

Review of: "A Philosophical Analysis of the Foundational Suppositions in Harm Reduction Theory and Practice"

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A very interesting read that aims, and to some degree succeeds, at teasing out some of the problematic philosophical underpinnings of harm reduction as a strategy, policy, and movement. This sort of analysis should be most welcome in the harm reduction field, as historically, harm reduction has focused on the pragmatic reduction of drug-related harms, and later the scientific evidence for its merit, rather than any philosophical theorizing about the concept. While I am not qualified to provide a detailed review of the critical hermeneutics approach, a few concerns did emerge for me, particularly as I authored an evolutionary concept analysis of harm reduction (Denis-Lalonde et al., 2019). I am also a health care professional in this field for 2 decades, and a long-time drug user.

On several occasions, the author makes claims about what "harm reduction proponents" believe, often without citations. For example, "when harm reduction is promoted as a 'better' or 'stand-alone' approach, it can do more harm than good." While there is no doubt that there are harm reduction advocates that hold these views, the absence of a source limits the credibility of the statement, and consequently, the argument. I am not aware of any reputable harm reduction organization that suggests that harm reduction is better or should be considered a standalone option for drug use or addiction. Harm reduction is generally presented as an important piece of the continuum of care for people who use drugs. When the author does provide citations for these claims, for example, "many harm reduction proponents conflate drug use and addiction [...] because they tend to have a relativist view of drug use and addiction, influenced by strong social constructionist perspectives (Davies 1997; Dingelstad et al. 1996)", the sources cited are dated, and not representative of current thought in this field. In actuality, as a concept, harm reduction recognizes drug use on a spectrum with risks and harms changing according to type of drug, method of administration, frequency of use, and more recently, local drug policy (which can have the largest impact as it directly affects which drugs are being used by whom, and the associated consequences/harms including drug poisoning deaths, incarceration, and emergency room visits).

Another concern is the author's critique that harm reduction research/literature ignores the perspectives of drug users. "I would argue that drug users often have 'their stories buried under the forces of ignorance and stereotype' of collectivist thinking and political ideology". While historically this may be true, the last two decades have seen a stark change in this area, there are now hundreds of studies exploring harm reduction from the perspectives of program users and people who use drugs. Presenting this as a gap in the literature is not only inaccurate, but further "buries the stories" of drug users which have been actively engaged with research (and in many cases leading it) for some time now. It also ignores that

many researchers are also drug users, and that professional identities are more complex than they appear.

The author correctly notes that the concept of harm reduction appears to have some contradictory aspects, however the discussion is limited in terms of depth. “The incorporation of any political ideology into the harm reduction paradigm contradicts the professed value-free neutrality of harm reduction.” While this statement is true, it ignores the historical roots and consequent evolution of this concept over many decades. Harm reduction has experienced some “mission drift” in terms of its philosophical ideas; this is not an indication of its failings or unreliability but rather its ability to adapt to changing drug policy, the dynamic needs of drug users, and an increasingly toxic illegal drug supply. While harm reduction continues to be value-neutral at the individual drug user level (relabelled as non-judgement), it was long ago recognized that value neutrality at the political/systems level does not bring about any meaningful changes for drug users and their families/communities. As a movement, harm reduction advocates began lobbying for drug policy reform because they recognized that both collectivist and individualist approaches were needed to adequately address drug-related harms. The epistemological pluralism that the author proposes is alive and well, particularly regarding addiction theory and recovery models.

One statement really struck me as critical to this discussion, “the influence of activists who choose harm reduction as a platform to promote their political ideologies will continue to have a deleterious effect”. I completely agree, and while I cannot speak for harm reduction advocates on a larger scale, the idea is to use political power/influence to promote harm reduction (and reduce drug-related harm), not the other way around. “Harm reductionists” (a term I shy away from identifying with due to its narrow-seeming scope) risk losing public and political support for harm reduction if they appear too radical, or deviate too much from their modus operandi of reducing the harms associated with any and all sorts of drug use.

I commend this author for taking the time to thoughtfully investigate and critique some philosophical underpinnings of harm reduction. Readers should bear in mind that harm reduction is a concept that has evolved quite significantly since its official inception over 40 years ago. While this presents challenges to producing thorough academic analyses and lobbying politicians and decision-makers, it is undeniably a strength. Harm reduction has changed because the people who are using drugs have changed, the drugs they use have changed, and the political landscape in which they live has made it increasingly more dangerous to use drugs. This piece introduces some new philosophical perspectives on a few aspects of what harm reduction has been and could become, but it would be erroneous to assume that it is a thorough and complete philosophical exploration of such a dynamic concept.