

# Article analysis: race and addiction



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## Article Review: Race Case Study

“ The Life Narrative of a Mixed-Race Man in Recovery from Addiction: A Case-Based Psychosocial Approach to Researching Drugs, ‘ Race’ and Ethnicity.” *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community*, 27: 4, 375-392, DOI: 10. 1080/02650533. 2012. 745841. Published 2013.

Author: Alistair Roy.

The main purpose of the article is to explore the psychosocial approach of the research into drugs, and the links with race and ethnicity. In this article, the author attempts to understand and explain the fact that for some individuals their life experiences in association with drugs use are apparently out of step with what are considered the accepted contemporary social conventions. In this paper, he uses as an example the case of a 50-plus man of mixed race (fictitious name Bobby). This individual was selected for the case study because:

1. He is not part of a specific ethnic group;
2. He did not acquire a drug addiction until he was 26 years old;
3. His chosen drug was unusual for someone of mixed-race. (Roy p. 375).

Roy’s concept in this research project is broadly that he wants participants to be free to tell their own story, with – as far as is practicable – minimal input from the interviewer, thereby avoiding influencing the narrative by imposing any element of the interviewer’s own agenda (Roy p. 378).

His objective in the execution of the study is primarily to understand the relevance of the issues of race and ethnicity in relation to drugs use, using a combination of analyses of the subject's life experiences and the story he relates. The analyses are based on extracts from the subject's statements, which are each interpreted by panels of individuals who are ethnically diverse, of mixed gender and which include former drug users (Roy p. 378). At a later stage of the analysis Roy makes the decision to use a panel focusing specifically on moments when the interview interchanges had especially emotional or awkward (Roy p. 386).

Roy cites an example justifying this further analysis, where his own absence of a verbal response to a statement Bobby made, had induced a reaction from Bobby, leading Roy to wonder if his own lack of training in psychoanalysis allowed his non-verbal reactions to be transmitted to Bobby, affecting Bobby's subsequent comments (Roy p. 387).

Roy bases his argument on the concept that " An individual's social relationship patterns are seen to reflect and reproduce internal phantasies and conflicts. Furthermore, anxiety is seen as central to individual experience and human agency as actively but unconsciously defending against anxiety" (Roy p. 377). The psychosocial approach he adopts is based on the assumption that an individual cannot fully reflect on his inner world, and that this approach allows examination of not just the subject's conscious and unconscious", but also his experience, taking account of both rational and irrational dimensions (Roy pp. 377-378).

In discussing in his paper the interviews undertaken with Bobby and the subsequent analyses of the statements he made in the total of 3.5 hours of interview, Roy first seeks to critically examine the strengths and the limitations of his psychosocial approach. He mentions the possible concerns that the researcher's findings could over interpret what amounts to limited data, leading to findings with limited or poorly supported evidence. He concedes that although the Bobby interviews totalled over three hours and were therefore of longer duration than many interviews carried out in the name of research, they could not by definition produce the depth of insight and understanding that could be derived from other methods like "ethnography or observation" (Roy p. 387). However, he notes that he addresses such concerns in this study by providing clear explanations of his methods and by making only suitably modest claims.

Another concern associated with this method of analysis by panel (as voiced by a panel member) is that because the subject (Bobby) is excluded from the analysis process, the analysis of his (selected) statements is in danger of attributing to him an identity and personality that Bobby himself would neither recognize nor acknowledge, and which he is unable to repudiate. Roy states that although in principle the concept of giving the subject the right to reply is good, he nonetheless feels that the panel approach is successful (Roy p. 387).

Somewhat surprisingly, Roy comments that he was somewhat frustrated by the choices of subjects Bobby included in his interviews, having wished that Bobby would focus more on his drug use and treatment or on his addictions. However, he also concedes that interviews in which the topics and the

content are directed or steered by the interviewer lose the focus of the interview in giving the interviewee the chance to relate his own life story (Roy p. 388).

Giving consideration to the reasons Bobby took to using heroin, Roy suggests one reason could be that it was “ framed by his need for both (psychic) escape and (social) involvement.” Additionally, Roy suggests that Bobby’s decision “ must also be framed by highly limited opportunities for a sense of subjecthood and the unexpected loss of one in which he was highly invested” (his mother). Roy also notes that whereas ethnicity is almost universally used as the reason for differences between drug users, Bobby as a drug user is not typical in that he started using drugs relatively late in life and his drug choice was unusual for a man of mixed race. Whilst some might think this makes justification of research into Bobby questionable, Roy believes that it in fact helps throw light onto the whole gamut of psychic and social processes involved in drugs use, and that his specific type of analysis helps develop greater understanding with regard to research into drugs and the links with race and with ethnicity (Roy pp. 388-389).

Roy’s overall concept in this study is in contrast to the usual approach that he refers to as “ the production of rational explanations produced within objectivist epistemological frames” (Roy p. 375). His approach is instead to “ seek an explicit engagement with the irrational and unconscious aspects of researching these subjects (Roy p. 375).

Roy’s approach to his psychosocial interviewing technique with his subject, Bobby, is to use the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM), which

comprises two elements. The first is allowing and encouraging the subject to tell their own story. The second element is the use of diverse interpretive panels to implement the process of interpreting the story. Roy states that this technique brings to the process a greater width of life experience as well as multiple viewpoints to the analysis of the related story. The research process continues with the researcher continuing alone, but embracing that additional data arising from the opinions expressed by the panel members (Roy p. 376).

To facilitate understanding of the case, Roy bases his analysis on Kleinian theory, which “ defines unconscious phantasy as an ever-present mental process underlying all mental activity” (Roy p. 376).

Overall, the basis of Roy’s approach is that “ Psychosocial approaches assume that the individual’s inner world is only partially available to self-reflection and the methods seek to examine conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational dimensions of experience” (Roy pp. 377-378).

The main points of view presented in Roy’s research article are that to obtain the key information and the answers he seeks, he deliberately looks for “ an explicit engagement with the irrational and unconscious aspects” of the research into his subject (Bobby). In contrast to the traditional research approach into drug users, which tends to stigmatise ethnic minorities, Roy selected Bobby as an individual not belonging to a specific ethnic group and who therefore is an exception to “ social norms” (Roy pp. 375-376).

Reference:

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Roy, Alastair. (2013). "The Life Narrative of a Mixed-Race Man in Recovery from Addiction: A Case-Based Psychosocial Approach to Researching Drugs, 'Race' and Ethnicity." *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community*, 27: 4, 375-392, DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2012.745841