THEY SAY THAT RECOVERY INVOLVES REPAIRING A SPOILED IDENTITY – BUT IS THIS REALLY HELPFUL?

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This presentation is based on a recently published paper:

Some key literature on recovery & identity

The appeal of ‘spoiled identity’ to understanding recovery

- Research suggests that drug users frequently seek to distance themselves from a negative drug user identity
  - ‘Distancing’; ‘othering’; ‘downward comparison’
- Drug treatment services (particularly 12-step programmes) encourage individuals to destroy their negative identity rooted in the drug world & establish supportive social networks that will sustain a positive new identity
- Linking recovery to repairing a spoiled identity is consistent with current drug policy & its focus on re-integrating drug users back into mainstream society
- Explaining recovery in terms of repairing a spoiled identity is relatively simple & easy to understand
Goffman & ‘spoiled identity’

  - Goffman does not actually define ‘spoiled identity’
  - His book is about stigma
  - Stigma is not an absolute concept; it is context dependent & relational
  - All individuals have experience of stigma: nobody can be perfectly normal
  - If Goffman had defined the term ‘spoiled identity’, he would probably have argued that people do not have ‘spoiled’ or ‘unspoiled’ identities. He would likely have argued that it is only aspects of a person’s identity that can be damaged at particular moments & in particular situations.
Further difficulties of using ‘spoiled identity’ to understand recovery

- Labelling drug users as ‘spoiled’ & non drug users as ‘unspoiled’ is misinformed & simplistic
- Labelling drug users as ‘spoiled’ is derogatory
- Drug use can be experienced as a ‘totalising spoiled identity’ from which it is difficult to escape
- Abstinence from drugs is not the only way of generating a positive identity
- Even if individuals cease all drug use, they may still be given a spoiled identity by others
Goffman, dramaturgy & recovery

  - Dramaturgy: means looking at life & the way people behave & interact as if they were part of a theatrical performance
  - Identity is something that is ‘done’ rather than ‘owned’ & the focus is on what people ‘do’ rather than who they ‘are’
  - Identity is not fixed, but fluid & changeable
  - Identity is ‘performed’ in social interactions with others
  - Within each interaction there is a ‘performer’ & ‘an audience’
  - Individuals enact different performances to different audiences
  - There are countless identity possibilities for recovering drug users (beyond ‘spoiled’ & ‘unspoiled’)
  - Individuals do not have to be totally abstinent (or ‘unspoiled’) in order to present to others in a positive way
Goffman (1959) argues that social performances are conveyed by two separate means of communication:

- ‘Expressions we give’: conscious & intended (e.g. verbal statements such as ‘I am abstinent’)
- ‘Expressions we give off’: often unintended (e.g. sweating & sneezing when in withdrawal or nodding when intoxicated)

Individuals try to project a sense of honesty and integrity about themselves by ensuring that the ‘expressions they give’ are consistent with ‘the expressions they give off’

- However, intoxication & the physical signs of drug use tend to impair a drug user’s ability to control the information they communicate about themselves
- When drug use is under control or absent, it is easier to present a consistent & socially acceptable self to the world
- Presenting a consistent & socially acceptable self to the world ‘should’ enable individuals to participate in easier & more satisfying relationships with others
Discussion

- Our understanding of recovery can be improved by looking beyond Goffman’s concept of ‘spoiled identity’ & drawing upon his broader dramaturgical work
- Drug users are not ‘spoiled’ people (although aspects of their behaviour may be ‘spoiled’). Equally, abstinence will not make them ‘unspoiled’ perfect people (nobody is totally ‘unspoiled’ or perfect)
- It is possible to change our identities (even if only in small ways) in every social interaction (even whilst using drugs)
- There are many positive roles & identities open to all of us
- A relapse does not mean complete failure & past negative behaviours & identities do not need to be carried around forever
- However, it is easier to present a positive identity when not using drugs
- Individuals who maintain consistency between what they say about themselves & the impressions they give off are likely to find it easier to build trusting & supportive relationships with others
Conclusions

- We do not argue that Goffman provides the perfect solution to understanding recovery
- Limitations include:
  - Stigma towards drug users can be very entrenched – even when drug users try very hard to be good citizens, people may still label them negatively
  - Dramaturgy doesn’t really take account of how behaviours & identities are influenced by structural, institutional, material & physical factors beyond immediate individual control
  - Goffman’s work is now quite old & newer theoretical approaches (such as postmodernism or embodied sociology) might enable us to develop our understanding of recovery processes further
- However, Goffman’s work provides some useful insights & debating points for the recovery field
- Additionally, his broader dramaturgical work seems more useful than his more often quoted work on ‘spoiled identity’
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Issues for debate

- Have you heard of the idea of repairing a spoiled identity?
- What did you think about it? Was it useful? Does it seem useful now?
- Does the idea that people can change aspects of their identity in particular circumstances & in front of certain audiences sound relevant, useful, promising or helpful?
- Could drug workers and peers use Goffman’s dramaturgical work? If so, how?
- Would drug users benefit from learning how to make sure that the impressions they deliberately convey about themselves match the things that they convey unintentionally?
- Are relationships damaged when people seem to say one thing but unintentionally convey another?
- Is it really possible to change your identity (or aspects of your identity) given society’s attitudes?