in testing and evaluating theories that involve system-level environmental change. It has struggled to establish consensus when operationally defining criteria and when creating reliable instruments for measuring theoretical constructs. Many of its theories are too broad to make the types of predictions characteristic of science. So, just as with the field of Community Psychology, there is a need for more discussion about contextually specific theories for those with substance use disorders, and in particular those using heroin.

Vaillant (1983) noted environmental cultural factors may be key contributors to whether or not individuals maintain abstinence after treatment. These factors include the amount and type of support one receives for abstinence. Individuals who participate in aftercare services sustain abstinence for a longer period of time (Laudet, 2009; Sannibale et al., 2003). One study found that each additional month spent in aftercare led to a 20% increase in the odds of continued abstinence (Schaefer, Cronkite & Hu, 2011). Unfortunately, many individuals who complete substance use treatment are released back into the community without the types of environmental

supports needed to solidify their abstinence. Community-based support groups such as AA do offer immediate psychological and/or spiritual support, but they usually do not provide needed housing, employment, or reliable sober-living environments. From a theoretical position, they might not provide the context and support that are needed to change the social ecology and employment opportunities for many within the heroin subculture.

Moos (2007) and Vaillant (2005) offer rationales for why integration into the social system should be important to recovery effectiveness, such as resultant bonding, monitoring, goal direction, modeling, positive reinforcement, rewarding alternatives to using, as well as advice and outlets for dealing with negative emotions and stress. Because relationships within the environment (and/or in the personal network) are likely to be vehicles for these processes, integration can be viewed as relationship formation processes. Furthermore, as Vaillant explicitly noted, many of these recovery-supportive processes are likely to be active in new, recovery-supportive friendship and mentoring relations, which of course is based on SRT theory. This explains our focus on processes whereby relationships form in the social environment, or support their formation in the personal networks, and especially how friend and mentor relationships affect recovery outcomes.

These theories fit well within community-based efforts to reduce addiction and heroin use. There is now a need to focus on identifying mechanisms through which social environments affect these types of health outcomes and looking at system-level evolution, and theory can help set the direction for this work (Jason, Light, & Callahan, 2016). This research could contribute to reducing health care costs by improving the effectiveness of the recovery systems in the United States, and by restructuring and improving community-based recovery settings (Callahan, Gelfman, Beasley, Calabria, & Jason, 2016). Mutual help systems can facilitate access to large

supportive networks where people make new friends who all know each other and interact regularly, and intimately, to promote a new lifestyle and altruism (Light, Jason, Stevens, Callahan, & Stone, 2016). Of the three theories reviewed, we feel that the SRT has the most potential for better understanding those using heroin. From this theoretical point of view, what is needed is low cost, but effective, ways of replacing those social networks with ones that feature individuals who do not use drugs and alcohol, and who are employed in legal activities (Polcin, Mericle, Callahan, Harvey, & Jason, 2016). Community network-based solutions include recovery settings where individuals can seek support with others for their addictions (Isler, Mineau, Hunter, Callahan, et al., 2017).

It should also be noted that those with a heroin addiction could also be considered along a continuum, with high variation among its members. In fact, it is very possible that when governments make this drug illegal, legal authorities have unwittingly pushed its users into a lifestyle that often ends up in the criminal justice system. For example, if alcohol were illegal, those who used this substance would also face more difficulties functioning in society in order to obtain this drug. The “war on drugs” has certainly been an important factor in marginalizing those with all types of substance use disorders. In addition, it should be also noted that that pharmaceutical industry and medical community has also participated in the increase in heroin use in our society, both by exponentially increasing the number of pain killer prescriptions (which increased the numbers of people on opiates) as well as when reducing the mood altering qualities of a number of drugs from 1998 to 2004 thus accelerating the transition to heroin.

This article reviewed three prominent theories that can be applied to those using heroin. In general, opportunity theories do provide considerable help in understanding why individuals both begin and continue use. But it is the subcultural theory that helps explain that deviance is

the result of individuals conforming to the values and norms of a social group to which they belong, if one belongs to a social group whose norms differ from those of the main society then one will become and likely remain a part of that sub populace. SRT provide some of the most convincing evidence about the sometimes exclusive social behaviors, routines, use patterns, and income generating activities that can impart a greater significance to the actual drug use itself. Thus, all three theories help better understand heroin use that occurs within a cultural context, Multiple methodologies have provided strong evidence, including that from epidemiology, qualitative and ethnographic observation. The key features of heroin addiction need to include context, and theories that have tapped into this rich approach could be used to help us restructure and improve community-based recovery settings.

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