



‘We the Avant-Garde’

A History from Below of Dutch Heroin Use in the 1970s

GEMMA BLOK

In the 1970s the Netherlands (like many other western countries) was shocked by a sudden wave of heroin use. The heroin ‘epidemic’ is currently framed as a public health problem that has been solved in a commendably humane fashion. In the mean time heroin users have gained a ‘loser image’. Using memoirs written by and interviews with former heroin users, this article argues that heroin use was initially linked to cultural rebellion, self-development and social criticism. We need to take this forgotten aspect of the history of the Dutch heroin ‘epidemic’ into account when we try to explain this historical phenomenon.

‘Wij de avant-garde’. Een history from below van heroïnegebruik in Nederland in de jaren zeventig

In de jaren zeventig van de vorige eeuw werd Nederland (net als veel andere westerse landen) opgeschrikt door een plotselinge golf van heroïnegebruik. Deze ‘heroïne-epidemie’ wordt momenteel beschouwd als volksgezondheidsprobleem dat succesvol is bedwongen, op een bewonderenswaardig humane wijze. Ondertussen hebben heroïnegebruikers een ‘loser’ imago gekregen. Op basis van memoires geschreven door en interviews met voormalige heroïnegebruikers, betoogt dit artikel dat het gebruik van heroïne oorspronkelijk verbonden was met culturele rebellie, zelfontplooiing en cultuurkritiek. Dit vergeten aspect van de ‘epidemie’ is onderdeel van de verklaring voor de populariteit van opiaten destijds.

In 2010 a Dutch radio news broadcast announced that the heroin user had disappeared from the streets.¹ The ‘epidemic’ of heroin use, which had started in the early 1970s, was declared officially over. Of the estimated 30,000 heroin users in the Netherlands in the early 1980s, today about 14,000 are left.² Their average age is 55. The vast majority of this group currently receive methadone – a synthetic substitute for heroin – on a daily basis. Some 600 people are in heroin-assisted treatment, which means they go to a clinic several times a day to use prescription heroin in a controlled setting. According to Wim van den Brink, professor in Psychiatry and Addiction at the University of Amsterdam, the introduction of heroin-assisted treatment in Holland around the year 2000 has been a key ingredient in the decrease of public nuisance and criminality caused by hard-drug users.³

Narratives originating from addiction treatment and politics currently dominate the memory of the wave of heroin use the Netherlands experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. They present a positive image of a public health problem that has been solved in a commendably humane fashion. In 1989 the Dutch civil servant Eddy Engelsman, employed at the Ministry of Welfare, Public Health and Culture, proudly stated that ‘the Dutch being sober and pragmatic people, opt rather for a realistic and practical approach to the drug problem than for a moralistic or overdramatised one’.⁴

In Dutch addiction treatment, during the 1980s and 1990s the focus slowly shifted from achieving complete abstinence, towards a reluctant acceptance of relapse and chronic drug use. A new treatment goal was formulated called ‘harm reduction’ – minimising the harm caused by an addiction, both to the individual and to society in general. From the late 1990s onwards, the harm reduction paradigm was supported by new research framing addiction as a chronically relapsing brain disease. Many Dutch addiction experts embraced this model of addiction.⁵

The impact of the Dutch approach, experts argue, has been that hard drug addicts have gained a ‘loser-image’.⁶ For instance, in *Substance Abuse. A Global View* (2002), the American professor in Mental Health Andrew Cherry

1 ‘Heroïneverslaafde uit straatbeeld verdwenen’, *De Praktijk*, *NPO Radio 1*, 18 August 2010.

2 Trimbos Instituut, *Nationale Drugsmontor 2013-2014* (Utrecht 2014) 108.

3 Wim van den Brink in: ‘Heroïneverslaafde uit straatbeeld verdwenen’, *De Praktijk*, *NPO Radio 1*, 18 August 2010.

4 Eddy Engelsman, ‘Dutch Policy on the management of drug-related problems’, *British Journal of Addiction* 84 (1989) 211-218; 212

DOI 10.1111/j.1360-0443.1989.tb00571.x.

5 Anja Krabben, Toine Pieters and Stephen Snelders, *Chemie van verslaving. Over genen, hersenstoffen en sociale zwakte* (Houten 2008); Zon MW, *Verslaving. Slotpublicatie* (Den Haag 2005).

6 Andrew Cherry, Mary E. Dillon and Douglas Rush (eds.), *Substance Abuse. A Global View* (Westport 2002) 159; Han Israëls and Annet Mooij, *Aan de Achtergracht. Honderd jaar GG & GD Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 2001) 181.

writes that ‘because Dutch authorities do not prosecute drug addicts simply for using drugs, and because the state provides methadone as a substitute’, the heroin addict’s lifestyle is not regarded by the young Dutch as a form of cultural rebellion.⁷ The loser-image of heroin use was probably stimulated by the public image of pale, ragged and desperate-looking street junkies that were omnipresent in many Dutch inner cities until the early twenty-first century. They could be seen nodding off or shooting up in corridors or porches, or waiting in line at the busses for mobile methadone maintenance.

In the – limited – historiography of heroin use, this drug symbolises the ‘hangover’ of the sixties. During the Summer of Love everybody was sitting happily together, sharing joints and tripping on LSD, their heads filled with dreams of making the world a better place. In the 1970s the atmosphere changed due to economic recession, rising youth unemployment and disappointment about the slow pace of social and political change. Contemporary observers argued that young people turned to opiates as the ultimate nihilistic answer to their despair.⁸ In general, the 1970s are often regarded as a ‘sad period’, writes the Dutch historian Duco Hellema, a decade when the ambitions of the sixties seemed to perish in social malaise and individualism.⁹ Those who were young in the 1970s have been characterised as a ‘lost generation’.¹⁰ Dutch social scientists present heroin as the perfect drug for this depressive decade, arguing that heroin addiction was increasing in the 1970s since ‘the perspectives of young people were becoming gloomier. They experienced difficulties in securing a place in society and in the labour market. Because of this, they did not feel safe and secure anywhere. They felt threatened in their identity’.¹¹

However, although the heroin ‘junkie’ might have become a ‘loser’ in the public image since the late 1980s, a vulnerable ‘patient’ in the eyes of addiction experts and a symbol of the ‘sad’ decade of the 1970s in academic discourse, during the 1970s the subcultural status of heroin was still quite high. With this drug, users could feel they gained admittance to an outlaw society of people who derided society’s dominant values about work, discipline and personal achievement. The fact that heroin use was initially linked to cultural rebellion, self-development and social criticism is a forgotten aspect of the history of the Dutch heroin ‘epidemic’.

Using a variety of life stories of (former) Dutch heroin users as my source material, this article will present a cultural history of heroin use.

7 Cherry, Dillon and Rush (eds.), *Substance Abuse*, 159.

8 Eric C. Schneider, *Smack. Heroin and the American city* (Philadelphia 2008) chapter 8 (e-book) 20 DOI 10.9783/9780812203486.

9 Duco Hellema, *Nederland en de jaren zeventig* (Amsterdam 2010) 15.

10 Ed van Eeden en Peter Nijssen, *Jong in de jaren zeventig. Tijdsbeeld van een generatie* (Utrecht, Antwerpen 1993).

11 Albert Felling, Jan Peters en Peer Scheepers (eds.), *Individualisering in Nederland aan het eind van de twintigste eeuw* (Assen 2000) 26.

Instead of focussing on the history of addiction treatment or on identifying specific social groups of heroin users, my focus will be on the ways in which individuals give meaning to their heroin use. I will concentrate on the framings of drug use in popular culture and to rituals surrounding drug use in daily life. This cultural history starts from one basic question: how and why did heroin become so popular in the 1970s?

Sources from below

For the historian of drugs, analysing drug subcultures from the past is a difficult task. Apart from the limited amount of drug users who wrote pamphlets, books or memoirs, such as the ‘opium eater’ Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) or ‘drug fiend’ Aleister Crowley (1875-1947),¹² drug use has mostly been a private, hidden, or subcultural form of behaviour – especially of course, after twentieth century drug legislation made the non-medical, recreational use of opiates, amphetamines, cocaine and cannabis illegal. Historians who have attempted to unravel drug users’ experiences in the past therefore have mostly turned to medical or police records.¹³

Concerning heroin use in the 1970s and 1980s, the historiography so far has focused on developments in addiction treatment as well as on local and national drug policies.¹⁴ Less attention has been paid to the

- 12 Aleister Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (London 1922); Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (London 1822).
- 13 Caroline J. Acker, *Creating the American Junkie. Addiction Research in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control* (Baltimore 2002); Catherine Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession. Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920-1961* (Toronto 2006).
- 14 Virginia Berridge and Alex Mold, *Voluntary Action and Illegal Drugs. Health and Society in Britain since the 1960s* (Basingstoke 2010) DOI 10.1057/9780230274693; Gemma Blok, ‘The Politics of Intoxication. Dutch Junkie Unions fight against the ideal of a Drug-Free Society, 1975-1990’, in: M. Dinges en R. Jütte (eds.), *The Transmission of Health Practices (c. 1500 to 2000)* (Stuttgart 2011) 69-88; Johan Edman, ‘Red Cottages and Swedish Virtues. Institutional Drug Treatment as an Ideological Project’, *Social*

History of Medicine (2013) DOI 10.1093/shm/hkto33; Johan Edman and Karin Stenius, *On the Margins. Nordic Alcohol and Drug Treatment 1885 – 2007* (2007); Michael Gossop and John Strang, *Heroin Addiction and the British System. Vol. 1: Origins and Evolution* (London 2005); Alex Mold, *Heroin. The Treatment of Addiction in Twentieth Century Britain* (DeKalb 2009); René Renggli and Jakob Tanner, *Das Drogenproblem. Geschichte, Erfahrungen, Therapiekonzepte* (Berlin 1994); Martin Schmid, *Drogenhilfe in Deutschland. Entstehung und Entwicklung 1970-2000* (Frankfurt, New York 2003); Robert P. Stephens, *Germans on Drugs. The Complications of Modernization in Hamburg* (Ann Arbor 2007) DOI 10.3998/mpub.217711; Klaus Weinbauer, ‘Drug Consumption in London and Western Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s’, *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs: An Interdisciplinary Journal (hereafter: SHAD)* 20 (spring 2006) 187-224.

complex phenomenon of the sudden rise in heroin use itself.¹⁵ In the case of the Netherlands, what we do know is that by the late 1960s a small drug subculture of some 250 opium and amphetamine injectors had grown into existence.¹⁶ When Asian dealers introduced heroin on the Dutch market in 1972, its popularity was instantaneous. By 1974, the Dutch capital of Amsterdam housed 5,000 heroin users.¹⁷ In the early 1980s, the number of heroin users in the Netherlands was estimated at 30,000.¹⁸ They formed a mixed group, consisting of thousands of drug tourists, mostly from America and Germany, and (after 1975) between 3,000 and perhaps even 6,000 immigrants from the former Dutch colony of Surinam.¹⁹

The perspectives of the 'junkies' themselves are hard to come by. Still, it is important to actively look for them, since life stories (memoirs, autobiographies or interviews) can shed new light on the way people explain their actions. As historian Mary Jo Maynes and sociologists Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett pointed out, 'in contrast to demographic studies and survey research, which often reduce people to a cluster of variables such as race, ethnicity and gender, effective personal analysis provides evidence about individuals as whole persons'.²⁰ In order to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of the heroin 'epidemic' as a historical phenomenon, we should listen to the 'quiet voices' of 'those who do not easily, for one reason or another, get their voices heard'.²¹

This article will use various types of life-stories as sources for a history from below of 1970s heroin use, beginning with autobiographies that were published since the 1980s, written by (former) heroin users, or authorised by them: Bart Chabot, *Broodje gezond* (1996), about the life of rock star Herman Brood; René van Collem, *Heroïne godverdomme* (2014); Peter Derks, *Heroïne. Het*

15 Robert P. Stephens, *Germans on Drugs*. Klaus Weinbauer, 'Drug Consumption in London and Western Berlin 187-224.

16 Herman Cohen, *Drugs, druggebruikers en drug-scene* (Alphen aan de Rijn 1975). Peter Geerlings, 'Ambulante hulp voor drugsgebruikers in Amsterdam', in: W.K. van Dijk en L. H.C. Hulsmann (eds.), *Drugs in Nederland* (Bussum 1970) 160.

17 Ed. Leuw, 'Door schade en schande. De geschiedenis van drug-hulpverlening als sociaal beleid in Amsterdam', *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie* 8 (1984) 153.

18 Gemma Blok, *Ziek of zwak. Geschiedenis van de verslavingszorg in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2011) 182; Wim van den Brink, Vincent M. Hendriks and Jan

M. van Ree, 'Medical co-prescription of heroin to chronic, treatment-resistant methadone patients in the Netherlands', *Journal of Drug Issues* 29 (1999) 587-608, 587.

19 Gemma Blok, 'Pampering Needle-Freaks or Caring for Chronic Addicts? Early Debates on Harm Reduction in Amsterdam, 1972-1982', *SHAD* 22 (2008) 243-261.

20 Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett, *Telling stories. The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca 2008) 15.

21 Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London, New York 2013) 62.

dorpje 'stigma' (2010); René Stoute, *Uit het achterland* (1985); and Chiel van Zelst, *100.000 fietsventielen* (1999).²²

A wealth of sociological, criminological and medical studies concerning Dutch heroin users exists as well. These studies mostly reveal the medical, sociological or criminological 'gaze' and the heroin users themselves are present in the studies only indirectly. One particular study differs in this respect, since the users' perspective is much more present. In 1982, the Dutch criminologists Otto Janssen and Koert Swierstra published an extensive study of heroin use in the Netherlands, based on 68 in-depth interviews with 'problematic' users. Respondents were approached through institutions for addiction treatment, and prisons. Although the interviewers were interested in certain specific themes, such as the experiences of heroin users with addiction treatment and their economic survival strategies, the researchers emphasised that the interviews were 'open' and respondents could choose how they wanted to tell their stories.²³ The value of this study for a history of heroin use from below lies in the fact that several of the original interviews were published almost verbatim, and others were quoted at length in the study.²⁴

The third type of life story that is used in this article is a collection of interviews with seventeen (former) heroin users. This data was collected as part of a project to collect oral histories of heroin use in the Netherlands, which I started working on in January 2015. My ultimate aim is to interview a substantial and diverse group of (ex) opiate users. So far, seventeen former heroin users have been interviewed. All participants responded to a call I did in a Dutch national newspaper, or came forward in reaction to an invitation on my project website, www.heroineepidemie.nl.²⁵ The interviews were conducted using the semi-structured life story approach.

The use of oral history has not yet gained prominence in the history of intoxicant use. However, since autobiographies, memoirs, letters or diaries written by heroin users are scarce, interviews form an important source for drug historians. Their worth is shown in *Addicts who survived*. An

22 Bart Chabot, *Broodje gezond* (Amsterdam 2001, 11th printing; originally published in 1996); René van Collem, *Heroïne godverdomme* (Utrecht 2014); Peter Derks, *Heroïne, het dorpje 'Stigma'* (Zoetermeer 2010); René Stoute, *Uit het achterland* (Amsterdam 1985); Chiel van Zelst, *100.000 fietsventielen* (Amsterdam 1999).

23 Otto Janssen and Koert Swierstra, *Heroïnegebruikers in Nederland. Een typologie van levensstijlen* (Groningen 1982).

24 Unfortunately the original tapes of the interviews have not survived, so it is impossible to check to what extent these quotes were edited. Still, these life stories as we can assume they were told to researchers in 1979 and 1980 form a unique type of source material, that will be used in this article to analyse how users at the time explained and framed their own heroin use.

25 Hanna Bijl, 'Waarom spoot Jan en alleman zich kapot?', *Het Parool*, 26 January 2015.

oral history of narcotic use in America, 1923-1965 (1989), written by the American historian David Courtwright. In the 1980s Courtwright, along with two other researchers, interviewed 32 ageing addicts who had started using opiates in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.²⁶ Their stories offer a unique view on the drug subculture of the period.

The interviews I have conducted with a selected group of former drug users are not representative for the whole population of ‘survivors’ of the Dutch heroin ‘epidemic’. First of all, these respondents have all managed to break their habit, albeit after extended periods of use. Most of them are white (16) and male (11). Their ages are between 55 and 70. Although this is a limited amount of life stories, they are valuable since these respondents are in general very capable of reflecting on their past heroin use. Since they are clean now and motivated to tell their stories, their narratives are quite rich and eloquent.

Moreover, in telling their stories many (former) heroin users tend to stress their own choice in the matter: they recount how they actively sought out heroin themselves, for various reasons. In spite of the many regrets they developed later on, and the hardship and losses heroin caused them – as they readily admit – their stories also still reflect the positive connotations heroin use (once) had for them. Drugs can play all kinds of (often) positive social roles – as markers of identity, as part of socialising events and conviviality, or as symbols of ‘subcultural capital’. In many youth subcultures, drug use is ‘an important part of “being in the know” about what constitutes hipness in a particular scene’, according to sociologist Sarah Thornton.²⁷ The life stories of Dutch heroin users suggest this was also the case for heroin in the 1970s.

On the surface, almost all respondents distance themselves from their past drug use. The dominant narrative in most (16) of the seventeen interviews that were conducted for this article is one of regret and loss. The use of heroin, narrators told me, has cost them dearly in terms of (mental) health, social relationships, careers, personal development and wealth. However, when they start to recall specific places of use, fellow users, music they listened to and the feeling heroin originally produced, more positive functions and ambitions that once were connected to this drug shine through.

‘Raw, urban romanticism’

For many early adopters of opiate use in the Netherlands the famous American beat generation writer William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) was the ultimate

26 David Courtwright, Herman Joseph and Don Des Jarlais, *Addicts Who Survived. An Oral History of Narcotic Use in America, 1923-1965* (Knoxville 1989).

27 Sarah Thornton, ‘The social logic of subcultural capital’, in: Ken Gelder ed., *The Subcultures Reader* (New York 2005) 184-193.

'junkie hero'.²⁸ Within the small group of Dutch opium injectors in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Burroughs counted as the 'Old Master'. In 1970 the Dutch translation of Burroughs's autobiographical novel, *Junkie. Confessions of an unreedemed drug addict* (1953), was published.²⁹ Burroughs wrote in vivid detail about various ways of consuming opiates, and about tricking doctors into prescribing opiate medication. Writing openly about the pains and pleasures of opiate use, Burroughs placed himself in the Romantic tradition of drug autobiographies like the *Confessions of an English opium eater* (1821) by Thomas de Quincey. Burroughs however, avoided lyricism and wrote his opiate memoir as a straightforward, deadpan eyewitness report of heroin use in New York.

Burroughs started using opiates in 1945, when America was experiencing a wave of heroin use. Times Square was the centre of this post-war opiate epidemic in New York. Soldiers returned from Europe after the Second World War with an opiate habit and carried with them so called morphine syrettes: devices for injecting liquid morphine through a needle. Moreover, during the 1940s many jazz musicians, like Billy Holiday and Charlie Parker, were using heroin.³⁰ In Times Square jazz bars musicians mixed with war veterans, pimps, prostitutes, small-time criminals and the occasional bourgeois intellectual like Burroughs.

To Burroughs and his friends, Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the Times Square crowd symbolised a unique kind of knowledge about life, stemming from direct experience. Drug use, in the eyes of these 'Beat Generation' writers, was linked to authenticity. When *Junkie* was published in 1953 however, the book went completely unnoticed. It was not until the next wave of heroin use washed over America during the 1960s and 1970s that Burroughs became a hero for a new generation of drug users. Fans showered Burroughs with gifts of heroin, hoping for a chance to shoot up with the 'Godfather of Dope'.³¹ In the Netherlands too, Burroughs achieved some fame in underground circles. He visited Amsterdam several times, around 1980, to read at poetry festivals in the cultural centre at the Leidseplein, the Melkweg. While in Amsterdam Burroughs also paid a visit to a well-known drug users' hangout in the Spuistraat, called the HUK.³² By then he was in his sixties, looking much older, with dry cracked skin and was very thin. To Dutch heroin users he symbolised the fact that you could be famous and grow old with an opiate habit.³³

28 For Burroughs' influence on the opiate scene, see for instance: Eddie Wood, 'Bill Burroughs in Amsterdam'; Rene Stoute, *Uit het achterland* (1985); Martijn Haas, *Dr. Rat. Godfather van de Nederlandse graffiti* (Amsterdam 2011) 103-107; Bart Chabot, *Broodje Gezond*; interview G. Blok with Rob Le Coultre, 15 May 2010, and with Eric Hoogendorp, and Sjon B.;

Arend-Jan Heerma van Voss, 'Junkie', *Haagse Post* 1977.

29 William Burroughs, *Junkie* (Amsterdam 1970).

30 Schneider, *Smack*, chapter 3.

31 Schneider, *Smack*, 144.

32 Martijn Haas, *Dr. Rat. Godfather van de Nederlandse graffiti* (Amsterdam 2011).

33 Interview G. Blok with S. B., 24 February 2015.



▲
Fragment of a comic by former heroin user Eric Krabbenbosch about daily life in the 'HUK', a notorious drug consumption room in Amsterdam in the 1970s.
Private collection.

Another vehicle for the association of cultural rebelliousness with opiate use was music. In New York pop artist Andy Warhol cultivated ‘heroin chic’ stars like the models Edie Sedgwick and Nico, and freaky folk musicians like John Cale and Lou Reed. The famous 1967 album *Velvet Underground and Nico*, produced by Warhol, contained songs like ‘Heroin’ and ‘Waiting for the man’, with lyrics openly discussing opiate use. In provocative theatrical happenings Warhol and his friends presented the use of speed and heroin as part of the way of life of ‘real’ instead of ‘plastic’ people.³⁴

Peter Pontiac (1951-2015), a famous Dutch cartoonist who used heroin in the 1970s, has stated that the ‘raw, urban romanticism’ of the Velvet Underground-album strongly appealed to him.³⁵ He was not alone in this: when Lou Reed was touring Europe in 1974, his three concerts in the Netherlands³⁶ were sold out. An extra fourth gig at the Amsterdam theatre Carré was inserted into the programme to accommodate the huge demand.³⁷ The audience in Rotterdam was shocked when Lou Reed, performing his famous song ‘Heroin’, actually seemed to shoot up on stage. ‘When I put a spike into my vein, then it makes me feel like I’m a man’, he sang the famous lyrics, and then he wrapped a microphone cord around his arm. He took a needle from the pocket of his jeans, and – apparently – injected drugs. It was the highlight of the concert and it made the audience shiver in horror and fascination.³⁸ It was all an act, but it definitely was Lou Reed’s intent to make it look real. He performed this act regularly during his 1974 European tour.³⁹

The ‘major league’ of drug users

The German historian Klaus Weinbauer, writing about drug consumption in England and Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, states that heroin consumers

[...] staged their first “shooting-up” (their first injections) individually, following the motto: “making a cult out of a shot.” They either carried the syringe (their

34 Ken Goffman en Dan Joy, *Counter Culture Through the Ages. From Abraham to Acid House* (New York 2004) 314; Timothy Hickman, ‘Heroin chic. The Visual Culture of Narcotic Addiction’, *Third Text* 16 (2002) 119-136 DOI 10.1080/09528820210138272.

35 Sarah Berkeljon, ‘De dood wordt al genoeg gehaat’, *De Volkskrant* 22 January 2015.

36 Lou Reed played at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, the Congresgebouw in The Hague, and De Doelen in Rotterdam.

37 ‘Extra Lou Reed concert’, *De Tijd. Dagblad voor Nederland*, 10 mei 1974.

38 Rinus van der Heijden, ‘Necrologie: Lou Reed: bruggebouwer tussen rock ‘n roll en punk’, www.jazzenzo.nl (17 December 2016).

39 Howard Sounes, *Lou Reed. Een leven in de Velvet Underground* (Amsterdam 2016)187.



One of the drugusers in front of the 'HUK' in
Amsterdam.
Private Collection.

“gun”) in black wooden boxes lined with fine red satin or – in a more masculine rough way – stored the syringes in the walls of their rooms. Moreover, the first injection of the “stuff” was also a test of courage, an initiation rite.⁴⁰

Life stories of Dutch heroin users paint a similar picture of opiate use as part of identity formation and proving one’s masculinity. Some users made quite a show of injecting opiates, for instance by spreading out a doctor’s case filled with paraphernalia on a pub table, like the punk graffiti artist ‘Dr. Rat’ (Ivar Viçs). At an Amsterdam wedding party in the late 1960s An opium injector had a girl tie up his arm with a black scarf, like a magician’s assistant, and injected his opium in plain sight.⁴¹

Tjeerd Keulemans⁴² and several other interviewees argue that among heroin users there was a certain ‘junky pride’ – the feeling that a *real* heroin user uses the needle and shoots up his dope directly into the vein. This conviction, he claims, was ‘almost like a religion’. According to psychologist Herman Cohen, who published a study on drug use in the Netherlands in 1975, those who injected drugs felt superior to the ‘normal’ drug user, because they had crossed the final frontier.⁴³

For instance, in his autobiographical novel *Uit het achterland* (1985) former opium and heroin user René Stoute offers a vivid description of opiate use as a form of subcultural capital. Living in the Dutch town of Haarlem in the late 1960s, Stoute was fascinated by a local countercultural hero called Max. This man had returned from his hippie travels in Asia with an opiate habit, and on his return to Haarlem he continued using opium, buying it – like most opiate users did at the time – in Amsterdam through the Chinese community. To Haarlem people he was known as ‘Dirty Max’, since he did not care much about personal hygiene. To the young René Stoute however, Max was an enigmatic figure, as he was sitting in his favourite pub, surrounded by a group of admiring youngsters, smoking hash from his chillum, telling exciting tales about his adventures in India. Stoute wanted to be just like Max, who symbolised the ultimate way to ‘detach oneself from the bourgeoisie’.⁴⁴ He repeatedly asked Max to introduce him to opium. It took a while before Max was willing to do so. According to Stoute, ‘one was not allowed into the major league just like that’.

According to Weinbauer, ‘heroin consumption was individualized and scarcely group-based’.⁴⁵ In many life-stories however, heroin use comes forward as a group-based activity – at least during the initial stages of use.

40 Ibidem.

41 Cohen, *Drugs, druggebruiker en drug-scene*, 85; Martijn Haas, *Dr. Rat. Godfather van de Nederlandse graffiti* (Amsterdam 2011) 106.

42 This is a pseudonym, on the request of the interviewee who expressed a wish to remain anonymous. The transcript of the interview,

which was held on 25 November 2015, is kept with the author of this article.

43 Cohen, *Drugs, druggebruiker en drug-scene*, 113.

44 René Stoute, *Uit het achterland* (Zwolle 1985) 71.

45 Weinbauer, ‘Drug consumption in London and Western Berlin’, 200.

Respondents started using heroin while being part of a group of friends or acquaintances, people they met regularly in bars, youth clubs or squats. For some, heroin was something like a ‘party drug’, as they smoked or injected heroin in the toilets of clubs like Paradiso in Amsterdam, Vera in Groningen or the Paard van Troje in The Hague. Jim Pattiasina recounted how each weekend he went to Amsterdam with his Moluccan friends to go clubbing in the Red Light District, to chill out on soul music and to smoke joints.⁴⁶ Over time, cigarettes filled with heroin replaced the joints.

Like Keulemans, many respondents did not use only heroin. Many narrators had tried it all, from the early 1970s up until the early 1980s, starting out with alcohol and cannabis, later moving on to speed, LSD, magic mushrooms. After some experimenting, heroin entered the game. Former heroin user Leo de Roos for instance, started his drug-using career inspired by the ‘hippies’ hanging around on a square in his small Dutch hometown near the coast. In 1973, when he was fourteen years old, he was smoking joints with them. Soon after that he was introduced to LSD.

We were listening to The Doors, Janis Joplin, Frank Zappa... I read *The cool-aid acid test* (by Tom Wolfe, 1971, CB.) about Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. I thought it was all very hip, very interesting, fuck the duck, you know... This was where I belonged.⁴⁷

Soon after, De Roos was introduced to heroin. Many life stories of former heroin users present a similar history of poly-drug use, suggesting that the difference between the optimistic ‘psychedelic revolution’ of the sixties and the nihilistic ‘epidemic’ of heroin use of the seventies is less pronounced than is often assumed. Heroin simply was one of the drugs that were available during those experimental years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As one respondent told criminologists Janssen and Swierstra, heroin was recommended by word of mouth. If one was bored with speed, then why not try heroin, the latest drug novelty?⁴⁸ To some, heroin was a calming drug after intense LSD-experiences. Tjeerd Keulemans put it into words like this:

The reason I kept on using heroin, after I had tried it once, was that I was so confused because of all these trips on LSD and mushrooms. Heroin made me feel quiet. It was the perfect antidote to all the chaos and confusion in my head.

46 This is a pseudonym, at the request of the interviewee who expressed a wish to remain anonymous. The transcript of the interview, which was held on 12 May 2015, is kept with the author of this article.

47 This is a pseudonym, on request of the interviewee who expressed a wish to remain

anonymous. The transcript of the interview, which was held on 18 May 2015, resides with the author of this article.

48 Janssen and Swierstra, *Heroïnegebruikers in Nederland*, 180.

Several of Janssen and Swierstra's respondents recounted how for them heroin was a kind of self-medication after a period of intensive speed use, which can result in paranoid feelings, trouble with sleeping and even psychosis. Around 1970 a small wave of problematic intravenous speed use had been going in the Netherlands.⁴⁹ Heroin was the perfect drug for a person who was freaking out on speed.

Opiate use and creativity

German heroin users in the 1970s, Klaus Weinhauer claims, 'cultivated a masculine "sweet-short-life-ideology" where the risk of dying was ignored'.⁵⁰ Heroin use is often described as a nihilistic flirtation with death. Interestingly, many (former) Dutch heroin users looking back describe their first experiences with opiates in life-embracing terms. They say they did not use heroin to escape from their problems, or were pushed to use it by peers; they actively went looking for the drug. For instance, when she was a teenager Nelleke Oldenburg was hanging out with the hip crowd in the Dutch town of Hilversum. One day she watched a man shooting up heroin. Immediately, she thought: 'I want to do that too!' Soon after she asked her boyfriend to give her a shot as well and liked it a lot.⁵¹ Another Dutch heroin user, the famous artist and rock star Herman Brood, witnessed someone shooting up opium in the late 1960s. He also claimed his only thought was: 'I want to do that too!'.⁵²

Narrators struggle to find the proper words to describe the joys of heroin, using phrases like 'intense', 'fantastic', 'very deeply satisfying', a 'homecoming', 'everything is ok' or 'the answer I had been looking for all my life'. Interestingly, this sudden release from worries, fears and insecurities apparently generated a feeling of mental freedom. Cartoonist Peter Pontiac remembers how after taking his first shot of opium he started to cry, because he 'could finally relax. It was like after many years, I was finally allowed to take off my tight shoes'.⁵³ Many interviewees talk about finally cleaning their houses on heroin, painting, drawing, taking photographs or making music. They experienced a new type of energy and confidence.

'A lot of creativity was unleashed from inside of me', Nelleke Oldenburg claimed. The drug enabled her to be 'quiet in herself' and to do what she had always wanted to do, which in her case was to draw and to write poems. The stereotypical image of the nodding heroin addict, staring at his shoes, clearly

49 Blok, *Ziek of zwak*, 170-180.

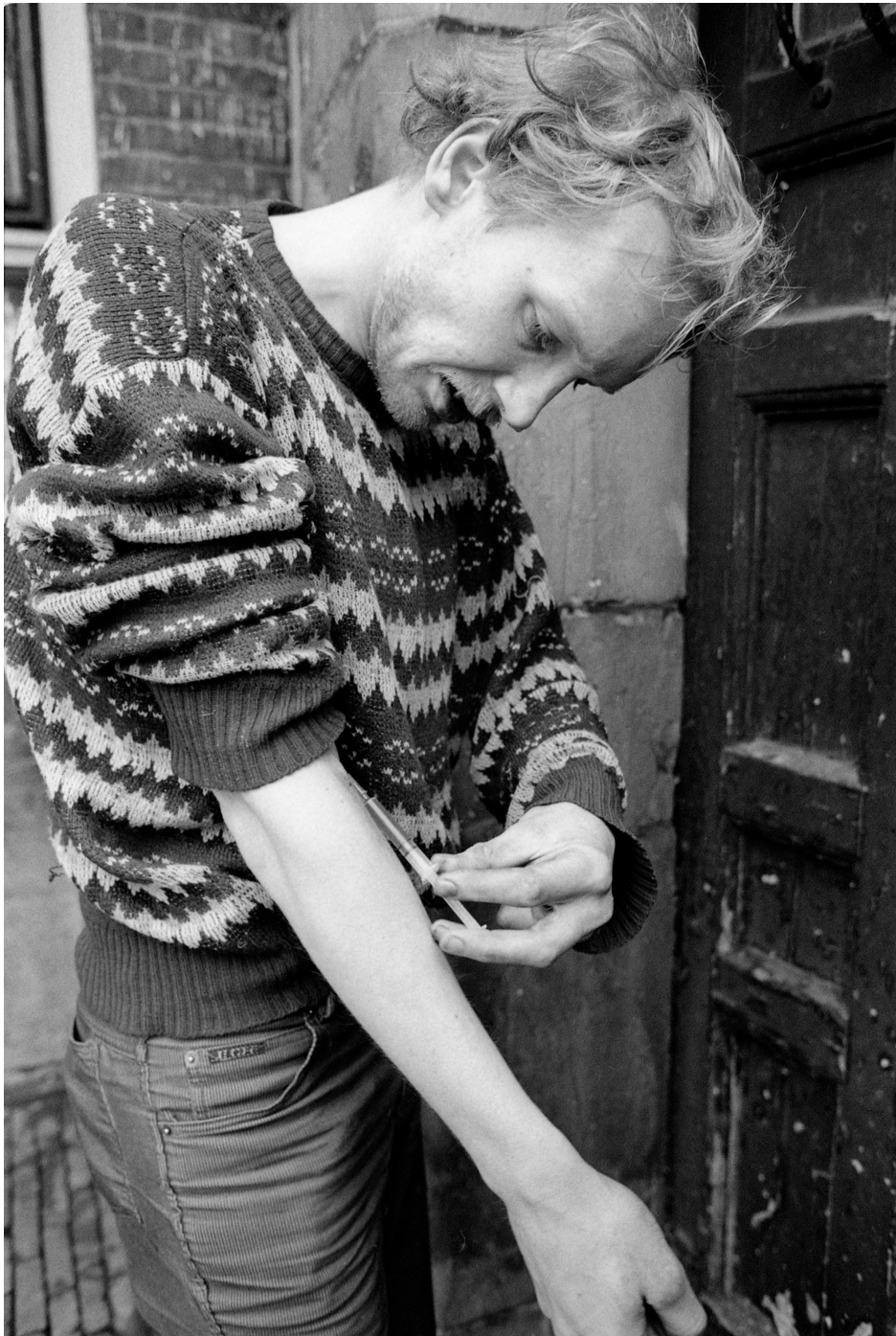
50 Ibidem, 206.

51 This is a pseudonym, at the request of the interviewee who expressed a wish to remain anonymous. The transcript of the interview,

which was held on 3 March 2015, is kept with the author of this article.

52 Chabot, *Broodje gezond*, 137.

53 Berkeljon, 'De dood wordt al genoeg gehaat'.



An addict junkie gets an injection (shot) of heroin in his arm at the Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam, Netherlands, April 3, 1984.

Nationaal Archief, Collectie Spaarnestad/ANP.

does not apply to heroin users who have only recently started using heroin and can still make do with lesser amounts of the drug. Eric Hoogendorp, who started injecting speed and opium in the 1960s, told me how after injecting opium, he always started to draw immediately: 'I always carried a set of Rotary pencils, and a book in which I could draw. And we listened to good music. I'm still a jazz connoisseur. I love John Coltrane, and I am an Eric Dolphy fanatic'.⁵⁴

His friends, he claims, were all aspiring artists. One of them, when he was high, worked on a huge painted picture on the walls of his apartment. Hoogendorp in fact made a distinction between his own 'generation' of drug users – the early adopters of the opiate and speed culture in the late 1960s, who were 'artists' first and foremost – and the later generation of heroin 'junkies'. Other interviewees told similar stories about opiate use and creativity. One of them, Karel Groote, was an aspiring photographer. He claimed heroin made him feel inspired. 'It was a good high, at first. It didn't make me nod too much. I felt inspired, made some of my best photographs'.⁵⁵ In the interview, he made a point of stressing the difference between heroin and alcohol in this respect: 'On heroin, you really are able to work. When you use alcohol, and you're tipsy, you think you can do it all, but you produce nothing, really. On heroin, you do.' Significantly, many interviewees mention the Dutch heroin users Peter Pontiac, 'Dr. Rat' and Herman Brood – heroin users who were quite famous in the Netherlands both for their drug use and for their creative output, comics, graffiti, and rock music (and painting) respectively. They appear to have been role models for heroin users in the 1970s, since they were able to use drugs and be creative, famous and admired at the same time. Creative ambitions are a significant theme in many of the interviews with, and memoirs of, former heroin users.

A society of hypocrites

Social commentary by Dutch heroin users is less explicit and harder to come by in comparison to the cultural criticism that was voiced by psychedelic revolutionaries. Heroin users did not publish underground magazines or organise happenings.⁵⁶ So we have to look for their views of Dutch society in autobiographies and interviews. There, a discourse emerges in which key elements are the stigmatisation of heroin users, as well as the hypocrisy, materialism and competitive drive of the so-called normal people. Former heroin user Chiel van Zelst, in his autobiographical novel *100.000 fietsventielen*

54 Interview with Eric Hoogendorp, 17 February 2015.

zestig', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 21:1

55 Interview with K.G., 15 March 2015.

(1995) 37–60.

56 Stephen Snelders, 'Het gebruik van psychedelische middelen in Nederland in de jaren

(Amsterdam 1999), recounts how he spent many hours watching people in the streets of Amsterdam. With his girlfriend, he made cynical comments on passers-by:

[...] assholes with their briefcases and tight haircuts. On their way to their nice jobs [...] All radiant and fresh, living in houses full of fluffy towels and fresh fruit. Ready for success and glory in a white world where nothing is impossible. They have picked up the glove of success, and entered the battle to shine on stage. Being serious is a scary disease.⁵⁷

Van Zelst's book is a fierce attack on the so called decent people who looked down on 'filthy junkies', but who profited from them at the same time, buying their stolen goods from them looking for a cheap bicycle.

As heroin became more expensive in the course of the 1970s, intensive users needed hundreds of Dutch guilders a day (comparable to hundreds of Euro's today) to get by. They had to either stop using, or resort to begging, some kind of criminal activity or prostitution. Many of them stole bikes, handbags, expensive clothes, LPs or electronics from stores. Peter Derks for instance, used up about four hundred Dutch guilders of hard drugs each day by the early 1980s. He developed a cunning trick, claiming to sell cheap 'second hand' video players and asked his clients for an advance payment of one hundred Dutch guilders. In fact he did not have any video players in store, but the advance payments bought him a good shot of heroin, which he enjoyed while the client was waiting in vain for him to return. 'Four customers per day were sufficient', he wrote in his memoir. According to Derks, it was easy to find 'decent citizens' who wanted to buy stolen videos, and this 'says something about the morality of many Dutch people'.⁵⁸ He recounts how at night he used to walk past the brightly lit houses of the 'normal people' and stare at their happy family lives. This was the worst of it, he thought, feeling like a complete outsider, like being already dead yet still walking around among the living.⁵⁹

The gap between the 'normal people' and the junkies probably grew wider as the heroin 'epidemic' reached its peak in the mid-1980s. Drug related nuisance and criminality became significant social problems in the Netherlands from mid-1970s onwards. Possibly, the public hostility they experienced stimulated heroin users to in turn formulate critical views on the hypocritical 'normal, decent people'. Bitter memories of being ignored and humiliated are a feature of many interviews and autobiographies. Teun Weening remembers how even the alcoholics in the clinics looked down on them:

57 Van Zelst, *100.000 fietsventielen*, 75.

59 Derks, *Heroïne*, 95.

58 Derks, *Heroïne*, 81.

Back then we were nothing more than ‘dirty junkies’. In the clinic they made sure you felt that too. I remember that we had a group therapy session where you had to tell each other what kind of animal you could see in someone. There was one man, an alcoholic, who said to me ‘You know, you’re a crow. Crows are a kind of scavengers who pick up things here and there, anything that they want; and if nothing more is left for them to catch, then they’re gone’.⁶⁰

Wendela Berg remembers how once, at a very low point in her life as a heroin user, someone beat her up. She ended up lying on the pavement, semi-conscious and badly hurt: ‘Nobody helped me. Back then I looked quite dirty, like a drug user, and people just let me lie there. A couple of years later, when I had stopped using heroin and had gained 12 kilos in weight, and wore nice clothes, I fell off my bike. Immediately, three men came over to help me’.⁶¹ Another woman felt that the personnel of the methadone clinic she visited regularly showed her no respect. She claimed they treated her like an inferior kind of person, when she and her friends were actually ‘the avant-garde’ of society.⁶²

The public health model of heroin use revisited

Although some of the former heroin users I interviewed did identify themselves as patients, suffering from the disease called addiction, most of them did not. Instead they spoke of their encounters with heroin in terms of (bad) choices or chance. However, in one respect the narratives of former heroin users are strikingly similar to public health narrative on heroin of the 1970s and 1980s. Both former heroin users and Dutch public health advocates from the period tend to frame the heroin ‘epidemic’ in terms of a generational phenomenon.

For instance, psychiatrist Wijnand Mulder related the popularity of drug use to changes in society after the Second World War. Mulder worked with young drug users as a psychiatric consultant at the Jellinek, the Amsterdam institute for addiction treatment. Addicts, according to Mulder, suffered from an identity crisis and *Weltschmerz*. The memory of the Holocaust for instance, for them was difficult to deal with, he wrote. ‘Nobody knows how to handle the murder of six million Jews, this black hole in history

60 The transcript of the interview, which was held on 25 November 2016, resides with the author of this article.

61 Interview with Wendela Berg. The transcript of the interview, which was held on 7 April 2015, resides with the author of this article.

62 This quote from the Dutch heroin user Aleid S. (1956-2011) was handed over to me by Michiel Louter, an addiction treatment worker who was her counsellor for years.

we have to deal with'.⁶³ According to Mulder, it was quite understandable that some young people retreated to dark cellars to listen to jazz music and smoke marihuana, feeling confused. In his book on drug use and addiction *Verslaving* (1969) he claimed that many drug users were in fact artistically and intellectually gifted people, albeit with neurotic tendencies.⁶⁴ Their choice of a new kind of intoxicant, rather than the socially accepted intoxicant alcohol, represented a rejection of 'aggressive' Western culture, Mulder thought.⁶⁵

When from the late 1970s, under Mulder's leadership, the Amsterdam Municipal Health Service initiated a large-scale methadone maintenance program in the Dutch capital Mulder legitimised this new harm reduction approach by emphasising that drug use in the lives of young people was often just a phase. He related the use of heroin to 'a difficult period in the lives of young people'.⁶⁶ Often triggered by health problems, a new relationship, the birth of a child or other life-events, people simply stopped taking heroin. Therefore handing out free methadone in a very easy, low-threshold way was not a way of 'giving up on people'; it was part of guiding them through a difficult period of intensive drug use, while trying to minimise the damage.

Like Mulder, many heroin users present their lives as part of a wider generational experience of rebellion and libertarianism. In 1979 and 1980, interviewees told Janssen and Swierstra how they rebelled against their families. One woman they interviewed felt 'pushed' by her parents. She grew up in a well-to do family in a provincial town and felt 'destined to be a good girl. Piano lessons, a good classical education, always wearing dresses. I always felt irritated and when I was 14, I ran away'.⁶⁷ Other women told Janssen and Swierstra how they rebelled against their parents by dating 'black' boys from Surinam or Indonesia.⁶⁸ This shocked their parents, they claim, who held negative views on immigrants.

In my interview project too, narrators often relate generational experiences, such as high parental expectations, the pressures of the educational system or a lack of emotional openness within their families as a reason for their attraction to drugs. Some connect the 'cold' atmosphere at home to the legacy of the Second World War. René van Collem for instance, a musician, who in 1982 was evicted from the famous Dutch band *Doe Maar* because of his heroin habit, told a similar story in his autobiography *Heroïne*,

63 W.G. Mulder, *Verslaving. Druggebruik bij jongeren* (Amsterdam 1969) 169.

64 Mulder, *Verslaving*, 145.

65 Mulder, *Verslaving*, 172.

66 W.G. Mulder 'Het methadonprogramma van de Amsterdamse GG & GD', *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 131 (1987) 2037-2040, 40.

67 Janssen and Swierstra, *Heroïnegebruikers in Nederland*, 298.

68 *Ibidem*, 296.

godverdomme (2014). Heroin released him from a depression caused by tensions at home. His father was severely affected by the war. Being Jewish, he had to go into hiding. He survived, but his mother died near Auschwitz. According to René van Collem, his traumatised father never talked about his feelings at home. He neglected his wife and son.

Others relate their rebelliousness to discontent with the expanding educational system. In 1969, in the Netherlands the age for compulsory education was extended from 12 to 16 years.⁶⁹ Increasingly, young people spent more time at school, and for some former heroin users this apparently was not a very pleasant experience. The pressure to achieve, they felt, was high. For one reason or another, there was a bad match between themselves and the school system. Their behaviour was problematic; they felt they did not receive sufficient individual attention; they dropped to a lower level of education. As their achievements were lacking, they started skipping school and looked for entertainment and recognition elsewhere. One narrator described himself and his drug using friends as ‘refugees from the educational system’.⁷⁰

Within public mental health, this kind of generational framing of drug use disappeared in the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Heroin users were now described as the ‘addict population’, consisting of a variety of users with individual profiles. This profile included their biological and psychological make-up. The ‘social’ element within this individual profile became defined in terms of family background, social functioning and life-events.⁷¹ Wider socio-cultural developments influencing waves of drug use were no longer taken into account. However, there is a lot of common ground between the narratives of (former) heroin users on the one hand, and the public mental health narrative as formulated by the leading psychiatrist and governmental advisor W.G. Mulder in the 1970s and 1980s, in that both parties made sense of drug use in terms of a shared generational experience.

Conclusion

In oral historian Alessandro Portelli’s famous words, ‘subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible “facts”’. According to Portelli, oral sources ‘tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what

69 Nelleke Bakker, Jan Noordman en Marjoke Rietveld-van Wingerden, *Vijf eeuwen opvoeden in Nederland. Idee en praktijk, 1500-2000* (Assen 2006) 557-560.

70 Interview with Auke de Jong (pseudonym), 15 February 2016.

71 See for instance, Els Noorlander, ‘De ontwikkeling van de methadonverstrekking in

Nederland’, *Medisch Contact* 42 (1987) 402-405; Els Noorlander, *De cirkels van Van Dijk* (Utrecht 1993).

72 Alessandro Portelli, ‘What makes oral history different’, in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (eds.), *The oral history reader* (London, New York 2006) 32-43, 36.

they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.⁷² When we listen to the life stories of former heroin users, it becomes clear that they frame their drug use as part of a search for new ways of feeling and existing. In reflecting upon the role drug use has played in their lives, the stories of heroin users form a useful counter-narrative to the current, medicalised narrative of the 'epidemic' of heroin use of the 1970s and 1980s. The epidemic metaphor suggests 'drug use is a disease, drug use causes great suffering, drug users infect others through social contact, and that consequently drug users must be quarantined'.⁷³ Instead, the life stories of heroin users highlight heroin use as a 'practice of the self', to adopt Michel Foucault's phrase – an intentional and voluntary action by which 'one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being'.⁷⁴

To what extent this yearning for transformation and cultural protest was a 'true' motivator for people's actions, is impossible to determine. It is a historical fact however, that since the 1960s, opium and heroin use have become part of a subcultural, romantic discourse linking opiate use to the wish to replace a mundane, bourgeois existence with direct and 'authentic' experience, freedom and creativity. This discourse is still reflected in the narratives presented by (former) heroin users. Storytelling (whether in autobiographies or memoirs or verbally when interviewed) is a process by which we 'draw on discourses culturally available to us in order to construct narrative accounts, enabling us to tell particular stories at particular times'.⁷⁵ The fact that Dutch (former) heroin users in their life-stories regularly present their drug use as a liberating activity, separating them from the stifling world of so-called normal people suggests the existence of a discourse available to them which links heroin use to identity formation in opposition to society.

In our present culture, the discourse on heroin use as cultural rebellion exists next to the dominant, and socially more acceptable, narrative of addiction as a disease. Former heroin users seem to struggle to unite these conflicting narratives when telling their life stories and giving meaning to their past experiences. For us historians, the subcultural symbolism surrounding heroin use is important to take into account however, when we try to explain the sudden wave of heroin use in the 1970s and 1980s. Surely, the new stream of supply from Asia triggered the Dutch heroin 'epidemic'

73 Andrew Golub, Bruce D. Johnson and Eloise Dunlap, 'Subcultural Evolution and Illicit Drug Use', *Addiction Research & Theory* 13 (2005) 217-229, 218 DOI 10.1080/16066350500053497.

74 Cameron Duff, 'Drug Use as a Practice of the Self: is there any Place for an 'Ethics of Moderation' in Contemporary Drug Policy?', *International Journal of Drug Policy* 15 (2004) 385-393; Paul Rabinow

(ed.), *The essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984. Ethics. Subjectivity and truth* (London 1997) 282.

75 Stevi Jackson, 'Telling stories. Memories, narratives and experience in feminist research and theory', in: Karen Henwood et. al., *Standpoints and Differences. Essays in the Practice of Feminist Psychology* (London 1998) 47.

in the first place. Explaining the corresponding rise in demand is much more difficult and remains a delicate and complicated issue. Next to social, psychological and economic factors, incorporating a cultural history of drug use should be part of the endeavour.

Gemma Blok (1970) is Assistant Professor in modern Dutch History at the University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on the history of psychiatry and addiction treatment, as well as on the history of drug use and drug policy. Her publications include 'Bothersome and besotted. The struggle against public drunkenness in urban space', in: Anne van Wageningen and Virginie Mamadouh, *Urban Europe. Fifty tales of the city* (Amsterdam 2016); "'Insane migrants" in transit. Psychiatric patients' files as a source for return migration, c. 1910', *Social History of Medicine* 28 (2015) 889-901; *Achter de voordeur. Sociale geschiedenis vanuit de GGD Amsterdam in de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2014). Email: g.blok@uva.nl.