

The Contributions of Qualitative Research Methods for Studying Rx Drug Diversion

James A. Inciardi, Ph.D. & Hilary L. Surratt, Ph.D.
University of Delaware

Theodore J. Cicero, Ph.D.
Washington University

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Traditional Qualitative Techniques

- Examination of case reports
- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups*
- Participant observations**
- Intercept interviewing
- “Cold calls”

Examination of Case Reports

- Rx News, case studies, media reports, gov't hearings, agency press releases
- Pros: easy to obtain; inexpensive
- Cons: sometimes biased and/or inaccurate; single event based; insufficient information

Key Informant Interviews

- Treatment counselors, researchers, police and other agency representatives, community leaders, drug users, dealers, pill brokers
- Pros: wide variety of individuals to choose from; provides the opportunity for triangulation of inquiry; can be done relatively quickly
- Cons: Not all key informants are readily accessible or are willing to talk; challenging to gain access in unfamiliar communities

Focus Groups

- 5 to 7 prescription drug abusers
 - Brief interview guide; tape recorded
 - Discussions guided by experienced facilitator
- Pros: potential to obtain detailed and different perspectives from “insiders” of the phenomena under study
- Cons: small samples; data are not generalizable without multiple groups; potential for some participants to monopolize the discussions

Participant Observations

- Direct observations of the phenomena under study
 - “passive participation”
- Pros: first hand information; provides context, and a broader sense of the problem
- Cons: need to be well known and trusted in the area; might need a “broker” or guardian to get access; can be dangerous

Intercept Interviewing

- Direct contacts with people in their natural settings
 - Good in club settings, circuit parties, malls
- Pros: quick, inexpensive, large numbers of interviews can be collected
- Cons: limited venues, limited amounts of data can be collected, limited time (5 – 10 minutes)

Telephone Contacts

- Calls to key people (police, health practitioners, regulatory officials, media representatives) in areas where abuse has been identified
- Pros: relatively quick and inexpensive
- Cons: information may be limited to the official (and sometimes biased) perceptions of the problem; “cold calls” to agencies may aggravate respondents; excludes users and dealers from the equation

Pulling It Together

- Ethnography
- Rapid Assessment
- Targeted Sampling

What is Ethnography?

- Ethnography in its broadest sense involves analytic description of behaviors that characterize cultures and particular socio-cultural groups.
- Ethnography also includes description and analysis of the beliefs that generate and mediate those behaviors.
- As such, ethnographers attempt to explain why people believe certain things and behave in certain ways -- relative to their own cultural systems and not necessarily those of mainstream society.
- Thus, ethnography answers the questions -- who are these people, what are they doing, and why are they doing it?

Ethnographic Methods

- Participant observation, life histories and case studies, as well as structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews.
- Most often associated with ethnographic methods is "participant observation."
- Its underlying premise is that one cannot really know, understand, and describe a different culture or phenomena without "stepping into" it, "living the life" to the extent that it is legally and ethically possible.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

- Ethnographers refer to this process as "fieldwork," and its success is based on the development of respect and trust between the researcher and his or her participants.
- The ethnographic process, furthermore, usually requires significant time for fieldwork, systematic data collection, and data analysis, thereby distinguishing it from short-term investigative reporting.

Ethnography Pros and Cons

- Pros: ethnography is both science and storytelling -- the closer the consumer of ethnographic research comes to understanding the “insider’s” point of view, the better the science and the better the story.
- Cons: Ethnography requires significant time to accomplish, and is therefore time consuming and expensive.

Rapid Assessment

A method for rapidly ascertaining, understanding, and characterizing the nature and extent of health and social problems in a particular locale, and for suggesting ways in which those situations can be improved.

Rapid Assessment Methods

- Surveys
- Key informant interviews
- Focus Groups
- Direct observations
- Intercept interviewing
- Existing indicator data

Community Institutions

Key informants (youths and adults)
knowledgeable of the local drug scene

- Hospital emergency rooms
- Treatment programs
- Schools
- Police and sheriffs' departments
- Drug task forces
- State police
- Religious institutions

Regulatory Agencies

- Nursing Board
- Medical Board
- Pharmacy Board
- Dental Board
- Veterinary Board
- Impaired health professional programs
- Other regulatory boards

Drug Abusing Populations

- Street-based crack, cocaine, and heroin users
- Club culture
- Circuit party culture
- Methadone maintenance patients
- Other treatment populations
 - Publicly-funded
 - Private pay
- Elderly populations
- Street sex workers
- HIV positives

Dealer/Trader Populations

- Street dealers
- Local pill brokers
- Traders
 - club culture
 - circuit party culture
 - street culture
 - adolescents

Rapid Assessment Pros & Cons

- Pros: timely -- takes only weeks to accomplish; less expensive than ethnographic studies; obtains data from a wide variety of sources – including “cultural insiders”
- Cons: provides only a “snapshot” of the current situation in a particular locale; can take time to set up in unfamiliar communities

Targeted Sampling

- Targeted sampling is a purposeful, systematic method by which specified populations within geographical districts are identified, and detailed plans are designed to recruit adequate numbers of cases within each of the target areas.
- Several elements are necessary for this approach, including the systematic mapping of the geographical areas in which the target population is clustered, examining official "indicator data" (such as police arrest reports), information from professional and indigenous informants, and direct observation of various neighborhoods.

A “Mixed Methods” Approach

- NIH Grant # R01 DA021330
- Understanding the Scope and Magnitude of Prescription Drug Diversion
- P.I.: James A. Inciardi, Ph.D.
- Co-PIs: Hilary L. Surratt, Ph.D. and Theodore J. Cicero, Ph.D.
- \$2.9 million

NIDA Supported Research

- 3 South Florida counties (Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach)
- 4-year study
- 1,800 systematic interviews with treatment clients, methadone patients, street abusers, gay men, and the elderly
- 160 key informant interviews with abusers, dealers and pill brokers
- access to files on “traffickers” from the Broward County Sheriff’s Department