



Hope to Die a Dope Fiend

Charles Pearson; Philippe Bourgois

Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Nov., 1995), 587-593.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0886-7356%28199511%2910%3A4%3C587%3AHTDADF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>

Cultural Anthropology is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/anthro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Hope to Die a Dope Fiend

Charles Pearson

San Francisco Urban Institute

Philippe Bourgois

San Francisco Urban Institute

Department of Anthropology

San Francisco State University

Scotty injected his last drops of heroin into a scarred vein running along his outer forearm. On this chilly, late winter afternoon, I had been watching him, his street partner Jim, and another homeless heroin addict, Leo, share a \$20 bag of black tar heroin in their homeless encampment/shooting gallery. For the past year, as part of an HIV-AIDS prevention study, I have been spending much of my time with a network of heroin addicts who live under a stretch of San Francisco's downtown freeways.

As I was walking toward the back of the camp where another four men were fixing heroin, out of the corner of my eye I saw Scotty fall to the ground. As he jerked in the dirt, his eyes rolled back and asphyxiated gasps rattled from inside his throat. "Oh my God," I thought as I ran to his convulsing body, "he's gonna die!" What was I supposed to do? Call 911 from the bushes under the freeway? Would Scotty stay alive while I dragged him over the ten-foot-high chain-link fence surrounding our camp to an anonymous stretch of sidewalk? Would I even be able to find a functioning pay phone? I must have said something about calling 911, because I vaguely heard Jim reassuring me, "No, don't. He's okay." Scotty was clearly not okay, but, from the perspective of the addicts in the shooting gallery, the paramedic authorities and the police who would follow them were even less okay.

At a total loss, I massaged Scotty's chest, hoping to somehow relax his breathing. Fortunately, at this point Jim took more coherent control. He had me grab Scotty's arms and pull them above his head, jamming him into an upright position. Following the gestures from a long-forgotten junior high school CPR training session, but having no faith in their efficacy, I placed my knee in the center of Scotty's back to arch his torso and maybe open his clogged respiratory system. Jim was massaging Scotty's shoulders, while Leo, who had woken up

from his heroin nod, rubbed Scotty's chest the way I had been doing a minute earlier. All this only made Scotty struggle for his breath even more violently, until finally he began spitting up little, solid, white objects. For a moment, I thought that his teeth had uprooted in the upheaval and were popping out of his mouth. Once the objects hit the ground, though, I realized that Scotty was not losing his teeth; rather he had spit up two \$20 packets of heroin tightly wrapped in chunks of white grocery-bag plastic. Street dealers like Scotty store their supply of heroin in their cheeks so they can swallow it when the police raid them, allowing them to retrieve it later by inducing vomiting when the danger has passed.

With his windpipe clear and all his merchandise safely regurgitated on the ground, Scotty's seizure gradually subsided. As I lifted his 36-year-old, half-starved, heroin addicted, alcoholic body—which could not have weighed more than 105 pounds—out of the dirt, Leo, eager to help, grabbed a blue plastic milk crate and positioned it for Scotty to sit on. Jim continued to massage Scotty, while I backed off to allow my own adrenaline to subside.

My defenses shattered, the misery and threatening uncertainty of the lives of the dozen homeless heroin addicts I had befriended in the course of this research slammed me into a fit of anger. I threw one of the dirty, uncapped syringes lying next to Scotty's mattress into the bushes that camouflaged our visibility from a freeway access ramp. I felt powerless, realizing how completely hopeless it was for me to have thought that my daily give-and-take exchanges or my outreach/intervention research project might ever improve the lives of these desperate dope fiends. Throughout my relationships with the different members of the shooting gallery's network, I have always made gestures that I hoped might alleviate, at least marginally, their daily struggles for resources and minimal comfort. I have provided them with such minor amenities as old clothes, spare dollars and change, food, candles, and an occasional car ride to hospital emergency rooms and social service appointments. Once I brought them a carload of federal government disaster relief blankets that I had persuaded a local homeless shelter to entrust to me. Most importantly, courtesy of San Francisco's needle exchange program, each week I have delivered a full supply of new, clean hypodermic syringes. During Scotty's seizure, however, I was forced to face the fact that there was nothing I could ever do to keep Scotty from probably dying a poor, hungry drug addict. I guess that is why he refers to himself with pride as a "dope fiend."

Repressing my anger—or rather channeling it into a personal sense of inadequacy—I knelt in front of Scotty, took one of his hands, and asked him to tell me if he was okay. Perhaps I needed assurance that my presence mattered—before, during, and after the seizure. If our chest-massaging, arm-yanking, and torso-thrusting had saved his life, I wanted it to be for a reason. Still trying to focus his eyes and get his bearings, Scotty replied weakly, "Yeah. Thanks for being here, Cap. I don't know what would've happened if you weren't around." He gently reached out his swollen, scabbed hands to cradle mine and then squeezed firmly, all the while thanking me over and over again. He even forced his dis-

combobulated eyes to focus calmly on my face. Both touched and reassured—our mutual humanity cemented at least for a moment—I realized it was time for me to get away. I needed to go home; I was ready to have a tantrum. I wanted to break my ties with this shooting gallery, dope fiend scene.

I did go home and have a tantrum, screaming at my housemate and research partner, Philippe, about the United States being criminal; anthropological research being an elitist lie; and humans obviously having no worth, let alone humanity. Succumbing to the protomodern Gingrichian order of things, I was convinced there was no possible hope for ever meaningfully addressing, even slightly, the suffering of the socially marginalized in America. I even yelled at Philippe for adding cilantro, an herb I normally enjoy, to our dinner soup. I had forgotten that my research partner was also close to Scotty and that conducting this ethnographic fieldwork was his equally futile way of coping with the social misery of the homeless heroin addicts surviving on the margins of our neighborhood. I was not ready, consequently, when he lashed back out at me with a humiliating barrage of curses for caring about human life and for not being professional enough in my ethnography: "What the hell is the matter with you? Don't you realize that they're all dying? What difference does it make if he dies right now? It would have been better for him. Can't you separate yourself out? This project can't go on if you're gonna mess up like this. I'm going to call the whole thing off. Forget it! Forget it! I quit! You're fired! This is ridiculous."

A few minutes later, he and his wife were shrieking at each other because she would not allow him, or me, to return to the encampment and sleep near Scotty in what we thought might be one of his last nights alive. She was struggling to create the emotional and physical boundaries that are impossible to maintain when you undertake participant-observation research with drug addicts who live only a few blocks from your home. We reached a compromise solution: It was okay for Philippe to return to the camp with me to check on Scotty, as long as we both came home before midnight. Perhaps succumbing to Philippe's hyperintellectual strategy of focusing obsessively on the research to keep his emotions at bay and to channel them into academic productivity, I too felt an urgent need to tape-record the details of Scotty's life—to generate a record of him before it was too late. Before leaving the house, however, I scanned my closet, looking to wean some useful items for our friends from its overabundant stock. I grabbed my Gore-Tex hiking boots for Scotty's partner, Jim, who had lost the sole on his right workboot that afternoon. Philippe could not stop himself from berating me for giving my possessions away like a guilt-ridden liberal. I cursed him back, accusing him of acting like a typical California homeowner bereft of human compassion. My anger against him diminished, though, when I noticed that he could not stop himself from skipping and running through the drizzle to the homeless encampment, even faster than I.

Once in front of the campfire, we talked over the sardines and potato chips that I had bought at the corner store for Scotty with the hope that the food would help stabilize his jolted constitution. I purchased this meager amount of food, their only meal all day, with money out of my salary from the National Institute

on Drug Abuse grant, which was funding this research. Perhaps, once again, this was also a way to assuage my guilt over making money studying social misery in the name of applied anthropology. His body and mind sound again, Scotty told us of a similar seizure he had had three weeks earlier; of his ulcers and bloody stools; of the radial nerve damage which had rendered his left hand limp and useless for the past seven months; of his first heroin injection at the age of 12; of how his life fell apart at 23 when his wife was stabbed to death; and, finally, of his mother's lifelong addiction to Valium, even during her pregnancy with him. "I was a diazepam baby," he giggled, almost with shy charm.

The introspective, soothing tenor of the evening changed abruptly with the arrival of Pete, a 50-year-old former resident of the camp/shooting gallery who had recently inherited \$10,000 from the sale of his dead mother's house. Since receiving the money a week earlier, he continued to frequent the shooting gallery during the day, but left at night to sleep in a motel. Every night he treated a couple of the camp's inhabitants to a bed indoors, a hot shower, all the Cisco Berry fortified wine they could drink, and all the heroin they could shoot.

As Pete joined us in front of the campfire to party and treat a few of his closest addict friends to an extra fix of heroin, I began harrying him with an account of Scotty's seizure. He deflated my earnestness with a dismissive smile, "So he did the tuna?" The consensus in the camp was that Scotty had undergone an alcohol seizure—or what they call fish-flopping. Fish-flopping is an almost routine event among physically weakened drug and alcohol addicts, but in this particular case it was clearly exacerbated by stress. Scotty had been deeply anxious all day because earlier that morning they had received notice from the California State Police to evacuate their camp under the freeway by the end of the week. They had been living there for over six months and now they were going to have to start over again, with absolutely no possibilities for shelter in sight. I am convinced that it was this police-induced stress that precipitated Scotty's alcohol and heroin-cum-malnutrition seizure.

Cutting short our discussion of the particulars of fish-flopping and future emergency shelter possibilities, I overheard Pete, in a hushed voice, inviting Scotty and Jim to spend the night in his motel room. This was the first time he had extended a motel invitation to the pair. They eagerly accepted, asking Philippe and me to join them but admonishing us in a whisper to stay quiet about the plans so as to avoid any jealous arguments from the others in the camp, who were going to be left behind in a midwinter drizzle that was turning into pouring rain—just one more of the showers that made 1995 one of northern California's wettest winters on historical record.

Scotty and Jim began to gather some fresh pants, shirts, and socks—from a bag of clothes Pete had paid to have laundered for the camp—and asked us again, almost nervously, "Won't you come and hang out with us inside? You know, like socialize. It'll be fun." Eager to pursue our emotional resurrection, Philippe and I not only agreed, but even offered to drive Scotty and Jim to the motel. Pete was obviously too high and drunk to safely drive the used Chevrolet truck he had just bought with part of his inheritance. Before they understood our

concern, Philippe was already sprinting home to fetch his car. Barely stopping for breath, he pulled his car out of his driveway slowly, without turning on the lights so as not to worry his wife for failing, yet again, to draw clear boundaries between his "research" and his home. By the time Philippe returned, Scotty and Jim had already piled into Pete's truck, suspecting that Philippe might have merely run off and not understanding why anyone would be so worried about riding with a drunk driver. Most importantly, they did not want to risk missing the opportunity to spend the night indoors. Scotty told me it had been almost two months since he had taken a shower. Philippe insisted that Scotty be safe and join us in our car. Shrugging his shoulders, Scotty obliged.

Despite the pouring rain and Pete's erratic weaving, we reached the motel without incident. Upon entering the three-bed room for which Pete claimed he paid \$125, Jim headed straight to the color TV. Squatting with his nose only inches from the screen, his fingers practically attacked the television's electronic controls until he found HBO. Jim mumbled something about not having had access to a television for over six months. Once a cops and robbers film was blaring from the console, Scotty roughly ordered Jim to fetch ice from the machine in the parking lot while he laid out five plastic cups next to the two quarts of Cisco Berry fortified wine that he had unsheathed from the brown paper bag wrapping they are normally obliged to maintain when out on the street. For the first time, Philippe and I found ourselves gulping down the bright red wine that could better be described as an alcoholized cough syrup. Repressing my gagging memories of being forced to drink similar tasting medicines as a child, I announced with false cheer, "Hey guys, I'm in trouble. I'm starting to like Cisco." I noticed Philippe wince at the lameness of my white lie, but I made a point of ignoring him. I kept my mouth shut, however, when Scotty poured me my second full cup of the stuff. I was careful to drink it more slowly this time, smiling knowingly at Philippe who, just finishing his first cup of Cisco, had to suffer politely as Scotty poured him an equally generous refill.

Sometime during this second round of syrupy wine, I noticed Scotty was having trouble finding a vein for the syringe full of heroin he had just prepared. He jammed the needle its full length through the scar tissue running along his inner elbow, but despite poking agitatedly through the muscle tissue, he was unable to locate a functional vein. I found myself springing out of my seat to wrap my hands around his biceps and constrict his blood flow, forcing his veins to surface more accessibly. Philippe wrenched me out of my over eagerness to be so helpful, snarling something to the effect of, "You don't need to be doing that for him." He even charged me with "being like one of those upper-middle-class whites who insist on wiping the ass of the poor." Scotty escaped our flare-up by retreating to the bathroom to shoot up in privacy. I was no longer furious at Philippe, however, because I recognized his emotions in the care, and even anxiety, with which he had been holding out our tape recorder to catch Scotty's words. He may have thought he was an anthropologist shielding himself behind a tape recorder and a long-term ethnographic research project, but it was clear to

me that he was also a human being despairing over the conditions of his dope fiend friends.

My way of coping that night was merely different. I was embracing each one of the addicts' most immediate problems and insisting on solving them on the spot. I guess that is why I ran to Pete's side the next time he pulled out the money pouch he kept strapped around his hips, to help him count a pile of \$100 bills he was frantically shuffling through. All night, at least every half hour, Pete had opened his pants compulsively to check the contents of this money pouch. Sometimes he would complicate the procedure by ripping off his left, new basketball high-top and clean white sock to retransfer one of the half grams of heroin he kept between his toes into his money pouch, or vice versa.

To my dismay, instead of calming him my counting made Pete even more agitated. This time Philippe physically pulled me back and, pinching my arm, quietly hissed, "Chill! Chill! Chill!" Simultaneously I heard Pete say he was missing \$6,000. For once I appreciated Philippe's censure. I, too, realized that Pete was capable of hallucinating that I might have taken his money. By now, he was prancing around the room searching everywhere, especially, it seemed to me, under the mattress where I had been sitting. Several times in the next 45 minutes I stood up and stretched, hoping Pete would notice there were no suspicious bulges in any of my pockets. I noticed Philippe had become silent, slumping in his chair; Jim had focused even more attentively on the television; and Scotty had rushed to Pete's side to begin running through a list of suspects. By the time Philippe and I had made silent eye contact confirming our mutual desire to leave as soon as it was politely possible, they had concluded that the thief had to be Leo, who, despite helping massage Scotty through his seizure, was the most private and least sharing of the men living at the camp.

Thanking everyone too profusely and mumbling weak apologies about having to work early the next morning, Philippe and I finally left the room and hurried to our car. We were only partially confident that we were no longer suspects. I told Philippe that before Scotty's seizure, I had seen Leo nodding exceptionally heavily on a heroin high. He usually never has the money to buy and inject enough heroin to reach the cherished sleeplike nodding state. By the end of our car ride we realized that Leo was in imminent danger. We both knew Pete would take revenge for his lost money and had already served several years in California prisons for murder. At home we were each so embroiled in silent anxiety that we barely said good night to one another. Walking to my room, I heard Philippe hurry to the bathroom and gag over the toilet. I assumed the ball of Cisco floating on top of the malt liquor that we had been drinking earlier that evening felt as precarious in his stomach as it did in mine.

Over coffee the next morning, we decided not to go down to the camp for a full week, hoping this might prevent us from becoming accomplices to murder. But unfortunately I was beginning to feel the same nausea that Philippe kept complaining about. We checked each other's eyeballs for signs of hepatitis, having been warned by a nurse friend that the fecal matter surrounding the camp could be a vector for Hepatitis A. By the end of the afternoon we both felt better

enough to feel guilty about our hypochondriac terror of the homeless filth of our dope fiend friends. I still had not learned my lesson from the previous week when I diagnosed myself with both tuberculosis and lice after returning from a night spent sleeping in the shooting gallery.

That evening after attending a particularly uneventful anthropology class on ethnographic theory, I could not stop myself from visiting the camp. I was relieved not only to encounter Leo alive and well and desperately heroin-sick (proving that he had not stolen Pete's money after all) but also to find Philippe in the camp. Philippe was finally willing to admit openly his vulnerability and confusion, as he too had not been able to live with our decision to let our dope fiend friends kill one another, and themselves, in privacy.

That night by the campfire I invited Philippe to join me in writing this article, and he jumped at the opportunity to harness his now up-front emotions into a safely academic outlet. Halfway through our composition the next day, however, we both could not help wondering, once again, about the perversity of maneuvering a professional piece out of so much social suffering: Are we bearing witness to social misery, or is this a narcissistic, voyeuristic account of exotic others? More importantly, does our discipline's aversion to conducting fieldwork among the homeless drug addicts and alcoholics who swarm city streets throughout the United States parallel the unconscious collaborations that allowed the trains to run on time to Auschwitz?

Postscript

Upon completing the first draft of this article, Philippe and I went to visit our homeless heroin addict friends—who no longer had their camp—and we were told through Jim's tears that Scotty had died in his sleep two days earlier on February 15, 1995. This was exactly one week after he had the seizure reported in these pages. Ignoring the busy pedestrians walking past us, Philippe and I reminded each other through our own tears how Scotty enjoyed quoting the righteous dope fiend refrain, "Hope to Die a Dope Fiend." He did.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The authors thank the San Francisco Urban Institute and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at San Francisco State University for a mini-grant to initiate this research. More substantial funds were provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). At NIDA, we thank Richard Needle and Susan Coyle of the Community Research Branch. Mike Agar guided us via e-mail all through our ups and downs and provided us with helpful comments on a first draft, as did Gary Goddard, David Hansen, and Jim Quesada. Steve Koester is responsible for the original impetus that led us to spend time in shooting galleries. Above all, we appreciate the boundaries that Charo Chacón-Méndez imposed on us during the frequent occasions when we lost control.