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Qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

Background and aims This narrative review aims to highlight key insights from qualitative research on drug use and drug users by profiling a selection of classic works. **Methods** Consensus methods were used to identify and select four papers published in 1938, 1969, 1973 and 1984 considered to be classics. **Results** These landmark qualitative studies included the first account of addiction as a social process, demonstrating that people have meaningful responses to drug use that cannot be reduced to their pharmacological effects; the portrayal of inner-city heroin users as exacting, energetic and engaged social agents; identification of the interactive social learning processes involved in becoming a drug user; the application of the 'career' concept to understanding transitions and trajectories of drug use over time; and the articulation of a framework for understanding drug use that incorporates the interaction between pharmacology, psychology and social environments. **Conclusions** These classic sociological and anthropological studies deployed qualitative research methods to show how drug use is shaped by complex sets of factors situated within social contexts, viewing drug users as agents engaged actively in social processes and worlds. Their findings have been used to challenge stereotypes about drug use and drug users, develop a deeper understanding of drug use among hidden, hard-to-research and under-studied populations, and provide the foundations for significant developments in scientific knowledge about the nature of drug use. They continue to retain their relevance, providing important correctives to biomedical and behaviourist paradigms, reminding us that drug use is a social process, and demonstrating how the inductive approach of qualitative research can strengthen the way we understand and respond to drug use and related harms.

Keywords Classics, drug use, harm reduction, inductive, qualitative research, social.

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INTRODUCTION

We have selected works for this review that we consider to be classics of qualitative research in the addictions field. As qualitatively trained female and male researchers of different generations, the works reviewed here were selected as 'classics' because they have had an enduring impact on the field and on our own work. While each has inspired and influenced a substantive body of successive work they have also, albeit in different ways, provided sensitive and compelling accounts of people whose lives are often dismissed by mainstream society.

The works reviewed here provide in-depth analysis of relatively small samples of people who use drugs. They take an iterative approach that permits an in-depth understanding of the practices of particular groups of people who use drugs. While the empirical findings are not intended to be generalizable, the works considered here are either derived from or have contributed to the development of social interactionism, a sociological tradition essential in establishing that drug use and drug dependence are social processes inseparable from the social and political contexts in which they occur. By providing frameworks for understanding drug use situated in real-world environments, they have also helped to inform practical ways to prevent and reduce drug-related harms.

LINDESMITH, A.R. (1938). A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF DRUG ADDICTION. *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY*, 593–613

Dubbed the 'father of the sociology of addiction', Alfred Lindesmith started his career as a graduate student in the University of Chicago's influential Sociology Department.

Using published medical cases combined with data derived from unstructured interviews with heroin users, he developed an account of addiction that centres on the notion that a conscious recognition of the use of opiates to stave off withdrawal is what defines the 'addict'. By comparing examples of conscious opiate use with cases in which people were medically administered opiates without their knowledge, Lindesmith demonstrated that when people experienced discomfort after opiates were withheld, but did not recognize the cause of their discomfort as withdrawal, they did not become addicted. His work showed how the status of 'addict' had to be confirmed through recognition of the discomfort associated with withdrawal as being the consequence of the cessation of opiates. Using empirical and theoretical analysis, he established that addiction was a social process by which the drug user only becomes an 'addict' by reflecting back the cultural stereotype by consciously using opiates to stave off withdrawal.

This finding represented a fundamental challenge to the idea of addiction as the product of individual 'psychopathic' character traits. As Lindesmith noted in 1940, 'It is not the effect of the drug that produces the alleged deterioration of character in the addict but rather the social situations into which he is forced by law and by the public's conception of addiction, which does damage' [1]. His controversial (at the time) findings made him a target for Harry Anslinger and the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN). Indeed, Anslinger and the FBN harassed Lindesmith for three decades, attempting to intimidate him and to suppress his research [2]. Challenging the government policy of the day also served to isolate him from the profession, and until the 1960s Lindesmith was widely ignored and often criticized by the academic community.

Today, almost eight decades after it was published, his paper remains the classic sociological account of addiction [3–5]. The lasting impact of Lindesmith's contribution lies in its demonstration that people have meaningful responses to drug use that cannot be reduced to the pharmacological effects of drugs on the body [6]. While criticized at the time for being an apologist for 'drug addicts', Lindesmith's work also played an important role in establishing drug use as a psychological and social phenomenon in need of treatment, rather than punishment. Since its publication there have been a range of critiques of drug treatment as a form of social control of marginalized people [7,8].

However, Lindesmith's influence in the development of the 'appreciative turn' in drug research which sought to empathize with, and understand the social position of, people who use drugs [9], demonstrates the impact of his work beyond the medicalization of drug addiction, including the work of Howard Becker (reviewed below). Social science scholars have since adopted this 'appreciative' approach in advocating for harm minimization [10].

Lindsmith's notion that drug effects can be produced by social meaning was also foundational to the establishment of contemporary theory about the performativity of drug use. This focus has inspired a diverse literature on cultural narratives about drug use, including in cinema and television, which include analysis of social scripts with real-world implications [11].

PREBLE E, CASEY JJ. (1969). TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS: THE HEROIN USER'S LIFE ON THE STREET. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ADDICTIONS* 4: 1–24

Commonly referred to as the grandfather of drug use ethnography, in 1969 the anthropologists Edward Preble & John Casey published a ground-breaking study which inspired a tradition of immersion in the social and economic worlds of drug users. Based on extensive interviews and observational fieldwork, 'Taking care of business' produced a conceptual shift in how we view heroin users. Most of the literature prior to this study portrayed heroin users as passive, psychologically impaired and physically inert, leading to the assumption that they were marginal to economic and occupational life [12,13]. Bereft of basic values and unable to delay gratification or plan for the future, their income-generating activities were characterized as impulsive, random and pharmacologically driven. In contrast, Preble & Casey [14] painted a compelling ethnographic portrait of exacting, energetic and engaged individuals involved in anything but escapism.

> 'They are actively engaged in meaningful activities and relationships seven days a week. The brief moments of euphoria after each administration of a small amount of heroin constitute a small fraction of their daily life. The rest of the time they are aggressively pursuing a career that is exacting, challenging, adventurous, and rewarding. They are always on the move and must be alert, flexible, and resourceful… the quest for heroin is the quest for a meaningful life, not an escape from life' ([14], pp. 2–3).

Preble & Casey also showed how heroin users in low-income communities typically received support for their income-generating activities in exchange for providing a supply of cheap goods. The notion that heroin use and involvement in the street drug economy permitted marginalized and excluded groups to lead adventurous and rewarding life-styles was, and remains, radical; as is the policy implication that responding to the structural and economic disadvantage that produces heroin use among the urban poor necessitates the development of legitimate opportunities.

> 'The career of a heroin user serves a dual purpose for the slum inhabitant; it enables him to escape, not from purposeful activity, but from the monotony of an existence severely limited by social constraints, and at the same time it provides a way for him to gain revenge on society for the injustices and deprivation he has experienced' ([14], p. 22).

Preble subsequently worked on a novel study of the economics of crime by heroin users, establishing a storefront research methodology which became critical to the success of almost two decades of drug research in New York and elsewhere [15].

This work inspired a wave of research on the economic lives of drug users, including the political economy of selling and using crack [16,17] and fieldwork conducted in New York City and Australia by the first author as part of her PhD and subsequent post-doctoral project [18–20].

BECKER, H.S. (1963). *OUTSIDERS: STUDIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF DEVIANCE*. NEW YORK: THE FREE PRESS

A sociologist at the University of Chicago, Howard Becker spent his early years playing piano and hanging out with jazz musicians, many of whom used marijuana. Drawing on the work of Lindesmith, he used fieldwork and interviews to identify an interactive learning process whereby experienced drug users taught novice users how to interpret the effects and meanings of drugs. Becker also developed the concept of deviance as a construct of social groups [21,22], illustrated by how conventional society labelled 'outsiders', including drug users, jazz musicians and 'delinquents', and how this labelling facilitated the development of subcultural identities with oppositional values, symbols and norms. He also highlighted the role of social and political elites as 'moral entrepreneurs' in influencing and directing the labelling process. The notion of moral entrepreneurs has been highly influential in the development of the concept of moral panics, which remains a popular framework for assessing media representations and policy exchanges about drug use [23,24].

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Outsiders* explore the role of social interactions in learning to use and enjoy the effects of marijuana and how mechanisms of control serve to both constrain use and label users as deviants. Becker insisted that motivations for drug use did not precede the deviant act but, rather, followed it. He argued that you first had to learn how to get high. As part of a three-stage interactive process, Becker proposed that: 'An individual will be able to use marihuana for pleasure only when he (1) learns to smoke it in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learns to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use; and (3) learns to enjoy the sensations he perceives' ([25], p. 235). This theory challenged predictive theories of marijuana use which ascribed behaviour to antecedent predispositions and his critique of drug use as private, compulsive and a symptom of individual pathology remains relevant today.

> 'In comparing this theory with those which ascribe marihuana use to motives or predispositions rooted deep in individual behavior, the evidence makes it clear that marihuana use for pleasure can occur only when the process described above is undergone and cannot occur without it. This is apparently so without reference to the nature of the individual's personality makeup or psychic problems ([25], p. 242).

The notion that users have to learn to get high, and that these highs were neither fixed nor inevitable effects of the drug, was confirmed by subsequent researchers, including Zinberg (reviewed below). Combining these insights with the concept of a drug use career, Becker's work examined transitions in drug use and addiction trajectories over time, inspiring a generation of researchers who employed this framework [26–28]. However, it would not be until 1981, with the publication of Marsha Rosenbaum's *Women on Heroin* [29], that this career concept would finally be applied to women drug users.

One of the most prolific living sociologists, Becker's early work remains as relevant today as it was five decades ago. Indeed, he flagged the potential for rational cannabis policy, reflected in increasing contemporary tolerance for, and legal regulation of, marijuana as both a medicinal and recreational drug. *Outsiders* also represented the first use of the term 'users', as opposed to 'abusers' or 'addicts'. In an interview with the *New Yorker* in 2015, Becker insisted that that his major accomplishment in *Outsiders* was to eliminate a single syllable: 'Instead of talking about drug abuse, I talked about drug *use*' [30]. This influence is evident today in the recent adoption of person-centred terminology, which avoids pejorative descriptors such as 'drug addict' and 'drug abuser' in favour of 'people who use drugs'. Becker's work has also had a significant impact on contemporary theory, especially as it relates to moral panics and more recent work on the governance of people who use drugs and the relationship between drug policy and drug-taking practices [31].

ZINBERG, N. (1984). *DRUG, SET, AND SETTING: THE BASIS FOR CONTROLLED INTOXICANT USE*. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

While we now know that there is no such thing as an 'addict personality', this was not always the case. Norman Zinberg's 1986 book *Drug, Set and Setting* was inspired by two decades of professional exposure to physicians who

were reluctant to prescribe opiates to patients in pain, including those who were dying, for fear that they would become dependent. Zinberg's research led him to identify the way in which much of this reluctance was fuelled by misconceptions about opiates, and his observation that doctors' attitudes to drugs shaped the effects of these substances on their patients.

Drug, Set and Setting draws upon qualitative interview data and case studies of what Zinberg termed 'controlled users' of marijuana (or cannabis), psychedelics and opiates. Starting with Becker's notion of drug use as learned behaviour, his analysis showed how some people used informal control mechanisms in order to regulate, rather than become dependent upon, these substances. Based on these findings, he developed a framework for understanding drug use that represented an important development in cross-disciplinary thinking.

> 'It is necessary to understand in every case how the specific characteristics of the drug and the personality of the user interact and are modified by the social setting and its controls' ([32], p. 15).

Zinberg's framework provided for a nuanced explanation of drug use that was dependent neither upon pharmacology nor pathology but, rather, framed experiences of drug use as the product of a complex interaction between drug, set and setting. Rather than binding analyses of drug use to an investigation of pharmacology (Zinberg's 'drug'), the user's psychology ('set') or their social context ('setting'), Zinberg provided a new framework that accounted for all these factors (Moore 1993) [33]. His influence is apparent in the work of scholars who have used this framework to examine how drugs, sets and settings shape specific drug use experiences and, in particular, research with functional users of ecstasy [34–36], cannabis [37–39], opiates [40,41] and methamphetamines [42]. His finding that controlled drug use, including heroin use, was possible not only challenged stereotypes of drug use and users as out of control and at the mercy of their addictions, but provided an empirical basis for harm reduction by documenting that the harms associated with drug use were neither inevitable nor irreversible.

Drug, Set and Setting has also exerted a powerful influence on qualitative research in the addictions [43]. During the 1990s qualitative and ethnographic studies began to examine the role of the environment in shaping drug-related risks. In particular, research showing how intensive policing exacerbated the injecting risk environment in street drug markets [44–47] demonstrated the public health costs associated with negative interactions between drugs, sets and settings. In 2002 Tim Rhodes drew upon this emerging body of qualitative work to posit a 'risk environment' framework which outlined four types of environmental factors—physical, social, economic and policy—and how their interplay at the micro, individual and everyday level and the macro, structural level determines the production of drug-related harms [48]. Zinberg's acknowledgement that that the biological, psychological and social factors all impact drug effects also provided a precursor to contemporary theoretical accounts of the constitutive nature of the relationship between the material and social elements of drug use assemblages [49].

CONCLUSIONS

While qualitative research has advantages in terms of gaining access to and information from hidden populations, the time-consuming and typically costly nature of these endeavours meant that they were rarely regarded as a good investment proposition. As we have seen, even classic studies were conducted by graduate students.

Despite hesitation to embrace the scientific potential of qualitative methods in drug research, the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s provided a powerful incentive to adopt and adapt qualitative, particularly ethnographic, research methods to inform public health responses. For example, qualitative research made a significant contribution to understanding how and why injection drug use can facilitate the transmission of blood-borne viruses. Detailed studies of injecting communities shattered the myth of needle 'sharing' as a pathological bonding ritual, replacing it with the complex reality of a rational coping mechanism conditioned by legal and economic impediments to obtaining clean equipment and the social imperatives of street drug scenes [45,50,51].

Despite a demonstrated track record in the age of AIDS, many researchers in the addictions field still maintain that qualitative methods represent a soft option, producing anecdotal information of uncertain relevance to 'real' science [52]. In particular, qualitative accounts continue to be devalued as subjective and unscientific and, where they are critical of power, as 'politically-motivated' and 'negative' [53]. However, as the classic studies reviewed here indicate, qualitative research on drug use can provide powerful correctives to biomedical and behaviourist paradigms. Immersion in the social worlds of substance use can yield crucial insights into understanding the dynamics of drug use and risk behaviour and the settings in which they occur, identifying opportunities for intervention and informing the development of effective public health responses.

Many classic studies have emerged out of the interactionist traditions of sociology, contributing to the notion that drug use is a social practice that is embedded in and inseparable from the social conditions in which people use drugs. Contemporary qualitative research draws upon the notion of drug use as a social practice established by the studies reviewed here in order to investigate the

diversity of drug consumption, including the political economy, structural violence, governmentality, performativity and materiality of drug use [11,16,30,48]. From Lindesmith to Zinberg, the classics reviewed here demonstrate the enduring legacy of qualitative methods and illustrate their value as part of the research toolkit for detecting, understanding and preventing drug-related problems.

Declaration of interests

None.

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