

10-4-2019

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Recommended Citation

Danns, George K. Dr. (2019) "DOES “HURT” HELP? A Review of Miriam Boeri’s HURT: Chronicles of the Drug War Generation," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 2. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol11/iss2/2>

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Does "Hurt" Help? A Review of Miriam Boeri's *Hurt: Chronicles of the Drug War Generation*

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The book *"Hurt: Chronicles of the Drug War Generation"* by Miriam Boeri is a timely and important study. It provides penetrative perspectives on the Sociology of Crime and Deviance and the Sociology of the Family, through interpretative explorations of the personal lives and moral careers of 100 baby boomers addicted to illicit drugs, ensnared in the criminal justice system, buffeted by other agencies of social control and continuously marginalized by mainstream society. The author writes: "The title of this book is the motif of the stories told - baby boomer drug users are hurting. Many were hurt before they start using drugs, others were hurt by society's response to drug use" (p.190). She adds: "The broad goal of the book is to understand drug use problems by examining drug users lives at the intersection of race, gender, class and age" (p.3).

The book is intellectually engaging, beautifully written and a scholastic feast. The cases studied are well related; conclusions are derived; and a plethora of sociological theories and constructs are applied meaningfully or challenged.

Boeri is bold, yet compassionate as she lays bare the lives of her subjects with riveting focus on the personal and family crises that led them to become addicts. She describes the rupture in the social networks necessary to sustain normal lives; their experiences of relentless bullying and socially crippling interventions of the Criminal Justice System, the Prison Industrial Complex and the Treatment Industrial Complex - all three entities emboldened and empowered by the War on Drugs. The author argues that the book is an expose on how the War on Drugs prolonged drug use at the individual level and expanded the drug problem at the national level.

Was the author "value neutral" in her "Chronicles of the Drug War Generation?" The author had DNA invested in the subjects of her investigation in that her brother was one of the 100 cases she studied. She served as his advocate and as his family member and invested emotional, social capital and other resources in his well-being. She writes: "My training and experience as an academic prepared me for conducting scientific research studies on drug users, but my inside knowledge as a sister of an incarcerated heroin user was critical to my understanding of the complex impact of the war on drugs" (p.5). The situation of the author's family member may have served as motivation for conducting the study. It therefore invokes Max Weber's notion of the choice of the research topic being "value relevant."

The author did not in any way hide her love for her brother and concern for the wellbeing of the other cases she studied. The author confesses: "My analytical reflection does not conceal my compassion" (p.6). No effort was made to protect his confidentiality as a subject as is the customary research protocol. Pseudonyms were used for everyone except "Harry." The "HURT" was therefore personal pathos, a quest for catharsis. The author's pain was conveyed, if not felt by the reader. Was the study design and its application of its unique scientific mixed method approach in collecting data characterized by bias? Are the conclusions of the study consequently tainted with bias? Then again, would this book have been as impacting without the author's insights into the phenomenon through the case of her brother? This study leads one to consider: Is value neutrality even possible in the social sciences? Some sociologists believe that it is impossible to set aside personal values and retain complete

objectivity. Indeed, this author of this book acknowledges her subjectivity.

In the tradition of C Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination*, the author looks at the social, political and historical contexts of baby boomers' lives; and, how changes in the social landscape impact drug trajectories thus connecting the "personal troubles" of these drug users to the "public issues" in the wider society. Drawing the connections between personal troubles of milieu and public issues of social structure, however, does not explain why one member from a family becomes a drug addict while siblings from the same household live regular lives. For the author, the contest between agency and social structure is won by social structure. One is often left with the impression in this study that it is wholly the system to be blamed and not the individual who is addicted to drugs. The author states: "Their stories are filled with personal problems, and it is easy to blame the individual. But the analysis of their lives overtime reveals how policy, culture, and social context intersect at every period of their lives, sometimes creating their problems, at other times shaping how the problems are viewed and addressed" (p.6). Several of the 38 cases discussed in the book personally blamed themselves for their plight. They started illicit drug use and they ultimately decided when to stop or to start using drugs again. This is not to deny that social factors can and do impel the choices individuals make, but rather, it is to recognize the agency of individuals in determining outcomes in their own lives.

The range of theoretical frameworks and constructs utilized in the book include: maturing out thesis, life course theory, social capital theory, self-control theory, social control theory, role theory, turning points, and more. These theories and constructs are introduced as the 38 out of the 100 cases studied are unveiled in the book. They were employed to provide analytic context for the cases. Maturing out thesis and self-control theory were debunked by evidence from the cases. While, life course theory, social capital theory and social control theory were shown to provide explanatory relevance. The reader is left, however, with one theory explaining this and another theory explaining that. The book could have been made even better, for example,

if linkages were made among life course theory, social capital theory and social control theory in presenting a more holistic theoretical explication of the subject matter. The author seemingly traversed, with equal facility, between an interactionist approach by highlighting the importance of emotional support, family and other social networks when narrating cases, and essentially a structuralist approach when attributing causation.

Functionalist theory was evident as the author looked at the role of social institutions. Conflict theories were manifest as the author moved into areas of social inequality, class, race, gender, and social justice. Conflict theory could have provided an overarching theoretical framework for this study. Nevertheless, I found the book a sociological treat with its utilization of a wide array of theoretical perspectives.

The author concludes by proffering a "social recovery model" as a paradigm shift in the study of the drug abuse problem. "The social recovery model builds on two related concepts - social capital and recovery capital. Social recovery facilitates the process of acquiring the skills, resources, and networks that enhance people's ability to live in a society without resorting to problematic substance use... A social recovery model directs attention to the social environment with a primary focus on human interaction. It places emphasis less on individual behavior change and more on the social and relational process of recovery within mainstream society" (pp. 188 - 189). The strength of this social recovery model is that it provides a discernible strategy, based on the cases studied, for reintegrating drug abusers into mainstream society. Its weakness is that it does not address how to stop new drug users from emerging. Further, it assumes an ideal whereby policies and programs emerging from this new paradigm will be untroubled in their implementation.

The author ends the book with an Epilogue. After relating the story of "Snap" a black male who was a victim of the new Jim Crow and who, along with her brother, was murdered in drug related violence, the author states in the last two sentences: "My brother

was not Black, but his life was very similar. And when I received Harry's death certificate in the mail his race was listed as "Black" (p. 194). It is useful that the author has drawn this equivalence between Harry and his friend Snap. Harry could not have been "White" because everything considered bad in America is seen as involving mainly Black people. But Harry was White. Poverty, crime, drug abuse - for all of these Black communities and Black people are generally portrayed as the main perpetrators or victims. The typing of drug abuse as predominantly a Black problem in the media, in movies, among law enforcement and others has led, until relatively recent, to the denial of evidence of widespread drug abuse in White communities with resultant deleterious consequences. The opioid epidemic, methamphetamines, alcohol and other drug use have savaged White communities and led to the demographic increase in death rates among White Americans, while the death rates for all other race groups have been declining. Middle-aged White Americans are dying from despair through alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide (PBS Newshour, 2017). Congress was constrained by this growing loss of White

lives to begin removing the stigma from opioids as a crime and rebranding it as a public health epidemic. The US Senate on September 17, 2018 passed the Opioid Crisis Response Act by a vote of 99 to 1 to combat the drug epidemic (Ors and Martinez-Ruckman, 2018).

Our author focused on a Black community in the City of Atlanta known as 'The Bluff (Better leave you fucking fool)' – "a community recognized as one of the most violent open-air drug markets in the country" (p.63). The time has come to cease ignoring the numerous "Bluffs" in White communities. Predominantly focusing on, stereotyping of, and imposing mean and discriminatory treatment on Black people, for everything seen as bad in America, are seemingly hurting far more White people in the society than intended. Actively seeking the delegitimization of racial discrimination should be included in the author's Recovery Paradigm for it to be truly effective.

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