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The process of paradoxical autonomy and survival in the heroin careers of Mexican American women

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Abstract

This study focuses on the process of paradoxical autonomy and survival in the heroin careers of Mexican American women. We explore how gender roles among Mexican American female heroin users influence the emergence of a paradoxical autonomy. Five key subprocesses of this autonomy were identified from 14 life history narratives: sustaining employment, working the welfare system, illegal activities, emotional aloofness, and loss of family and children. Dependency on drugs did not lead simply to the reproduction of traditional gender dependency but, paradoxically, seemed to contribute to a new type of gender autonomy. This autonomy did not necessarily make the survival less arduous, only more independent from gendered responsibilities associated with men and often with family and children. We discuss how this paradoxical autonomy is not acquired without ambiguity by some of these women, who place a value on maintaining relationships with men and family. Our study makes a contribution to a better understanding of the diverse processes by which Mexican American female heroin users struggle to survive. Although this struggle leads to a paradoxical autonomy from their traditional gender roles, it does little to change other barriers to self-development originating from poverty, ethnic discrimination, and the severity of their drug addiction.

Key words and phrases

Mexican American; women; injecting drug users; paradoxical autonomy; heroin

Few studies focus on female Mexican American heroin users even though their rates of heroin use are among the highest compared with those of other female groups in the United States (Desmond and Maddux, 1984; Hser, Anglin and Booth, 1987; National Institute of Justice, 1994). The existing studies find that Mexican American female addicts have a more rapid onset of addiction, stronger relational dependency, and stronger commitment to their children and families. More recent research (Moore, 1994; Ramos, Aguilar, Anderson and Caudillo, 1999) suggests the existence of distinct subtypes of Mexican American female heroin users. We build upon and elaborate on these more recent findings, which offer a far more differentiated view of these women than previously presented. More importantly, we explore how emerging gender roles among Mexican American female heroin users influence the diversity of this group. A major finding from this study is that these women range from being autonomous in a paradoxical way to being traditionally dependent.

Methodologically, much of the research analyzing these females compares them with Mexican American and white male heroin users. While these comparisons are indeed important, they do not address variations among Mexican American female heroin users themselves. Studies have focused on pregnancy and issues that relate to infants born to addicted Mexican American mothers (Glynn, Pearson and Sayers, 1983). Others find that Mexican American females become addicted to heroin within a shorter period of time than do Mexican American men (Anglin, Hser and McGlothlin, 1987). These studies reveal that, like other female addicts, these women were introduced to heroin by a husband or boyfriend upon whom they were emotionally

dependent (Maddux and Desmond, 1981; Moore, 1990). Moreover, Mexican American females resemble many other female addicts in that they are burdened with providing child care and fulfilling related family responsibilities while still managing the oppressive demands of their addiction (Ramos et al., 1999). However, Mexican American females exhibited characteristics that distinguish them from other female addicts. Following traditional gender norms, they were considerably more dependent on men and the connections to their families through most of their addiction careers (Maddux and Desmond, 1981)

As previously indicated, some studies on Mexican American female addicts have begun to identify in-group differences. Moore (1990) found that Chicana addicts from “conventional” families were relatively more enmeshed and dependent on male relations in the street-addict world than were women from unconventional, or “cholo,” families. (Cholo families within the Mexican American community are those families characterized for several generations by drug use, criminality, incarceration and street connections.) Conventional Mexican American families were more likely to ostracize a female member who used heroin, inadvertently pushing her deeper into street life. In contrast, the cholo families developed a high degree of tolerance of drug use and other deviant behavior. Moore reported that some Mexican American female addicts with a cholo family background were “highly individualized actors in the street scene.” Women from more conventional families had greater difficulty adapting to this subculture. Ramos et al.’s (1999) more recent ethnography of Mexican American female heroin users describes how these women employ different strategies to cope with their multiple roles as drug user, drug dealer, mother, relative, probationer and criminal.

In our research we hypothesized that gender roles would be important in differentiating the behavior of Mexican American female addicts among themselves and from other female addicts. Mexican American culture has been largely described as a masculine, “macho” value system that magnifies the differences between gender roles to a greater degree than many other cultures (Alvarez, Bean and Williams, 1981). These traditional gender roles are largely a reflection of this group’s economic status: mostly working class and poor. These roles, however, are beginning to change, reflecting differences in generations and improvements in economic status (Williams, 1990). However, the women in our study are not only poor but are living in segregated neighborhoods that have been subjected to economic marginalization and social isolation. Therefore we expect that traditional gender roles of male domination and female submissiveness among this population are well entrenched and will be highly resistant to change.

This paper examines how gender roles constrain or facilitate the different survival strategies employed by Mexican American women during their addiction careers. We explore the trajectory of the Mexican American female’s heroin career and attempt to analyze the variations in patterns of behavior that range from traditional dependency to what we describe as “paradoxical autonomy.” The findings are based on data collected from U.S.-born Mexican American females enmeshed in a hard-core “tecato” subculture. “Tecato,” an argot term, refers to a highly gendered heroin-injecting subculture concentrated in the United States-Mexico border region (Quintero and Estrada, 1998; Ramos et al., 1999).

Research methods

This article draws upon life history data collected as part of a needs-assessment study of Mexican Americans who inject heroin in San Antonio, Texas, based on Rossi and Freedman’s (1982) methodological strategy. The initial phase of this two-year needs-assessment study was to conduct intensive ethnographic fieldwork and collect life history data using community researchers. These data were combined with quantitative data from governmental sources and local agencies in the final report (Valdez, Kaplan, Yin and Codina, 1996). The report estimated

that there are more than 8,000 such injecting drug users (IDUs) in San Antonio (Valdez et al., 1996). It confirmed that San Antonio has had a serious heroin addiction problem among its Mexican American population for decades (Desmond, Maddux and Trevino, 1978). Qualitative methods such as life history interviews may be especially important in the investigation of the complex and sensitive social relationships that are central to special populations such as women (Sterk-Elifson, 1995). The subtleties of these relationships cannot be adequately picked up by closed-ended questionnaires and other quantitative techniques, much less by the administrative data available in San Antonio for our needs assessment. We felt that supplemental qualitative data of heroin-using women were necessary for describing and interpreting the specific social context and subculture in which tecato gender relationships are imbedded.

The community researcher identified sites having a high concentration of heroin users and gathered data from field observations, field interviews, key informants and previous familiarity with these neighborhoods. Physical locations associated with the networks of heroin users were visited, including bars, clubs, convenience and check-cashing stores, restaurants, shooting galleries, and streets frequented by prostitutes. The sampling strategy specifically targeted a population of low-income and tecato female injectors, which the needs assessment identified as a segment of the San Antonio heroin user population that warranted the most attention for services. Sampling was limited to low-income West Side neighborhoods, where the majority of Mexican-American female injecting drug users reside. Based upon interactions with heroin users in these sites, we compiled extensive field-notes and conducted spot field interviews. These data allowed us to make a preliminary classification of active female heroin users in each site to provide the basis for specific sampling targets. The targets included prostitutes, old and young addicts, married women and lesbians. Sampling proceeded until a quota of at least two cases in each target group was reached.

Fourteen female heroin injectors were selected for the sample and were asked if they would be willing to participate in a life history interview. A few women refused to participate, but we had no impression that this might suggest a sampling bias. The study sample was mostly from poverty-level house-holds. Ages ranged from 16 to the late 40's, with a modal age category of 32 to 36. Other common characteristics showed early marriages, divorces, and, in some cases, second marriages; low levels of education; and arrests. Nine of these women were mothers of from one to six children. One was pregnant with a second child. Half of the women were currently heads of single-parent households, and half were on some form of public assistance.

Extraordinary efforts were taken to ensure the quality of the interviews. It took six to nine months after the initial contact before women gave their consent to participate in the study and to respond to the life history interview. The interviews were conducted by one of the project's trained community researchers, herself a former addict. She had the advantage of having an insider's perspective and had previously worked with this population in an earlier AIDS project. The field researcher maintained contact with the women throughout this period. This allowed us to develop trust and to obtain collateral information about the validity of the life history data. The life history interview inquired into several general concerns, such as family history, current marital status, drug use, and illegal activities. Probes were used to solicit more detail on each of these concerns. The women were encouraged to expand on significant life events that could be associated with their own heroin use or that of significant others. The interviews, approximately an hour and a half long, were conducted and tape-recorded in field settings such as homes and restaurants. Contact with the women was sustained after the interview so that uncertainties could be checked.

Our qualitative analysis was based on the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994). Open coding was accomplished by a line-by-line reading of the transcriptions.

Core coding categories included family, education, drug use history, violence, criminal history, and sources of income. Selective coding proceeded after the core category of traditional dependency/paradoxical autonomy emerged. Coding was aided by a qualitative software program (QSR-NUDIST). Analysis proceeded from the identification of the core process and related subprocesses to the construction of a typology (Bailey, 1973, 1994)

Findings

We found that the cholo family background emerged as an important property related to the core category of paradoxical autonomy/traditional dependency that emerged in our coding. Drug selling and using by family members was also a characteristic of the majority of these females' families from childhood. Martha, a 23-year-old mother currently involved in prostitution, comes from an extended family where everyone was reported as using drugs. According to Martha:

I had my cousins, my brother, *mi hermano* (brother) that used to drink. My mom used to drink. I have—he is my cousin, but my mom raised him when he was little because my uncle died *cuando ellos estaban chiquitos* (when they were young). *Mi primo* (my cousin), Chuy, he was doing heroin, and from there my brother started and from there I started. And you know! From beer to weed, from weed to acid to spray. *Todo* (everything), we have been to hell and back.

A second property that emerged was the degree of connectedness to male partners, to family members and their children, and to other persons. Among women who were continually involved in relationships with males, some were emotionally and physically attached and dominated and others were relatively independent. The most common category was females who tended to have drug abuse careers with a relatively high degree of autonomy from men. One of the most striking examples of this autonomy was the economic independence that most of these females maintained despite their addiction to heroin. Becoming physically dependent requires that heroin be taken on a regular basis over a period of time. This physical dependency brings about two dominant features of the lifestyle: “obtaining a supply of drugs and finding the means, usually financial, to make this possible” (Taylor, 1993). Most of these females managed to develop ways to acquire drugs and income without an attachment to men. Even among those females who had a steady male partner, relationships with men were characterized by autonomy. In short, physical dependency on drugs did not lead simply to the reproduction of traditional gender dependency but, paradoxically, seemed to contribute to a new type of gender autonomy that expressed many elements common to the “macho” *tecato* culture, including aggression and a willingness to confront, if not dominate, others. We call this “paradoxical autonomy.”

Our typology analysis resulted in the majority of the sample (ten women) being seen as a variant of the “paradoxical” autonomous constructed type, while a minority of the sample (four women) would be classified as a “traditional” dependent type. We have chosen the adjective “paradoxical” to qualify the autonomy that we found. This was not the kind of autonomy that is normally celebrated in the feminist literature. It was not obtained without loss of intimacy with other people, including men, and in some cases it was accompanied by the loss of children. The autonomy was paradoxical because it was a continuing result of the struggle for survival, not the outcome of overcoming victimization. Moreover, it did not necessarily make the survival less arduous, only more independent from gendered responsibilities associated with men and often with family and children. In specific ways the paradoxical autonomy was inherited from their cholo families of origin, transmitted to them as an acceptance of emotional coolness as a condition of survival. And ultimately it is paradoxical, because the achieved autonomy from men is the result of dependency on a drug. In short, this paradoxical autonomy is the result of a life experience that has little if any analog in the consciousness-raising

processes of autonomy discussed in feminist gender theories. It is an alternative to another painful option expressed by the minority of our sample: traditional dependency relationships with often abusive males that characterize tecato culture. In fact, a history of abusive relationships with males and physical neglect as children characterized the majority of our sample.

The construction of the typology allows us to explore this paradoxical autonomy, which emerges as the heroin career becomes firmly established. Consequently intricate, self-initiated strategies are created to cope with the needs of a heroin addiction and to sustain this autonomy. Five key subprocesses of this core process of paradoxical autonomy were identified in the life history narratives: (1) sustaining employment; (2) working the welfare system; (3) engaging in illegal activities; (4) maintaining emotional aloofness; and (5) losing family and children.

Sustaining employment

San Antonio has been identified as having one of the lowest wage structures in the United States, with Mexican Americans disproportionately concentrated in the lower end of the city's occupational hierarchy (Abramson and Fix, 1993). Given the socioeconomic backgrounds of the Mexican American females in this study, most found employment sometime during their addiction career in the lower end of San Antonio's service industry. These jobs offer low salaries and do not provide health insurance or other benefits. Even without the added burden of buying expensive illegal drugs, it was difficult for these women to support themselves and their children with these types of jobs. As for their non-heroin-using peers, the labor market provides only the very limited opportunities of "underemployment"; jobs that require long hours and give below-poverty levels of income. One of the women, when asked how much she was making as a server in a cafeteria, responded: "Yearly, I don't know. I was not getting paid that much, I was just getting paid like may be one fifty a week."

Once the women began to use intravenous drugs, even keeping these low-level jobs became difficult. Another problem associated with maintaining these jobs, in addition to low wages, is the late hours of the tecato lifestyle. One participant said that she was frequently late or absent as a result. Even when she did go to work, her hangovers, sickness and withdrawal symptoms affected her work performance. As one of the other women indicated, this created situations where the normal work process was interrupted by undesirable outsiders and activities: "When I was working the restaurant, my boyfriend used to come to work and give me some heroin so I could get through the day."

The amount of disturbances in their employment increases with the progression and severity of their heroin addiction. In order to buy expensive heroin, they often must supplement their income with illegal activities. These activities are sometimes brought into the employment setting, causing nuisances for the employer. As these illegal activities become more lucrative compared with their menial "straight" jobs, the women's commitment to their traditional gender-prescribed work roles slackens, and this becomes visible in the workplace. They then begin to focus the bulk of their energies on the illegal economic endeavors and to develop a new perspective on opportunities and risks. This subtle (or not so subtle) shift in energy and perspective is sensed by employers and often leads to termination or resignation. However, a minority of the females are still able to maintain their autonomy through legitimate jobs throughout the course of their addiction career. Nonetheless, in most cases, as their addiction increases, the social stability necessary to sustain employment becomes more difficult. A similar outcome can be observed in a second source of legal income: the welfare system.

Working the welfare system

Another form of economic independence for these women is through working the welfare system and its various types of public assistance programs. Many of these women grew up in single-parent households in which public assistance was the norm. Given their social and economic backgrounds, public assistance is not stigmatized and is used either as a supplement or as a sole source of income to sustain their families and/or their drug needs. As Mary, a single 44-year-old, explains: "It's been a long time since I worked, and I never worked the way I should. I have always been on welfare, and you know, even today, I am on my own."

During their heroin careers these women may be eligible for several entitlement programs. At the early stages of their addiction careers, those who still had custody of their children were eligible for programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and/or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). These types of public assistance provide aid to mothers and families based on their income and the number and ages of the children. The majority of these women also received assistance from the food stamps program that gives individuals or families a monthly allocation of food stamps to purchase groceries at their local supermarket. The amount is based on eligibility. Some of these women were eligible for at least two of these programs. Dora, a 29-year-old mother of six, describes her public assistance situation:

[Are you receiving AFDC?] Yes. *[How much are you getting?]* I am getting close to three hundred dollars a month for AFDC and I also get six hundred dollars for food stamps.

In contrast to Dora's experience, some women receive much less public assistance. For them, this assistance is not enough to support either their family responsibilities or their heroin habit. Lisa is a 25-year-old pregnant mother of one:

[Are you getting AFDC?] Yes, and food stamps. *[How much are you getting?]* Just get one hundred and sixty-three a month and one hundred and ninety-one of food stamps. Well, it helps, but it is not enough to live off.

As the severity and intensity of their heroin addiction increases, extralegal use or hustling of the welfare system becomes common. As mentioned earlier, as these women become more enmeshed in the tecato world, they often lose custody of their children and thereby lose eligibility for public assistance. Females begin to engage in various schemes to hustle the welfare system by claiming children no longer living with them in order to continue receiving benefits such as food stamps. These stamps are a useful source of cash that can easily be traded and sold in the neighborhood's informal economy.

Engaging in illegal activities

The majority of the women in our sample were involved in illicit income-generating activities, which included prostitution, shoplifting, breaking and entering, fencing, and forgery. Drug dealing was not an option for these women in this area, since a Mexican American prison gang monopolized it. These illegal activities are frequently combined with occasional employment and some public assistance. Elizabeth, a 16-year-old sex worker whose parents are both in prison, supports herself by prostitution and shoplifting. Even though she has a steady boyfriend who is also addicted to heroin, she does not allow him to control or share the income generated by her illegal activities. Her illegal "specializations" of prostitution and shoplifting have provided her paradoxical autonomy from her relationship with her boyfriend and have allowed her to survive in a situation where her parents have been separated from her by the criminal justice system. She explains:

I have never had a job. *[So how do you usually get your money?]* Well, by baby-sitting or sometimes I go and make a date. *[Do you do burglaries or shoplifting?]* Shoplifting, yeah. The

most I've made is one hundred and fifty. [*Does your boyfriend use drugs?*] Yeah. [*Do you use them together?*] No. [*And where is he now?*] I guess shoplifting or something.

Lisa, who was cited above, describes the various illegal activities she has been involved in:

[*Do you recall the worst crime or the very first serious crime you committed?*] Yeah, it was a robbery. I did not do it alone, I was with someone. It was like in a fast-food place. They went in there and robbed it. I was over there trying to distract them at first. I was sixteen. I just wanted the money. I was not really strung out or nothing. Now I commit crimes to get money for drugs. When I am hooked, I do them every day. I get about two or three hundred dollars a day. Well, it depends: like when we would get leather jackets, we would get a lot of money. But when it was like cigarettes and little stuff, we would not get that much money. Like if it was clothes, we would hit the malls like North Star and Windsor, big malls like that. We would go to Austin and we would go to the malls, HEBs and Kroger's.

Women who are involved in illegal activities as their principal source of income tend to become more deeply enmeshed in the heroin subculture. While they are able to achieve relatively more paradoxical autonomy than their peers who are dependent on male income, those women who are intensely involved in illegal activities are at a point in their careers where their options are severely limited (Rosenbaum, 1981).

Maintaining emotional aloofness

These women experienced an emotional aloofness from male sexual partners, immediate family and extended-family members, and other social relationships. Even though these women operated in several overlapping social roles, including those of single mothers, wives or girlfriends, daughters, sisters, and lesbians, most made efforts not to get overly involved in their relationships. Their immersion in the tecato world is a continuous cycle of alternating emotional dependency and disinterest. Most relationships with men are continuously and persistently emotionally unsatisfying and abusive. Despite the perception of machismo, many men appeared to these women both as weak and as emotional burdens. The heroin career provided the opportunity for these women to break the cycle of emotional dependency on men and the others around them.

The majority of the women in our study were brought up in homes where emotional attachments among family members are relatively weak. For the most part, these women came from single-parent, often female-headed, households. In addition, they were often raised by adults other than their natural parents, such as grandparents, older siblings, or aunts and uncles. They tended to shift from one home to another throughout their childhood as a result of their parents' lifestyle. Reports of childhood experiences of domestic violence were frequent, including slaps, punches, bruises, broken bones, and stabbings. These families resemble Moore's "cholo families," in which there is long-standing street and gang connection, often over two generations, often with heroin use or prison in the family experience. Elizabeth, quoted earlier, expands on her relationships with her parents:

They are both in prison. My grandma took care of me until I started to go off on my own. I was eleven when my parents went to prison for selling drugs (heroin). My mom was all right, but she was not really there for me, and my dad never had time for me.

Over half of our sample had parents/guardians who had used drugs and/or had spent time in prison, resulting in long periods when parents/guardians were absent from the home. If there was a male figure in the home, he was either a stepfather or the mother's boyfriend. For the most part, the link between these female children and these men did not have the quality of a father-daughter relationship. The virtual absence of a positive male role model during

childhood appears to be only the beginning of tumultuous relationships with male partners and family members.

With two exceptions the women were initiated into the subculture of heroin use by males (husband, boyfriend, sex partners [N=6]); relatives (cousins, brothers-in-law) and friends (N=4). There were two exceptional cases: Irma, a veteran 46-year-old, was initiated at age 13 by a female baby-sitter; Junior, a 32-year-old fully employed, college-educated female was initiated by a sex partner in a lesbian relationship. Joann, a 40-year-old mother of five, illustrates the modal pattern of initiation through a male sex partner:

[How did you start?] My husband. Yes, my first husband. *[How long did you use drugs, how did everything begin?]* It began with, just a little, try it, you are going to like it. I tried it once and from there I began. That is when I went drinking and would go drinking, dancing, and I would not pay attention to my mom. And then I fell in love with this guy, the father of my children. I spent 18 years with him and that is how I got started with this addiction. He did not force me, he gave me some and I liked it and went on ahead.

Many of them also experienced failed marriages and relationships with male significant others that made them wary of developing an emotional connectedness. As a result, they exhibited an emotional aloofness from even those with whom they were socially tied, such as a husband or boyfriend. This aloofness was evident during an interview with Norma, a 47-year-old prostitute, with her boyfriend present:

Como te llamas [What's your name?] *Me llamo Norma.* *[Her boyfriend is in the background, and she is telling him], Vete a la verga de aqui! Tengo forty-seven, pero aqui esta este pinche viejo culero. Chicle pegado que no me deja, que no me deja tirar rollo, hombre. Porque tengo que decir cosas que son privadas. Pero este cabron quiere andar de orejon.* *[Get the hell outta here! I am forty-seven, but here is this asshole. He sticks to me like gum, and he won't let me speak in peace. Because I need to say things that are personal and private. But this asshole wants to be around and hear everything.]*

Other women expressed a reluctance to get involved with men. When asked about her relationship with her boyfriend, one respondent answered in the following manner: "I've been with him for about a year, but I am trying not to get too close, I am more into the drugs and stuff." In cases like this, the numbing effects of heroin may only further intensify the emotional aloofness already associated with existing relationships. That is, the sensation described as euphoric and indifferent takes precedence, typically drowning out emotional attachments.

This emotional aloofness, developed in early childhood in most of these women, is functional for and reinforced by the tecato lifestyle. As described by Quintero and Estrada (1998), the tecato world requires a detachment that is often expressed by male macho posturing. It also is very much present in the attitudes of female tecatas, who find this emotional aloofness highly adaptive for maintaining their paradoxical autonomy.

Losing family and children

The Mexican American culture has been described as highly structured around family networks that provide social, emotional, and economic support for their members. Among Mexican Americans at the lower end of the class hierarchy, individuals are interdependently linked to family and relatives. As female heroin users become more immersed in the tecato world, their traditional gender roles as wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters become secondary compared to the impulses of their addiction needs. One woman stated: "I'd go with the men who had the most money and drugs to offer me. Sometimes I'd stay with a man for a few months just to get the drugs."

For these women, abandoning their children at home or with relatives for long periods of time was not unusual. These behaviors forced their families to adapt to the circumstances and consequences of the addiction career and try to provide the necessary social support to keep the children in the family network. A majority of our sample had between two and six children. Most had separated from their dependent children. Older tecatas with adult children had little or no contact with them. Many of the younger children were living with other family members: grandparents, older siblings, aunts and uncles, and other relatives. Some were placed in foster homes or other institutions. One participant described it in this way:

You know, I gave my kids away because I started using drugs and they were suffering with me out in the street and I could not support them. And I never asked anybody for help. You know I never asked for welfare or anything. So I gave them to people that were close to the family. So they brought them up. [*And do you see them?*] No, no, I don't.

The participation in illegal activities usually resulted in periods of incarceration. In our sample, 13 of the 14 women had served time in either county or state institutions at least once in their lives, spending from a couple of days to years incarcerated. For many, intermittent periods of incarceration were a constant part of their lives. Nancy, a 35-year-old sex worker with two children, describes her incarceration experience:

[*Have you ever been in jail or in prison?*] Yeah. [*How long?*] For three years. [*How about jail?*] Lots of times (lots of jail time), prison just one time. [*For what?*] For when I look the rap for my husband; then he threw me to the dogs after I took his rap. I was working, I was a nurses' aide. I lost everything because of him. This is why I lost my girls.

Separation from their families and children during these incarcerations does not mean that these women completely abandoned them. Some of them stated that their children are the most important part of their lives, although caring for them was difficult, given their lifestyle. As this fieldnote indicates:

Anna's family stopped talking to her because she was involved with this guy and she was prostituting and shoplifting. Her two older children did not want anything to do with her, but her youngest son called her up and told her to come home and to get off drugs. She finally got the courage and called her mom. Her mom agreed to take her back as long as she kicked her habit. Anna agreed and moved in with her mom. She stayed clean for about three weeks but is now using one hundred and twenty dollars of heroin and about forty dollars of cocaine a day.

For many of these women, losing their children was not an "either/or" situation. As Anna's situation illustrates, there are periods in their lives when they enter rehabilitation programs and/or decide to stop using drugs. If they still have access to their children, it is not at all uncommon for them to reclaim them. In contrast, there are instances where the courts have mandated that children be placed in foster homes or institutions. In these cases it is difficult to regain custody. As a result of separation from their mothers, the children of these female heroin users may live in a series of households with various families under different circumstances during their childhood.

Many of these women find their lives in a continual state of flux. They pass into and out of the tecato world, a life dictating their separation and reunion with family and children. Their relationships with their families are highly related to how each family responds to a female member being a tecata. A family with more long-standing street and drug connections may have a family structure that is more accepting and adaptive to this situation. Those with more conventional backgrounds are placed in a far more ambiguous position. One respondent from a conventional family background says of her family's view of her lifestyle:

[*And how does your family view it, how do they feel about it?*] They feel bad about it, very bad. My grandmother could not accept it when she found out. She could not believe that there were people talking about me; that I was doing drugs. She used to tell me, but I would lie to her; but then it was there. I hated to lie to her, you know. She suffered a lot because of me.

Discussion and conclusion

This study on Mexican American women greatly strengthens research that argues that women's drug use cannot be reduced to a traditional gendered, lower-class stereotype of dependency on men and subordination to them. These studies reveal that female drug users encompass a wide range of social classes, lifestyles, social contexts, and careers in illicit drug economies (Fagan, 1994; Bourgois and Dunlap, 1993; Bourgois, 1995; Sterk-Elifson, 1996; Morgan and Joe, 1996; Waldorf and Murphy, 1995). This research line indicates that contemporary female drug users exhibit a wide variety of control over their drug habits and have access to social and drug resources. Specifically, these contemporary female drug users (as well as other females involved in deviant behavior) seem to be exhibiting a greater variation of autonomy than was found in past research. This new research contradicts the traditional theoretical viewpoint that these women can be characterized as male dependent. The Mexican American female heroin users in this study displayed a distinct variant of this trend toward more autonomy from men.

It needs to be mentioned, however, that this autonomy gained by distinct processes tied to employment, working the welfare system, illegal activities, emotional aloofness, and losing family and children is non-celebratory. It is non-celebratory in that this relative autonomy from personal relationships based on traditional Mexican American gender roles does not relieve the overwhelming burdens of supporting a drug habit or of subsisting economically. Collectively these women must still survive in an ethnic community that continues to impose clearly defined gender and class barriers on women. Thus the relative autonomy from men has not necessarily resulted in a freer development of self as a celebratory autonomy would assume.

The emergence of this paradoxical autonomy in these Mexican American women is strongly associated with social factors related to the progression of their addiction careers. For example, employment was possible only if they could balance the demands of their addiction with their job responsibilities. Similarly, their ability to hustle the welfare system, meet obligations to family and children, and maintain emotional relationships were linked to their level of addiction. Furthermore, an increasing separation from traditional gender roles occurred for the majority of these women as they became more involved in the *tecato* scene. As they became more severely addicted to heroin, they also became more enmeshed in a lifestyle that centered on maintaining access to heroin. This process usually encompassed strong attachment and commitment to criminal activities and street life, and created barriers to the opportunities offered by the employment and welfare systems.

Our data indicate that paradoxical autonomy is not acquired without ambiguity by some of these women who still place a value on maintaining relationships with men (Amaro, 1995). It is clear that the patriarchy ideology of the larger society, qualified significantly by ethnicity, imposes the cultural norm of connectedness (and eventually marriage and children) even on these women. This may explain why many continue to engage in monogamous serial relationships with multiple sex partners over their addiction careers despite its problems within this social context. We argue that women are engaged in this behavior toward men as a result of their ambiguous feelings about the need to be with men as well as awareness of the additional burdens associated with being with a man engenders.

This ambivalence to men in our sample parallels the ambivalence that drug-using women often face when confronting a situation of pregnancy and motherhood as reported by other

researchers (Murphy and Rosenbaum, 1999). Pregnant drug addicts often have numerous conflicting emotions when facing the prospect of motherhood. Often it may require a reconnection and deepening of a relationship with a father from whom the woman is trying to free herself. Ambivalence, then, seems to be a persistent factor in the lives of most drug-using women whatever their ethnic background.

In spite of all these difficulties, the Mexican American female drug users in our study managed to maintain relationships and receive support from family members even if only intermittently. This support by family members was often associated with their concerns about the welfare of their children and a desire to maintain the family despite its problems. In this regard, they were expressing a keen sense of family, a cultural domain strongly associated with Mexican Americans. Individuals within these types of families are greatly attached to their families and identify with them, and feelings of loyalty and reciprocity are typically strong. Given this finding, Rosenbaum's (1981) theory of narrowing options may need to be modified with regard to specific ethnic groups. In the case of lower-class Mexican American women with a "cholo" family background, the trajectory of narrowing options may be counteracted to some degree by family support and solidarity.

In conclusion, participation in the social world of the tecato seems to be creating new social identities for women that go beyond the gender roles traditionally associated with Mexican Americans in socially disadvantaged environments. These emerging roles are a reflection of the more general changes for women in society as a whole. Although these changes are providing new possibilities for women of all classes, for Mexican American female heroin users they are accompanied by specific issues associated with poverty, minority status, and traditional gender roles. Our study makes a contribution to a better understanding of the diverse processes by which Mexican American female heroin users struggle to survive. This struggle leads to a paradoxical autonomy from traditional gender roles, but it does little to change other barriers to self-development originating from poverty, ethnic discrimination, and the severity of their drug addiction. Future research needs to recognize the specific career trajectory of Mexican American female injecting drug users where the social, economic, and emotional hardships that persist despite autonomy may lead to a falling back to traditional gender dependency, reinforced by the intervention of the traditional family to provide needed support.

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