

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## New Toxics, New Poverty: A Social Understanding of the Freebase Cocaine/Paco in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Included within the field of research on changes in drug use patterns and vulnerability are conditions of emergency related to economic crisis, wars, and political conflict. This study addresses the complex connections between the rapid propagation of freebase cocaine (FBC)—locally known as “pasta base” or “Paco” in Argentina and the normalization of the consequences of Argentina’s 2001–2002 political-economic crisis. On the basis of the results of an ethnographic study carried out in three neighborhoods of the Greater Buenos Aires area between 2001 and 2005, this article aims to analyze how changes in the material and social living conditions are interrelated with the high toxicity of FBC/Paco and engender the emerging compulsion of its consumption and deterioration to the bodies, subjectivities, and social activities of active drug users from these shantytowns. By analyzing the changes in transactions directly or indirectly involving drugs—specifically those ranging from cocaine to FBC/Paco—we can argue how structural poverty, “new poverty,” is not only associated with the expansion of FBC/Paco but is also shaped by its use, modes of consumption, associated health problems, and sufferings.

**Keywords** drugs, new poverty, transactions, health

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence and rapid expansion of FBC/Paco consumption in marginalized neighborhoods in Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area quickly changed the patterns and the scenes of drug consumption before, during, and after the political-economic crisis, which took place in Argentina in 2001–2002 (Epele, 2007; Miguez, 2007; Touzé, 2006). In the neighborhoods first, and later in the media, a substance locally called *Paco* and/or “pasta base” came on scene as a “new drug,” and was dubbed “the drug of the poor.” Adding to the alarm over FBC/Paco

users’ bodily deterioration, the “compulsive” rhythm of consumption and high exposure to threats to their survival changed the relation between drugs and Argentine society in general (SEDRONAR, 2007). This new drug promoted the development of both local and regional social organizations and movements, and public debates and changes in the public health agenda for these populations (Giubelino, 2007; Pellegrino, 2007).

The main objective of this article is to examine certain dimensions of the complex relationship between “new poverty” and “new drugs” in Buenos Aires’ metropolitan region. While most ethnographic research on neoliberal marginalization and “new poverty” in Argentina focuses on reciprocity and moral economies (Isla, 2003; Scott, 2005), this article examines the ways in which the FBC/Paco expanded during the economic crisis that also highlights the expansion of commodification in areas of one’s daily life, which used to be regulated by different types of exchanges (Blim, 2000; Taussig, 1980). From this perspective, it can be argued that populations where FBC/Paco expanded rapidly also experienced rapid modifications in their living conditions and both intensified an already ongoing commodification of new areas of everyday life, objects, and bonds in contexts of poverty (Scheper-Hughes, 2001). This analysis is located within recent developments of the Social Sciences, Anthropology, and Public Health. These perspectives have sought to determine modes of producing vulnerability and changing patterns of drug use, in the contexts of social emergency, conflict, everyday violence, as well as economic and political crisis (Aceijas et al., 2006; Agar, 2003; Feldman, 1995).

On the basis of the results from ethnographic research which was carried out in the three neighborhoods of the Buenos Aires’ metropolitan area since 2001, this article endeavors to describe and analyze how changes in structural conditions and local economies interact with the characteristics of FBC/Paco consumption. First, the characteristics of FBC/Paco, its patterns of consumption, as

well as its vulnerability to health consequences are described and analyzed. Second, how the changes in transactions directly or indirectly involving drugs help identify structural poverty shapes and is shaped by different modes of consumption are analyzed. Finally, the characteristics and consequences of intensive FBC/*Paco* use shed light on the fragmentation of social networks in marginalized populations as well as on the political, economic, legal, and institutional fragilities of the mainstream society.

## RESEARCH, SUBJECTS, AND METHODS

This ethnographic study was carried out from 2001 to 2008 in three neighborhoods of the Buen Aires' metropolitan region. In keeping with the ethnographic method, interviews and participant observation were its central axes. Participant observation was conducted in the drug users' gathering places—street corners, dwellings, outdoor spaces, etc., and in homes where some lived with their relatives. Participant observation and interviews were also conducted in local health centers.<sup>1</sup>

Semi structured interviews were conducted with diverse social actors. Among the main categories documented in the interviews were social and economic living conditions, education, nature of the social networks for consumption of FBC/*Paco*, strategies to obtain resources, nature of the exchanges, family composition, drug consumption history, practices for using cocaine paste/*Paco*, consequences of intensive use to their health, threats for survival, and institutional trajectories. At first, 40 subjects, 24 men and 16 women, who were active drug users were interviewed. Ages ranged between 18 and 45 years. Most resources were obtained through diverse strategies combining informal practices (recycling objects, street vending, selling wares at open markets, wiping windshields at traffic lights, etc.), illegal practices (shoplifting, mugging, and minor drug sales) in addition to the occasional, precarious short-term work, or odd jobs, in the formal job market. Second, 20 family members, specifically mothers, wives, and siblings, were interviewed. Members of different social organizations, such as soup kitchens and neighborhood leaders among others, were also interviewed. Finally, health professionals, social workers, doctors, and psychologists were also spoken to.

## CRISIS, DRUG USE, AND COMMODIFICATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Researching changes in the consumption patterns has become one of the core problems within the field of social studies on drug use (Agar, 2003; Friedman, Rossi, & Braine, 2009; Strang, Des Jarlais, Griffiths, & Gosop, 1992). In addition to the changes linked to the new connections between geographical areas, diverse studies

have shown how drug use patterns in local contexts have been shaped by local consumption histories, the logic of violence, conditions of work and unemployment, health policies, and criminalization strategies regarding drug consumption (Bourgois, 2003; Curtis, 2003; Epele, 2003). Over the last few years, however, some studies on the changes in drug use practices and vulnerability to HIV-AIDS in developing countries have begun to modify their models of analysis, by including processes and events that were previously disregarded as contextual factors (Lurie, Hinzten, & Lowe, 1995; Magis Rodríguez, Marques, & Touzé, 2002).

On the one hand, ordinary processes and extraordinary events, such as the interventions of international organizations regarding health and drugs policies in certain countries and regions, wars, economic and/or political transitions, and the crises in developing countries, have increasingly been incorporated into theoretical and methodological models of documentation and analysis (Epele & Pecheny, 2007; Wodak, 1998). This is the case of the so-called "big events." The term refers to economic transitions, political, conflicts, or wars, which "may increase vulnerability to many social and individual harms, and specifically to HIV epidemics" (Friedman et al., 2009, p. 284). Although it is specifically unknown as to how these events cause a rise in the vulnerability in the short- or long-term, in some cases and in certain countries, certain general trends have been identified in these transformations. According to the studies conducted in Russia, South Africa, and Argentina, these "big events" are connected to changes in the social relationships of gender, patterns of injection, increase in the problem use of drug and alcohol, and changes in the nature and quantity of sex work in vulnerable populations (Friedman et al., 2009).

On the other hand, some research on political conflicts, wars, and even contexts of everyday violence in Anthropology have revised the theoretical-methodological approaches of ethnographies (Feldman, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). Although these analyses do not have a direct relationship with the issue of drugs or public health, they have contributed perspectives that help clarify how these "extraordinary" processes and events fracture the concept of what is "everyday" and "ordinary." Hence, installing a logic of uncertainty and turning the state of emergency into something permanent that corrodes on the epistemological basis—rationality, certainty, factuality, and truth—of shared social reality. Not only does this theoretical-methodological revision supply new power of resolution to document these critical conditions, it has also made it possible to newly examine "peace time" conditions in which routine, everyday oppression, and poverty in marginalized populations question traditional interpretive frameworks.

During Argentina's economic and political crisis and the collapse of 2001–2002, unemployment, poverty, marginalization, and exclusion (already widespread in the late 1990s) not only intensified but also took on new

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qualities and directions (Svampa, 2005; Zeballos, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Although with variations that depended on the geographical areas and neighborhoods, FBC/*Paco* spread rapidly before, during, and after Argentina's economic crisis. In a setting of deepened poverty, the alarm over FBC/*Paco* users' bodily deterioration, the intensive rhythm of consumption, and the high exposure to threats of their survival, social, and health problems in vulnerable populations were changed (SEDRONAR, 2007). Even though the living conditions improved during the period of economic recovery which followed the collapse, the complex relationship between this "new poverty" and the new substance kept a general trend until today.

Most socio-anthropological studies on poverty, "new poverty,"<sup>3</sup> the consequences of current crises on vulnerable populations, as well as social and collective actions (social and political movements, clientelism, and social networks) emphasize the logic of reciprocity, moral economies, and social capital carried out by these social groups (Auyero, 2001; Scott, 2005; Svampa & Pereyra, 2003). Taking into account these analytical processes, the main argument of this article is to identify how the expansion of FBC/*Paco* during the economic crisis highlights the expansion of commodification in areas of one's daily life, which used to be regulated by different types of exchanges (Blim, 2000; Scheper-Hughes, 2001; Taussig, 1980). Moreover, this intensification of an already ongoing commodification of new areas in one's everyday life, of objects, and bonds in drug-using social networks in poor populations does not only deepen the existing poverty and marginalization but also increases conflicts, violence, health risks, and dangers to survival.

Due to its low price and simple selling formula (one peso = one base) and the dominant intensive pattern of its consumption, this "new drug" not only facilitated the quantification of objects, services, and bonds in terms of pesos but also in terms of "bases" (i.e., doses of PB/*Paco*). Argentina's 2001–2002 political-economic crisis deeply affected the flow of cash as well as the circulation of objects while both experienced rapid fluctuations. Exchanges involving drugs both directly and indirectly were shaped by the price of FBC/*Paco* and by the increasing number of objects being included in the transactions. Problematizing these changes in transactions and relationships in terms of commodification implies considering to analyze drug consumption within the contexts of poverty. For example, in terms of neoliberal economy

coordinates, "doing business" in social spaces was previously regulated by different types of exchanges, transactions, and social bonds (Harvey, 2005). This vicious circle between changing transactions during the crisis and cheap, very toxic drugs deepened the health vulnerability, bodily deterioration, social fragmentation, and dangers to survival.

## THE SPREAD OF FBC/PACO: SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND VULNERABILITY TO HEALTH

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Argentine drug consumption scene among marginalized populations was dominated by cocaine and psychotropic drugs, and to a lesser extent by morphine, ketamine, LSD, and other drugs (Kornblit, 2004; SEDRONAR, 2007). Rumors about a new drug<sup>4</sup> began to spread barely a few months after the economic and political collapse of 2001–2002, when the fieldwork was carried out in a neighborhood of the Greater Buenos Aires. During this time, some neighborhoods became organized in order to keep it out, yet failed. Other neighborhoods were just "invaded" by the FBC/*Paco*. According to residents, dissemination was further facilitated by changes in the access to cocaine "for the poor" and marijuana, in addition to its initial selling price.

The early designation of FBC/*Paco* as the drug "of the poor" meant that it was "for the poor," as the initial price of one peso equaling a dosage seemed much cheaper than what cocaine was sold for at the time (between 7 and 10 pesos). In one of the neighborhoods where I conducted my fieldwork, the FBC/*Paco* arrived in the late 1990s, when the declining quality of cocaine and a lack of resources had already transformed drug use patterns (Miguez, 2007; Touzé, 2006).

During a period of social and sanitary emergency, the FBC/*Paco* problem was known through rumors and word-of-mouth. Only after some failed attempts at banning the sale of this "new drug" in certain neighborhoods, as well as its exposure in the media (since 2003), the *Paco* issue was included on the public policy agendas. One of the

<sup>4</sup>A rapid growth in the consumption of FBC seems to have converged in the Buenos Aires province, in particular in the Greater Buenos Aires area. The first province-wide survey of homes on the use of addictive substances (*Primer Estudio Provincial en Hogares sobre Uso de Sustancias Adictivas*), conducted by the Provincial Ministry of Social Development's Addiction Secretariat (SADA) in 2002, found that a 1.2% lifetime prevalence rate for cocaine paste consumption in the population for people aged 15–24 years who resided in the Buenos Aires province. Meanwhile, a later SADA study (2004) among the youth's aged 16–26 years from the Greater Buenos Aires' area pointed out to a lifetime prevalence of 3.5%. In both the studies, the prevalence for the last 12 months was 1% and 1.4% respectively. In addition, a study of FBC/*Paco* consumption in a shantytown of the Greater Buenos Aires (Miguez, 2007) indicated a 13.2% lifetime prevalence and a 12.2% annual prevalence. FBC was cited as the foremost illegal drug consumed by 47.2% users, beating marijuana which used by 35.9%. The profile of cocaine paste consumers in this critical locale indicated that 38% consumed more than once a day, and 29% said to have consumed over 50 cocaine paste doses in one day. Accidents as a consequence of smoking *Paco* befell on 32.9% of the consumers, and 60.3% had participated at one time in a crime in order to purchase drugs.

<sup>2</sup>The rapid expansion of cocaine consumption in the Greater Buenos Aires' most vulnerable populations was contemporary with the spread and strengthening of the effects of political and economic reform which began in the late 1980s—unemployment, rise in poverty, growing inequality, and social exclusion; territorial fragmentation; the deterioration of the public health system; etc., as well as with the creation of new strategies of criminalization/rehabilitation of drug consumption.

<sup>3</sup>Even considering the variations in academic traditions (marginality, poverty, and underclass), new poverty is a general category that refers to the impoverishment of middle and working classes and the modifications of the living conditions of the existing poor populations, (Fassin, 1996; Kessler, 2002; Wacquant, 1999).

first and foremost problems consisted of determining the composition of the substance, or vague set of substances, included in the category of FBC and/or *Paco*. There were different positions in the neighborhoods, specifically among drug users. While some called this new substance “pasta base,” others referred to it as *Paco*; yet, others spoke indistinctly of the *Paco*, “base” or “pasta base.” Some said it was not a new drug, but that the FBC or *Paco* had been around for years—only that since this version was being cut with highly toxic substances, it was of a lower quality. For others, the FBC was the version of years ago, while *Paco* was a new substance: residue left over from the production of cocaine hydrochloride. Yet, others thought that *Paco* was in fact FBC that had been significantly adulterated with mostly toxic and uncertain material. Finally, there were those who believed a combination of several of these statements.

From the beginning, the intense use of FBC/*Paco* was evidenced in marginalized populations in respect of the sudden changes in the users’ bodies, attitudes, and social relationships. According to the social actors, unlike cocaine, the FBC/*Paco* became associated with a swift physical deterioration (weight loss, lacerations, etc.), agitated motions, smoking in plain view of neighborhood residents, as well as their constantly begging for coins, and a growing number of robberies within the boundaries of the neighborhood. Users presented darkened skin, missing teeth, and burns on their lips and fingers from smoking with makeshift pipes made out of soda cans, television antennas, or any type of aluminum tube. There were also other characteristics and consequences of the intense use of FBC/*Paco*, which were described by users themselves in the following terms: feeling that it “burned” deep inside the mouth, esophagus, and lungs; the sensation that smoking “sucks all the water out of you,” “consuming you,” a quick loss of respiratory and lung capacity; stomach pain and poor appetite; painful spasms in the face, joints, and limbs; accelerated heartbeat; feelings of overexcitement, despair or—quite the opposite—of being suspended; “twisting and turning” or “slumped in a corner”; being extremely sensitive to noise; and having some persecutory hallucinations (Santis et al., 2006, 2007). Due to these experiences, residents from the neighborhood and users began to speak about the FBC/*Paco* as “killing in three months,” or that after a period of consumption, users were like “the living dead” or “zombies.” The spread of those expressions articulated with a conspiracy theory formulated by popular sectors that FBC/*Paco* had been introduced to annihilate poverty-stricken youths (Epele, 2007).

Accounts of experiences with FBC/*Paco* consumption described in these terms were mostly given by young men and women who already had a prior history of consuming other substances, particularly cocaine. Comparisons of cocaine and FBC/*Paco* users were, at times, quantitative; at other times qualitative; and occasionally both. In reference to smoking the FBC/*Paco* as compared with inhaling cocaine, users said: “you can’t stop smoking it,” “you try it once, then you can’t stop,” “it leaves you super

stiff,” “it makes you much more paranoid,” among other expressions. Daniel, a 31-year-old drug user who had consumed cocaine for several years, expressed the effects of *Paco* as follows:

It dries up your body, I go on one of these binges like once a month, and it dries you up, you feel like you dropped 20 kilos, this drug, it makes you lose muscle, like now, see I’m thin, since I don’t eat anything, I just smoke “pasta base” and cigarettes, you can’t breathe, there comes a time when it doesn’t hit you anymore, I guess, from my own experience that’s 40 hits, after 40 it stays steady, after that it isn’t steady anymore but you’re so hooked that it makes you keep smoking anyway.

On occasions, and for users with a long history of consumption, “shooting” (injected cocaine) was comparable to smoking FBC/*Paco* due to its addictive “hook.” Yet, smoking *Paco* is considered more addictive than shooting cocaine, because one does not have to stop, as when one is “coming down” after injecting. Most users with a long history of drug use agreed that the experience of these toxic substances in the body was qualitatively different from any other substance they had ever consumed, given the unique combination of compulsion and deterioration that characterized its consumption. According to experts, the use of FBC/*Paco* has the following effects on the health of intensive users: increased heart rate and high blood pressure, risk of blackouts and seizures, deteriorated cognitive and intellectual skills from prolonged, intense use, and an increase in the probability of injury and death at an early age in street fights and clashes (Damin, 2009; Santis et al., 2006, 2007; Touzé, 2006). The growing consumption among lower–middle and middle classes of the metropolitan region of Buenos Aires showed that although some experiences and characteristics of *Paco* consumption were shared, others—such as the rapid deterioration of users’ bodies and their health—were less marked among middle class users (Santis et al., 2006, 2007; SEDRONAR, 2007).

#### LOCAL ECONOMIES, POVERTY, AND FBC/PACO MODE OF USE

FBC/*Paco*’s initial price of *one peso equals one dose* seemed to clearly establish, in the aforementioned social contexts, some new dynamics in transactions involving drugs. Unlike cocaine, the combination between the per-unit price and the promise (augmented by the rumors) of an intense high facilitated its quick propagation in these neighborhoods among children, teens, youths, and adults. The use of FBC/*Paco* began to reach an age group of children and adolescents who had previously used other substances (i.e., glue, alcohol, and marijuana). As with *crack* in the United States and other countries, its initial low price belied its high cost due to the elevated number of doses that intensive consumption would ultimately induce (Agar, 2003). Intensive users have said that they smoke between 15 and 130 bases a day, depending on the day, resources available, and the patterns of drug use—in other words, the particular characteristics of their “binges” and

when they would come down. Also, access to FBC/*Paco*, the payment of one peso for one “base,” which is as high as 7–10 pesos per base today, concealed a change in the modes of access to drugs.

Both the price and the progressive inclusion of objects in FBC/*Paco* transactions have shaped, and even intensified, certain attributes of the exchanges, which involve drugs both directly and indirectly. The circulation of objects complemented and/or supplemented a changing pace as well as the direction of cash flow, given the changes in job market and legal activities, the distribution of welfare programs, and constant transformations of illegal activity.

According to long-term cocaine users, a great variety of objects could be traded with directly or indirectly for cocaine and other substances in the 1990s. In those days, some dealers would buy items directly, while others would designate middlemen for buying and selling. In other cases, informal transactions were conducted among acquaintances and neighbors, which did not belong to the networks of drug use and/or sale. In addition to the larger stolen items, which necessitated a more complex system to sell off (e.g., automobiles), the range of objects mainly consisted of auto and home audio equipment, cell phones, watches, electrical appliances, computers, and furniture. In other words, this assortment of items included not only stolen goods but also objects from the home—that is, from their own homes, as well as from those of others (relatives, friends, neighbors, etc.). Occasionally, objects that were not usually considered tradable for drugs would get passed around: clothes or medicine, for instance. Even with these fluctuations and variations, most items fell within certain categories, leaving a repertoire of objects and activities clear of all transactions.

In the words of the social actors themselves, cash flow—as well as the items which were in circulation—was deeply affected and underwent rapid fluctuations throughout the 1990s, especially during the 2001–2002 crisis. Different, complex processes modified the logics of reciprocity and traditional trade economies. Besides the flow and availability of cash and items, the main processes affecting how users obtained resources included the following: widespread unemployment (both formal and informal work); the reduction and change in the profitability of the informal economy (street peddling, waste picking, selling at open markets, etc.); the development of patronage policies distributing goods and services; the organization of social and political resistance movements, which included solving the problems of survival; the initial shortage, 2002 generalization and subsequent reduction of social assistance programs; the rise in illegal activities to obtain resources (shoplifting, robbery, selling stolen items, petty drug dealing, etc.); the expansion of religious charity distribution programs (Catholic, Evangelicals, etc.); the development of local swap systems; and the expansion of popular kitchens to fight hunger and malnutrition.

FBC/*Paco* came onto the scene, grew, and modified these complex, changing dynamics for the provision, exchange, and circulation of cash and goods. In other words,

the general equivalence of one peso = one “dose” varied and helped shape processes of circulation and transactions, which involved drugs both directly and indirectly. There was a gradual inclusion of a wider age range of users than that of cocaine—particularly adolescents and children who until then had consumed only glue, alcohol, and marijuana. This situation promoted and routinized a set of transactions that had been previously unfamiliar or completely unknown. First, panhandling became frequent in the neighborhoods associated with the consumption of FBC/*Paco*. Second, an ever-increasing assortment of objects gradually became liable for trading with *Paco*. Unlike what occurred with cocaine, this range of objects included items as diverse and mundane as clothes, pots and pans, tools, furniture, and food, among others. This gradual inclusion of a greater variety of items in direct or indirect transactions around *Paco* was a sign of alarm that this drug was different. Pancho was a 29-year-old drug user, who had been consuming FBC/*Paco* during the last two years. In the words of Pancho:

In moments of desperation I reached that point, like I was hit with something, but I did it all the time, well, it’s a disease. I worked at a delicatessen. So when I got paid, I’d buy myself the best clothes, and come home with a little money left over. I’d come home, and when I ran out of money, I would sell my sneakers and my pants. I lost like crazy. Because what I was left with was junk.

Tell me about your clothes.

There’s this asshole who is straight and doesn’t smoke, and he says okay. You offer him sneakers that are worth 200 pesos for 30 and the guy knows that you’re out of your mind, so instead of giving you 30, he gives you 20. There’s the bottom-feeder, a guy that knows you’re going nuts, so he offers you 10 hits. And you go for it. Now these crooks got a hold of it right away, buying stuff really cheap I mean, that’s how it all began. It’s all business . . . dirty business, and that’s how it works. But now everybody’s into it, anyone will take your stuff. Because at the time you don’t care, but when you come down you go “Damn, I sold this for 10 hits,” and so you hit bottom. It’s real crazy, I lost everything, but I don’t mean just clothes, but TVs, stereos, cars.

These items were either their own property—electronic appliances, furniture, clothes, even sneakers; or that of their families—electronics, furniture, clothes, pots and pans, and groceries such as laundry detergent, canned food, or even uncooked food; and even their neighbors’ property—bicycles, domestic items, clothes, and the like; or were obtained by shoplifting or committing thefts of different magnitudes. These changes in the limits of item sets should not be misinterpreted as something akin to bartering drugs for objects or drugs for services. In the new transactions, not only have a greater number and different types of objects and services been exchanged for drugs, but there was also a progression toward a greater number of goods, in terms of both money and “number of bases,” that is, “doses” of *Paco*. As Pato, a 22-year-old drug user, says, items and activities were valued in terms of the “number of bases”; in other words, how many doses they could trade them for:

What did Paco change?

Everything, I'm always on alert, looking for stuff . . . you walk down the street and find something and say, I can get a hit out of this . . . or I nab one of my sister's T-shirts and that can be worth a few hits. You pretty much already know how many hits you can get for each thing . . . While I'm talking to you, my head is working on where I can scrounge up something, then I see that recorder, that can get me several hits.

This drainage of cash and merchandise through drug users in general—and *Paco* users in particular—was a sign of alarm for inhabitants and family members, a “symptom” of its “addictive” properties, which in turn promoted its compulsive consumption. In any event, the appropriation and diversion of cash, along with an ever-expanding range of items and services (sex work, illegal activities) which were exchanged for drugs, not only modified the modes of circulation already in existence in addition to the value of goods and services but also the logics and morality linked to these exchanges.

If we examine these processes, we can determine the complex ways in which the properties of the substances, consumption patterns, and characteristics of transactions interact to shape actions and practices considered “symptomatic” of the *FBC/Paco* within the contexts of poverty. In other words, given the growing poverty and indigence during the crisis, the changing transactions took on new characteristics while the intensive use of *Paco* adopted this dominant pattern. The changes in the local economies—greater poverty, growth of marginal economies, social programs, and clientelistic policies—modified the repertoire of items available to be traded for drugs, which in turn altered the complex system of transactions and circulation of items, thus altering the local economies. This double process is expressed synthetically in the drug users' experiences and in their apparently contradictory expressions related to hunger and *FBC/Paco*: “Paco doesn't let you eat” or “Paco relieves my hunger.”

Summing up, an increasingly more varied set of items and activities has become directly or indirectly tradable for drugs, broadening the repertoire of goods. With this expansion, a quantifying look defined by the formula “how many bases,” and how much money, gradually extended to different goods and services linked directly or indirectly to survival. These items had already been included in various modes of circulation and transactions within local assistance, patronage, and reciprocity networks.

## CHANGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

I found out that my brother, who is now 27 years old, was doing drugs. I mean his wife at the time would tell me, you know? But I would think: no, she's out of her mind, she's making it up . . . because I couldn't look beyond my own little world, my home, my kids and I thought he was, well . . . fine. He would go to work, he'd come home, I did think he looked thin but I'd say: well, he works nights, he comes home, he helps his wife around the house with the kids, he's not getting enough sleep, he doesn't eat right . . . I would

find these excuses for it, you know? The lack, the weight loss, the lack of appetite. Until one day it all blew up um, . . . he separated from his wife, he kicked her out of the house with the kids, their two girls were little at the time . . . he pressured [ized] her so, she left. He sold everything, all his stuff, he started selling off everything until he was left with nothing; he sold the house, his stuff, everything and he went to live with my dad. So after that one night he comes over and knocks on my door. I open, I was by myself . . . I suddenly open the door and . . . he runs in and hides under my bed, just like that. I swear I was so surprised and I asked: what's going on? I couldn't believe that he actually fit under there. So he said: they're coming after me, they're coming after me, close the door because they're coming to take me away, they're going to take me away. And I kept thinking: what's wrong with him? So anyway, this went on all night, he spent the whole night under my bed. He didn't want me to open the door.

After that they separated and he never went back to her because she never wanted to get back together with him. Then he went through this phase that was so . . . because after that he was in so deep that, because first they get started and it's like they cover it up, right? The family doesn't notice, and it's like they keep going along and they manage, but later when they reach a point when they're, let's say, so addicted . . . it's really impossible, there comes a time when they no longer bathe, um . . . they . . . they lose track of time, they don't eat, they don't take care of themselves.

I: Did he keep going to work?

No, by then, when he lost his job was when he got in so deep. That's when my dad died. My dad died from a heart attack because he attacked him in the middle of a scandal that went on all night one time . . . the neighbors told me that at about three in the morning he turned up and kept banging on the door, and shouted that he was going to beat the shit out of him, and told him to open the door because he wanted to go in and get something or other; and my dad told him that he wasn't going to let him in because every time he showed up he took everything . . . all of my dad's stuff, he had stolen his clothes, he had stolen his shoes and umm, he had taken money.

I: What for? To sell them?

Exactly. Because let's say that the guy who is selling, he doesn't only sell stuff for cash, if you have, if you bring him a pair of sneakers that are new or a brand name, well, he'll give you 3 or 4 bases and take them off your hands, and whoever is using and desperate will make the trade . . . so they're not just selling for cash, but for whatever you've got . . . That's why they make the decision to steal, taking stuff from their house, because anything can make the person money, from . . . a sweatshirt, a jersey, whatever. (Patricia, 28 years old)

Patricia, as many relatives of the *FBC/Paco* users, described the changes in one's everyday life that this “new drug” brought in most shantytowns. These chronicles are repeated once and again with certain variations in the neighborhoods, and they express a new climate tied up with this substance.

Sometimes young people do not steal from their family but from neighbors or they do not steal but embark on illegal activities. Yet on other occasions, they regulate their consumption levels according to what they can acquire through informal activity. Practices associated with *Paco* consumption included: ridding oneself of personal items; stealing from their friends, relatives, and neighbors; and

episodes of agitation, aggression, and counter-aggression at home and in the neighborhood. For instance, swapping groceries or used clothing, even sneakers—one of young people's most valued and distinguishing objects—in exchange for *Paco* recurrently expresses, in local and daily terms, how the boundaries of what is considered tradable for drugs was displaced.

As young people are critically exposed to a number of dangers, some family members, particularly mothers, stop sleeping or going to work, and go out searching for them. Frequent stealing from the neighbors harms and even fractures the already scarce social bonds and networks, promoting changes in the circuits of reciprocity that still exist in the neighborhoods. Within this repertoire were also included a set of states and actions of agitation, aggression, counter-aggression, and frequent self-injury that intensive users perform or suffer with their family, other neighborhood inhabitants, or when in conflict with the police and/or among local gangs.

Certain provisos must be made regarding the dominating role of *Paco* use which questions the version circulating in the neighborhoods, the media, and in the discourse of some experts. First, not everyone uses the FBC/*Paco* intensively. Some have even tried it and did not continue consuming it. Second, users also have an inconsistent relationship with the items, which they directly or indirectly trade for FBC/*Paco*. Some do not steal from relatives, and others define categories—food, milk, diapers, etc.—that they consider off-limits for swapping with *Paco*. Finally, *Paco* use is not exclusive to the lower classes, but also extends throughout the urban lower-middle and middle classes.

Some of the everyday experiences which social actors have named as causing turmoil are the actions of the users in order to get FBC/*Paco*, and of their relatives to stop them: the confinement that the users' relatives force on them so that they cannot leave on a binge; scolding and punishing them for stealing; young users' refusal to be treated or hospitalized; difficulties in accessing treatment; a multiplicity of dangers to the users' survival; and a rise in the number of deaths among them. Affected by rapid social, territorial, and economic changes; being expelled from, or escaping from, these few, fragile ties with the relatives fosters, in turn, a new category of dangers for the users and of despair for their relatives, in particular the mothers.

However, during interviews and conversations with the users and their families, these experiences are not just linked directly to FBC/*Paco*. They were also connected to changes in their lives and in the logics of violence that for the last few decades have been modifying everyday life in these neighborhoods. That is to say, it was due to *Paco* and also, in their words, due to *social* factors. Within this category of social factors, the actors included diverse experiences, practices, and logics of life in the neighborhood: changes in how children are raised; family restructuring and a more central role for women in activities related to making a living and providing care; the chronification of domestic violence; the expansion of marginal and illegal

economies in the neighborhoods; the increase of conflicts among local youth gangs; the rise in the imprisonment of, and violent deaths among, adolescents and youths in the neighborhoods; and police corruption and changes in the strategies of repression. Occupying the center of the narratives and views, changes in the everyday life—and their connection to intensive FBC/*Paco* use—present however, other characteristics in cases of non-intensive consumption, or within other social classes.

For the first time in Argentina's recent history, this group of experiences explained as the direct consequence of *Paco* consumption began to take part in public accusations, demands, and in the social organizations of the users' relatives. In particular, the mothers organized themselves into a regional network in order to provide support in these moments of despair, to seek ways to solve urgent situations and organize claims to the State (Giubelino, 2007, p. 17; Pellegrino, 2007). These claims were covered in the media and were therefore included on the political agendas, radically modifying the historical relationship between drugs and the Argentine society.

## FINAL COMMENTARY

The aim of this article is to highlight the rapid expansion of FBC/*Paco* during the worst moments of Argentina's 2001–2002 political and economic crisis, which transformed the scenes, experiences and health-related consequences of drug consumption in the Greater Buenos Aires's lower-class neighborhoods. The simultaneity of these two processes has promoted not only the deteriorating quality and high degree of toxicity of the drugs in general—and in particular, that of FBC/*Paco*—which is available to these populations, but has also fostered changes in transactions directly or indirectly involving drugs. By analyzing these changes in transactions involving the FBC/*Paco*, specifically commodification, in this study, it has been argued that there is a coproduction between social, economic, and health-related effects associated with intense FBC/*Paco* use.

The extreme characteristics and multiple consequences that the intense use of FBC/*Paco* brings can only be understood if they are considered within the extreme social living conditions wherein it emerged and developed. The entry and spread of *Paco* use in these neighborhoods strengthened and re-oriented the changes in their everyday reference systems during the great crisis, ultimately advancing the claims, accusations, as well as the local and regional organizations to deal with it.

Finally, the examination of the FBC/*Paco* issue in marginalized populations of the Greater Buenos Aires has become an examination of the disarticulation between economic processes and these social groups' social and health-related vulnerability. In other words, the entry, rapid spread, and multiple effects of *Paco* consumption made it possible to recognize, problematize, and shed light on how the toxicity and intoxication of this substance intensify, embody, and are even confused with the effects of macrostructural processes.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Nuevos Tóxicos, Nuevas Pobrezas: Un entendimiento social de la Pasta base de Cocaína/Paco, en Argentina.

Ubicándose en el campo de las investigaciones sobre los cambios en los patrones de uso de drogas y de vulnerabilidad en condiciones de crisis económicas, guerras y conflictos políticos, este trabajo aborda los complejos vínculos entre la rápida propagación de la Pasta base/paco y las normalización de las consecuencias de la crisis económica-política del 2001–2002 en Argentina. Basada en los resultados del estudio etnográfico llevado a cabo en tres barrios del Gran Buenos Aires desde el 2001–2005, el objetivo de este paper es analizar los modos en que las modificaciones en las condiciones materiales y sociales de vida, se anudan con la elevada toxicidad de la PB/paco para dar forma al carácter emergente de la compulsividad de su consumo y al deterioro corporal, subjetivo y vincular de los usuarios/as activos de drogas de poblaciones marginalizadas. A través del análisis de los cambios de las transacciones que involucran directa o indirectamente drogas, específicamente desde la cocaína a la PB/paco, se hace posible argumentar los modos en que la profundización de la pobreza, la denominada “nueva pobreza,” no sólo se asocia a la expansión de la Pb/paco, sino también modula sus modos de consumo, los malestares y problemas de salud asociados.

Palabras Claves: Drogas, Nueva Pobreza, transacciones y salud.

## RESUMEN

### Nouvelles substances toxiques, nouvelles formes de pauvreté: un regard social sur la pâte base de cocaïne (paco) en Argentine

Au coeur des recherches sur l'évolution des modèles de consommation de drogues et de la vulnérabilité des consommateurs en temps de crises économiques, de guerres et autres conflits politiques, notre étude se propose d'aborder les liens complexes entre la rapide propagation de la pâte base cocaïne (*paco*) et la normalisation des conséquences de la crise économique et politique des années 2001–2002 en Argentine. Fondée sur les résultats d'une enquête ethnographique menée dans trois quartiers de la périphérie urabaine de Buenos Aires (*Grand Buenos Aires*) entre 2001 et 2005, cette étude a pour but d'analyser comment la dégradation des conditions de vie associée à la toxicité élevée de la pâte base cocaïne provoquent chez les consommateurs actifs de drogues de ces banlieues marginales une compulsion croissante et la détérioration de leurs capacités physiques, mentales et sociales. Analyser la modification des transactions qui concernent directement ou

indirectement les drogues, particulièrement de la cocaïne au *paco*, permet de démontrer que le développement de la pauvreté—ladite “nouvelle pauvreté”—est non seulement lié à la propagation de la pâte base cocaïne, mais aussi déterminé par ses usages, ses modalités de consommation, ses conséquences sur la santé et autres troubles et affections.

Mots clés: drogues, nouvelle pauvreté, transactions et santé.

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## GLOSSARY

*Commodification*: This term refers to the process by which objects, goods, and other items in everyday life become commodities. In anthropology, there are two principal ways to understand this process: the maussian and the marxist framework. However, some studies articulate both orientations.

*Pasta Base/paco*: Local terms that refer to a diverse set of substances which are included under the expert category freebase cocaine.

*Paco*: Local term that refers to the substances.

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