

COMMENTARY

Beyond deviance and disease: Drug users as subjects at the Institute for Scientific Analysis†

Craig Reinarman

Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA

A distinctive genre of research on drug use developed at the Institute for Scientific Analysis (ISA) in San Francisco beginning in the early 1970s and continuing into the present. This article first provides a brief history of the Institute in order to situate its drug research in historical, institutional and biographical context. Second, it sketches an ideal type of the style of research generally used by ISA scientists to explore drug use, abuse, addiction, sales, treatment and policy. Four core elements characterize ISA's approach to research on drug use: Symbolic Interactionism as a theoretical framework, which attends to the subjective and adopts an appreciative rather than a correctional standpoint; inductive or Grounded Theory as an analytic strategy of discovery and hypothesis generation; qualitative methods such as ethnography and depth interviewing, which afford thick description of the people and worlds being studied and Labeling Theory, which sensitized ISA researchers to the possible effects of criminalizing and pathologizing discourse.

INTRODUCTION

It is my belief that any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients – develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject.

Goffman (1961, pp. ix–x)

The purpose of this essay is to sketch the history and intellectual foundations of the Institute for Scientific Analysis (ISA) so that its distinctive approach to drug

research can come into focus. The 'new institutionalism' in American sociology directs its attention to the mezzo-level of analysis, to the organizations in between social structure and social psychology, whose features influence the cognition and behaviour of the actors who inhabit them (e.g. Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). By these lights, one needs to understand a bit about the ISA as an organization in order to make sense of the types of social scientists it has attracted and the genre of drug research they typically produce there.

Dr Dorothy Lonewolf Miller founded the Institute in San Francisco in 1968, a propitious place and time as it turned out. She was doing research on the de-institutionalization of mental patients for what was then called the California Department of Hygiene and was deeply frustrated by the limitations placed on her research. With one assistant in a rented room, a card table and a borrowed manual typewriter, she set up shop and began writing research proposals and journal articles.

Dr Miller was an unusual character. She stood five foot two inches, weighed well over 200 pounds, not counting her abundant Navajo turquoise jewellery. She drank like a fish, swore like a sailor and often sat with her feet up on her classic roll-top desk spinning social theory and smoking cigars. Her doctors told her that if she did not change her behaviour she would be dead before the age of 50, a warning she took some pleasure in recounting to me when she was in her late 70s. Dr Miller was an exceptionally perspicacious social scientist who was awarded major research grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, the National Institute of Education, the Office of Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute of Justice and other federal, state and local funding agencies.

Correspondence: Craig Reinarman, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA. Tel: (831) 459-2617. Fax: (831) 459-3518. E-mail: craigr@ucsc.edu

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Dr Miller and most people who came to work at the Institute shared a deep concern with social justice. All had chosen to do research on pressing social problems in the hope, it now seems naively utopian to say, of solving them. In retrospect, the late 1960s was the golden age of social research, when the Kennedy and Johnson administrations set up the War on Poverty (the War on Drugs had not yet been declared) and other major policy initiatives that made available more funding for research on social problems than ever before or since in American history. A little more than a decade later, this golden age came to an end when the Reagan administration made it policy to *de-fund* research on the social causes of public problems. But ISA researchers have maintained much of ISA's original spirit and still managed to keep the doors open by continuing to win grants for cutting-edge research.

The ISA logo is a circle formed by differently coloured arrows converging on a single point to signify a multicultural gaze on social problems, although in 1968 no one used the word 'multicultural' yet. The colours of the arrows symbolized a convergence of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and whites. The Institute's definition of diversity extended beyond ethnicity to include people from all regions of US, as well as a few self-described 'convicts', 'dope fiends', 'cowboys' and various other working-class oddballs who worked alongside the geekier variety of oddballs, who were professors and PhD candidates.

This logo was not only emblematic of the Institute's political and philosophical identity; it also symbolized ISA's basic epistemology, a blend of Mead, Mannheim and Mills seasoned with a pinch of Marx. Although never articulated in a mission statement, this epistemological stance can be summarized this way: One cannot assume there is 'objective' knowledge that exists outside the observer ready to be apprehended in the same way by everyone; there is no Olympian standpoint from which the scientist can see everything clearly. Rather, all knowledge is context-dependent, produced by socially situated actors who bring to their observations their own lived experiences and material interests, and who look out at the world through the lenses provided by their culture at their specific moment in history (see, e.g. Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1973).

This epistemological stance later came to be known as standpoint theory and taken as axiomatic in post-modern and poststructural theory. At ISA, however, it did not stem so much from theory as from an intellectual commitment to pay attention to the points of view of the voiceless 'others' who, more often than not, are the folks the social scientists are funded to study. This commitment meant that there were always enough people around the table who lived with one foot in the worlds of the street and who could therefore tell the others, for example, when an interview question would be 'lame' or insulting to someone from those worlds.

Just as important, ISA also had at enough people around the table who were wise enough to value that street knowledge. When this hybrid mix of people worked well, the result was more scientifically valid instruments, richer data and a deeper understanding of the lived experience of people in trouble.

ISA as an organization, then, was born of a curious conjuncture: a charismatic leader who attracted a menagerie of mostly like-minded souls, who drew upon both the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s and the older bohemian 'culture of civility' around deviance for which San Francisco has always been justly famous (Becker, 1971), and who came to share an affinity for certain theoretical and methodological traditions and to create a space for ISA at the intersection of their networks.

This made the Institute a fascinating place to cut one's teeth in drug research. As a very green 23-year-old research assistant in 1971, I had a degree in economics and knew almost nothing. I got the job because I was game and I was cheap – I worked without pay as part of my alternative service as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. Like many of my cohorts who came of age in the tumult of the 1960s, I hoped to find a way to make a living that might make a difference in the world, and ISA seemed to exemplify 'engaged' scholarship. I was assigned a desk in the attic, but I could not fit my feet under it because the space was crammed with boxes. When I moved them out of the way, I noticed they were filled with canned food. The next morning they were gone. I learned they had been stashed there only until they could be shipped out through the fog in the dead of night to a band of Native American protesters who had taken over the sacred Indian land in the middle of the Bay known as Alcatraz. That no one at this serious social science research institute seemed to think such subversive supply storage, the least bit unusual was a clue about the nature of the place, although I did not fully understand this until later.

Dr Miller and many ISA researchers were fans of C. Wright Mills and believed with him that it was entirely appropriate for one's values to inform the choice of what issues to investigate, but that these values should never affect the scientific *craft* of collecting and analysing the data (Mills, 2000). This helps to explain how, despite their politics and their unorthodox approach to sociological research, ISA investigators won such a wide range of research grants: studies of suicide, the effects of warehousing the mentally ill, the impact of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a longitudinal follow-up of foster care placements, the effectiveness of California Youth Authority Parole in reducing delinquency and many others.

A CERTAIN STYLE OF DRUG RESEARCH

Research on drug issues was a recurrent theme in the work of the Institute, including studies of types of

alcoholics; careers of opiate addicts; women heroin addicts (a first); a morphine maintenance clinic from the 1920s; the effectiveness of methadone treatment for opiate addiction; MDMA or Ecstasy users (also the first); pregnant women who used illicit drugs; career trajectories of women cocaine users; methamphetamine use patterns; injection drug use among gay male sex workers and HIV/AIDS; the operation of early needle exchange programs; the effects of criminal justice pressures on cocaine sellers; the relationship between crack sales, gangs, and violence (see Joe-Laidler & Hunt, this issue); practices of Ecstasy sellers and an ethnographic, depth-interview study of drug use in Hong Kong night clubs.

From these and other studies emerged a set of research practices shared by most of the social scientists that have worked at ISA. More by accretion than by conscious design, these research practices came to constitute a particular genre of drug research that continues into the present, as will be evident in the papers that follow. Looking across the years, with different principal investigators coming and going with different grants, scaling up or down in size and moving offices, there was a good bit of variation at ISA as well as its fair share of conflict. (I note this to be true to ISA's basic values and because in any given week or year, its genre of drug research may not have seemed as clear or coherent as the following retrospective ideal-type will make it sound.) Still, ISA's approach to research on drug issues generally includes four core elements.

Symbolic interactionism as theoretical framework

Dorothy Miller was a student of Professor Manford H. Kuhn at the State University of Iowa. Kuhn was a major proponent of one form of symbolic interaction theory. Later, in graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Social Welfare, she was drawn to the work of Herbert Blumer, the Chicago School interactionist, who helped define this tradition and build the Sociology Department at Berkeley. In contrast to the functionalist tradition derived from Durkheim and the conflict theory tradition derived from Marx, interactionism puts the lived experience of sentient subjects at the front and centre as the authors of social action and creators of social organization (which also gave ISA researchers an affinity for constructionist approaches to social problems).

As Wellman (1988) has pointed out, there is a deeply democratic politics implicit in symbolic interactionism. It requires an appreciative stance towards the subjects under study and the meanings they create to make sense of the world in which they move. In this view, human beings are seen as interpretive creatures. They do not merely react according to instinct; they read and resist and even theorize about the circumstances they confront. And because the actors' understandings inform their behavior, these understandings must be part of any truly empirical sociological research.

To do less is to truncate, and thus impoverish the analysis. It should also be noted that this theoretical framework is tacitly subversive of status hierarchies insofar as it conceptually empowers subjects with their own forms of expertise, knowledge to which ISA researchers have always paid attention. The Sales and Murphy article in this volume, for example, describes strategies for engendering trust and candour from stigmatized respondents, such as drug dealers. Sales and Murphy demonstrate that by treating such respondents as experts about their own lives and careers – however deviant by conventional standards – they gain access to forms of knowledge that would be otherwise unavailable.

Grounded Theory as analytic strategy

With symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, it is a short hop to the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Anselm Strauss was a well-known professor of sociology at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, which was just across Golden Gate Park from ISA. Strauss and his colleagues trained many of the key ISA researchers in medical sociology, including Patrick Biernacki, Marsha Rosenbaum and Sheigla Murphy (Bieracki, 1986; Murphy and Rosenbaum, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1981). Grounded Theory is essentially a strategy for discovering or generating theory through analytic induction – the first observation and interview leading to next, depending on what emerged; sampling according to what one needed to know next in order to see the contours and workings of the social world under investigation; constantly comparing observations so as to test hunches that become hypotheses that in turn become theory. Like the Chicago School symbolic interactionism from which it was derived, Grounded Theory valorizes the phenomenology or lived experience of the actors being observed or interviewed. The Joe-Laidler and Hunt article in this volume, for example, shows how a line of research that began with questions about drugs and gangs led them to a new understanding of gang membership in which the role of parenthood emerged as more central, and drugs less central, than they had thought when they began their research.

Qualitative methods

Of a piece with both symbolic interactionism and Grounded Theory, obviously, are qualitative methods. Funding agencies tend to privilege quantitative methods, as do most top journals. A recent article in the *International Journal on Drug Policy* (Rhodes, Stimson, Moore, & Bourgois, 2010), for example, confirms what many of us have long suspected: an inverse relationship between the impact factor scores of journals in the drug field and the percentage of published articles using qualitative methods. Nonetheless, ISA investigators have successfully made the case that before one can measure the

prevalence of a phenomenon in a population sample, one must first find out *what it is*, which requires learning what the social actors who are producing it think they are up to. In proposal after proposal for over 40 years, ISA investigators have argued that their more qualitative and exploratory methods are essential for basic descriptive adequacy.

ISA is the sort of research shop that champions participant observation, ethnography, and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). ISA researchers typically conduct in-depth, open-ended, life-history interviews even when a structured survey questionnaire is the principle means of data collection. As Dan Waldorf told us more than once, 'Go out and talk to the folks. Get them to teach you about their world'. Like Dorothy Miller and most of the other core staff, he stressed the centrality of meaning as understood by actors themselves in order for us to understand the exigencies they faced and how they responded. This was the methodological axiom whether we were studying upper-middle-class, suburban, Mercedes-driving cocaine sellers, the most run-down, toothless, dime-bag street dealers or the tattoo-covered *vato locos* in the Mission District who dressed in prison garb, smoked PCP and painted guerrilla murals.

Labeling Theory

With symbolic interaction as a theoretical framework, Grounded Theory as an analytic strategy and qualitative methods looming large in one's tool kit, it is only another short hop to Labeling Theory, which informed most of the studies done at ISA. The beginning premise of Labeling Theory is that deviance does not inhere in the actor's behavior *per se*, but must be *defined* as deviant by someone with the power to do so (Becker, 1963). The stigma of an official label then tends to both close off legitimate options and cement deviant identities.

Dr Miller was attuned to these unintended consequences of labelling someone deviant, in part, because she had seen first hand as a young girl in the Midwest how such labels suffocated Native American children in reservation schools that defined them as lacking intelligence. Later, as a researcher she saw how psychiatric diagnoses often had a self-fulfilling quality that deepened the alienation of the patient, and thus lead to behaviours that confirmed the diagnoses. She was fond of quoting Erving Goffman's famous essay in *Asylums*, 'The Moral Career of the Mental Patient,' an ethnographic account of how the well-intentioned conferring between psychiatrist and the patient's family often appears to the patient as an 'alienative coalition' which places him or her in a 'betrayal funnel' that ends in 'traitorous desertion' and institutionalization (Goffman, 1961, pp. 137–140). All of this in turn amplifies the patient's original anxiety. Miller's acute sensitivity about such things drew her to the work of sociologist Lemert (1967) of the University of

California, Davis, who was one of the originators of what came to be known as Labeling Theory and who served as an original member of the ISA Board of Directors.

In keeping with the politics of the 1960s and the working-class solidarity for which San Francisco is famous, ISA's instinctive organizational perspective was bottom-up. The official viewpoints of agencies of social control were not presumptively privileged, but were rather understood as part of the situation to which drug users and various other 'deviants' were reacting. In the organizational culture of ISA, one's most basic job as a social scientist was to understand why people did the things they did, and to do that one was obliged to try to understand (*verstehen* was Weber's term) their worldview (*weltanschauung*). When you as the researcher, succeed in getting a glimpse of a deviant world, you become privy to at least some of the lived experience or the phenomenological forms of social structure and state power as these impinge on the everyday lives of the powerless. ISA researchers working in this tradition have been consistently mindful of the unintended, often self-fulfilling consequences of stigma – whether on addicts, alcoholics, delinquents or mental patients – which amplify deviance and further marginalize people who are often suffering most of all from marginalization. Thus, ISA studies of drug users generally eschew the pathologizing rhetoric of 'disease' in favour of careful analytic descriptions of the *meaning* drug use had for the drug users themselves, with drug use patterns conceptualized as *cultural practices* no matter how deviant they may seem to conventional society.

CONCLUSIONS

It was difficult to work at ISA for any length of time and not absorb these four elements of its approach to drug research. Aside from the fact that these elements informed most of the research ISA investigators proposed and conducted, ISA's informal, Friday afternoon colloquia were often given by those who pioneered this style of research. Alfred Lindesmith, Erving Goffman, Howard S. Becker and Edwin Lemert among others gave talks in a crowded conference room at California St. and 6th Ave., sharing their ideas along with the cheap Chablis and potato chips. It was part of our duties as research assistants to fetch such refreshments, what we received in return was the chance to sit at the feet of these masters and take in what they had to say.

The kind of research done at ISA drew additional inspiration from the 'New Criminology' that developed at about the same time in the UK and for many of the same reasons. The shared spirit is evident, for example, in the following quote from two of the founders of this school of thought about deviance,

drugs and crime, according to Cohen and Taylor (1976):

[C]riminologists already appeared to 'know' the motives behind the behaviour: it was, they declared, irrational or mindless, it was not a meaningful response to any of the matters which might reasonably preoccupy the consciousness of modern man. We set ourselves to change this state of affairs by demanding to know exactly what the deviant had in mind. We did not accept that he was the possessor of an inadequate or flawed or undeveloped consciousness, but rather believed that the matters to which he attended, and possibly the style in which he attended to them, were evidence of his *existence within a different life-world*. (p. 2; emphasis added)

As will become evident in the papers to follow in this issue, ISA's approach to drug research gave them an affinity for looking at such different life-worlds and thus allowed them to see things that other investigators, using other theories and methods, less often see. For example, they learned about the processes addicts themselves invented to get off heroin without treatment, what Waldorf and Biernacki named 'natural recovery'. They discovered patterns of controlled use of drugs that were thought to be inherently addicting, and that the complex constellations of behaviours reductionistically referred to as 'drug abuse' or 'addiction' were not hermetic, categorical phenomena, but rather behavioural gradients along which active agents moved according to their own norms and the peculiar exigencies they faced (Reinarman, 2005).

While attuned to the risks that a deviant label can turn into what Becker called a 'master status' that stands for the whole person, ISA researchers also saw the liminal position of part-time illicit drug sellers who described 'career turning points' in which they changed their market niche from crack to prescription drugs (Sales and Murphy, this issue), or who drifted out into 'legit' work. Such qualitative, exploratory approaches led Hunt and Moloney, for example, to notice the 'bifurcated friendship networks' of Asian American drug users who see their illicit drug use as a strategic means of symbolizing their departure from 'model minority' norms. This in turn showed that ethnic identity is not an ascribed status one simply has, but something achieved in performance and actively managed (Hunt and Malloy, this volume). In keeping with the theoretical premises of interactionism, ISA researchers helped to bring more culture into criminological approaches to research on drug use and thereby move beyond what Matza (1969) called the 'correctional' to the 'appreciative' view. From that standpoint, it is possible to see that there is far more overlap and interaction between conventional and deviant modes of drug use than is visible within dominant paradigms.

What will the future bring for the genre of drug research done by ISA researchers? The National Institute of Drug Abuse is now more deeply ensconced

in the broader National Institutes of Health where the natural science paradigm reigns. These agencies tend to favour statistical models over ethnographic description, quantitative methods over qualitative, and explanatory hypothesis confirmation over exploratory hypothesis generation. Advances in neuroscience have made the brain disease concept of addiction *en vogue*, which has further shifted the analytic gaze away from culture and meaning.

By all accounts, the competition for research grants from NIDA and other state scientific funding agencies has grown increasingly fierce. In the wake of the financial crisis and Great Recession, the US government is in a fiscal bind that constrains research budgets. At this writing, the House of Representatives, which appropriates funds for all such agencies, is controlled by a right-wing neoliberal majority who are frequently hostile towards sociological research. They often heap withering criticism on federal agencies that fund studies that take an appreciative stance towards drug users, whom they regard not as people *in* trouble whose conditions and choices need to be understood but rather as people who *make* trouble and whose behaviours need to be punished.

These are strong political headwinds, but the scientific need for the more cultural forms of knowledge generated by ISA researchers is arguably greater than ever. Novel forms of drug use and drug problems are emerging all the time. Who would have predicted that the rave scene and MDMA use would decline while Oxycontin became the fastest growing form of drug abuse in the US? The pharmaceutical technology for altering consciousness continues to race ahead of the political technology for regulating it. Given the ever-emergent character of drug use, detailed understanding of its shifting meanings and drug user cultures is essential.

It seems likely that the funding environment for the style of research done at ISA will grow more difficult. That ISA researchers have managed to carry on their tradition for as long as they have is a tribute to both the quality of their work and the ability of independent peer reviewers to rise above politics and recognize its value.

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