

# Addiction and stigma: Losing the ability to define who you are



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# Outline

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- Study design
- What is self-control?
  - Control / Self
- What is stigma and self-stigma?
  - A marked body
  - Shame and self-sabotage
- Two case studies
- Stigmatisation by health professionals
- Treatment options

# Study Design

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- How do people with substance dependence experience their self-control?
- Qualitative interviews with 69 substance users in Sydney
- Follow up after 1, 2 and 3 years (n=23)
- What are your plans in life, and what gets in the way of those?
- 30 alcohol, 32 opioid, 4 amphetamines, and 3 polydrug
- 48 male, 21 female
- Age 23-64
- Understand the nature of addiction first and foremost by getting to know the persons themselves

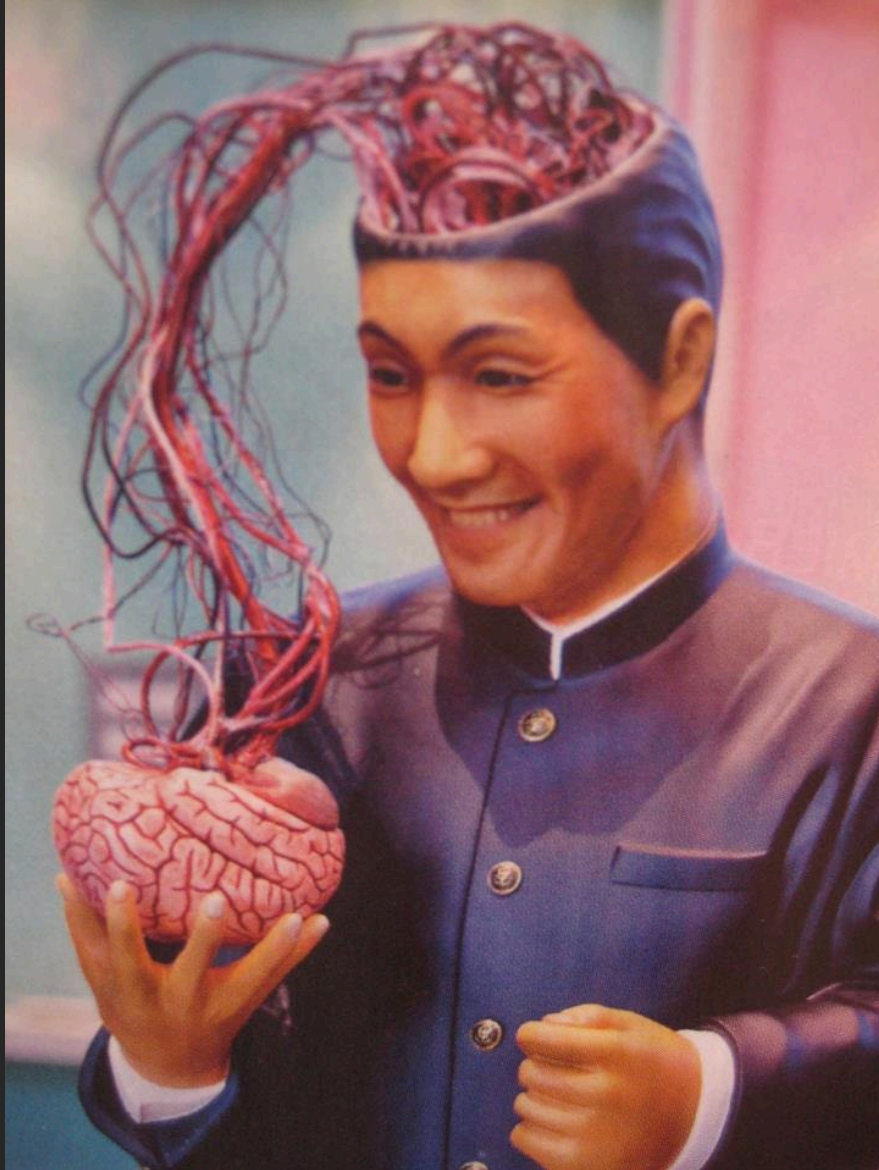
# What is self-control?



- Addiction is often perceived as a loss of self-control
- But how is self-control lost?
- What is self-control?

## Traditional view:

- Self-control is about **control**:
  - **Conflict** between desires and ratio
  - Use **willpower** to exercise control over desires
  - **Strength** to do what is **morally** good



# Normative view: The self of **self-control**

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- Self-image influences our actions
  - Is the self a magic cure?
  - No: Impairment of the self in addiction

# What is stigma and self-stigma?

- Goffman: “the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity”
- ‘Stigma’ derives from a Greek word meaning to mark, puncture, or tattoo – a Greek practice of marking the skin of those to be viewed as morally inferior, to be shunned, ostracised, or punished in some way.
- Ethics of stigma:
  - Mistreatment. Quite simply, people stigmatised as addicts are treated badly: excluded, shunned, made to feel bad
  - People stigmatised as addicts may internalise this mark leading to a loss of self-respect (this corrodes self-reliance, self-trust, self-confidence)



## Being marked: the body as looking glass

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- I look at my arms and I think God blimey (...) But that affects me, (...) I can't wear short tops, I just can't be a normal person anymore.
- Unfortunately I've got marks from my using (...) if I was doing customer service for example a doctor would know that I used to use. (...) I'd have to wear long sleeves every day and there's a lot of things I'd have to do to make myself feel presentable enough.
- You're a marked person if they know you're on methadone.

# Losing the ability to define who you are

- Sometimes I go outside and I really feel hated, I thought it must be how I dress or [the] expression on my face or something. You just constantly feel like you've got a big neon sign on your head saying 'loser,' you know, 'contemptible loser.' So when someone actually ... in a shop or something they'll actually smile at you or act like you're a normal being, human being, it's really restorative, it cheers me up for days.
- How do you see your self-control? I get to control what every day is I suppose. It's just a lonely kind of control because it's control based in publicly adding myself as a freak. But you know, it's a kind of control I suppose.



# How does stigma influence self-image in addiction?

## 1. Reduction of identities to only one: addict

- Multiple selves/identities

- Daughter, mother, partner, academic, social scientist, philosopher, joker, hot-tempered

## 2. Losing the ability to define who you are

- What actions are likely for me?
- What future is likely for me?
- What can I hope for in life?

# Case study Nicole

- Good upbringing: private school
- Comorbidity: ADD, anxiety
- Started self-medicating with cannabis and alcohol during adolescence
- Became a trained nurse. Got fired because she misused opioids at work
- Got pregnant, matured out.
- Got an eating disorder and relapsed again
- Spiraled down, became homeless, addicted to methamphetamines (ice), sex-worker
- Hit rock bottom, met a psychiatrist who suggested university
- Did very good for a few years, then failed last study requirement.
- Relapsed very badly again

- I was very anxious during that year at uni. Because I was worried about what other people were thinking about me (...) I come from a good family (...). I can fit in that group if I want to but I know that I'm an addict (...) I think that they can see it, you know? (...) I just felt like I looked like a drug addict.
- I find it hard to hide who I am and or where I've been or who I have been or what I've done. ... it's always going to be a part of who I am and I think it's really sad but it's true. (...) I think it's part of who I am and that worries me.
- Something I was really having problems with last year was negative thoughts about myself and really poor perception of myself, really negative thoughts
- I don't want to be considered a drug user. I want to be considered... I want to try and do things like a mother would do, be a good mother

# Case study Tom

- Got homeless and addicted to heroin at age 15.
- Nearly died during OD at 40
- Rewrote his narrative self around: I am a helper
  - Always defended bullied children
  - Always was advocate for the homeless
- Moved to another state to get rid of the identity of ex-user
  - Became active in the church
  - Wanted to get completely off methadone but kept relapsing

- I mean there's a time in my life where I'd be paranoid about sitting around other people's possessions you know 'cause if anything went missing generally nine out of ten people in the room would be dismissed and I'd get the blame ... there's a lot of discomfort within yourself after coming out of that lifestyle or existence really.
- Will people accept me for who I really am or is it easier to be seen as the user or the struggling ex-user?
- You're given opportunities in your life and you have to take them. There's many times where I denied those opportunities (...) we all want to be a part of something positive. But our lack of belief in self is what can cause negative impactful choices.
- I had the tools all along, I just never used them.

# Self-stigma, shame and self-sabotage

- I struggle [with] people offering me help, I still think that I'm not worthy of anyone's help.
- Once I start something good I feel guilty because I feel like I don't deserve it.
- I know a lot about all of these drugs, I know how to get off them, I know treatments, I know all that, I know as much as the doctors sometimes, (...) I know I've got potential as well but there's just something in me that, yeah, keeps self-sabotaging (...) it's fear I think, fear of whether or not I can hold it together.

# Stigmatisation by health professionals

A white, torn-paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the slide, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge.

# Neuroscientist Carl Hart

‘Not one of them crawled on the floor, picking up random white particles and trying to smoke them. Not one was ranting or raving. No one was begging for more, either — and absolutely none of the cocaine users I studied ever became violent. I was getting similar results with methamphetamine users. They, too, defied stereotypes. The staff on the ward (...) couldn't even distinguish the drug study participants from others who were there for studies on heart disease and diabetes.’



They think you're the sort of person going to steal their VCR ... 'cause [of] that typical image of a drug addict as some sort of homeless, stinking kind of shambling person who can barely speak and stuff, and I was never like that even when I was using.



- I think it was treating you with a lot of compassion and a lot of understanding and treating you like a fucking human being not like a criminal or a fucking drug addict. To give you hope that there's a fucking life after heroin. I think it were my key worker and staff, constantly telling me that 'there's hope, you're too good for that fucking shit, you know, there's a fucking life out there for you if you want it', which in 10 years of heroin no-one's ever told me. (Hughes 2007, 687)

Hughes, K., 2007. Migrating identities: The relational constitution of drug use and addiction. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 29(5), pp.673–691.

- Where do you see yourself in one years time?



# Treatment options

- Be aware of impairment of the self
- Narrative therapy
  - Changing rigid scripts in self-empowering one's
- Positive images of addiction?
  - Good – bad on drugs – good again
  - The using phase can be valuable
- Be aware of shame: forward looking and hope!
  - Shame about identity (destructive)
  - Guilt about actions (constructive)
  - No: Both guilt and shame can be stuck in the past or forward looking
- Identity is one aspect
  - Pharmaceuticals can be really construtive

# Questions?

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