

**A STUDY ON THE VALIDITY OF SELF-REPORTS:
FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH ON THE
PUERTO RICAN TREATED
DRUG USER**

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Introduction

Drug-Use Research

Drug abuse is illegal and, as such, is considered a form of deviant behavior. It represents rulebreaking activity labeled as morally wrong and, on that basis, punitively sanctioned. Consequently, there is good and justifiable reason for persons so involved to hide their involvement, or deny it if accused. It is not then, as is the case with other hidden or secretive endeavors, amenable to study by constructing questionnaires, sampling procedure, etc., to ask people about their participation in this activity (Ball, 1972).

The problem of developing valid measures is potentially greater for drug use than for other behaviors or attitudes generally assessed in surveys because such issues often refer to substances which are illegal to possess and, therefore, disapproved by society. There also exist the fears of formal sanctions, such as apprehension, for admitting to drug practices, and informal negative sanctions. Thus, the degree of revelation constitutes a critical methodological problem which plagues the study of most kinds of deviant behavior, especially drug-use, due to its potential of evoking formal legal sanctions.

Difficulties in obtaining valid and reliable data from past or present drug-users restricts our efforts to understand and gain insight into their realities, thus limiting the possibilities of dealing effectively with the problem.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study addresses the issue of validity of self-reports within the authoritarian setting of drug use. The study has explored and described the practical methodological issues encountered by social researchers in the conduct of studies, based on self-reports of treated drug-users in Puerto Rico. The specific purposes were the following: Describe and document the particular methodological issues encountered by the researcher during the followup field experience, in terms of the process of collection of data on treated drug abusers, as related to labeling. Describe the self-reported data regarding: socioeconomic area, occupational/educational area, past and current drug-use patterns, legal area, perception of labeling attitudes toward family, friends, community and self. Compare specific areas of self-reported data to unobtrusive data in an attempt to validate these items on the self-reports.

Methodology

The original research question proposed to be studied by the researcher, the relationship between labeling and relapse among drug users discharged from treatment, was redefined after a series of methodological difficulties were encountered during the phase of pre-test of instruments for the study. The major problems experienced by the researcher consisted in establishing contact and locating subjects, voluntary acceptance of participation in the project, the administration of the questionnaire form of data collection, and the inherent implications of these difficulties on the validity of the self-reported data. At that time, these field experiences were viewed as potential threats to the validity of the study. They evidenced the need for further research in the methodological area and

constitute the rationale for the researcher's decision to re-formulate the research problem to that of specifying, in an in-depth manner, the unique methodological problems of the field.

Design

The accomplishment of the research purposes, given the nature of the complexities present in a field setting, such as the follow-up of the discharged clients from drug abuse treatment, required a flexible approach. Therefore, the design of this research was a pilot case-study, exploratory-type design. The researcher had originally proposed to utilize a descriptive qualitative design. This design resulted inadequate and unfeasible, given the practical limitations observed in the field. The case study's strength lies in its usefulness in providing rich descriptive accounts to illustrate more generalized statistical findings. This design also permits the generation of qualitative data which is required to obtain adequate information on many areas of social life not amenable to the techniques for collecting quantitative data. The design provides an adequate way of obtaining the type of information required to contend with the difficulties of empirical situations (Glaser & Strauss, 1972).

General Characteristics of the Study Population

The subjects who participated in the study are Puerto Rican males over 18 years of age, discharged from methadone, drug-free and family orientation treatment modalities of the Department of Services Against Drug Abuse since 1977 to 1980. They are residents of the metropolitan area of San Juan and have not received any type of follow-up services for a period of time of six to eighteen months after discharge.

Sample

A total of 102 subjects were intensively followed up over a period of time of three months. Of these, twenty subjects were interviewed. The utilization of a selective sampling procedure by the researcher was based on the practical methodological limitations of selecting, locating and interviewing subjects on a follow-up basis within an authoritarian structure. This represents a location rate of 20%, which one would expect under such circumstances.

Data Collection Procedures

The collection of data can be described generally as based on a combination of participant observer and self-reports of current and retrospective nature. This approach was utilized by the researcher in order to observe current events and gather retrospective data. The need for this combination of strategies was dictated by the research concerns of the investigator.

Modes of data collection included several instruments to facilitate and complement this combination of strategies. These consisted of keeping a ledger, self-reports and observation guides.

The natural events and situations encountered in the field have been recorded and documented in a ledger on a case-by-case basis. More specifically, the descriptive accounts of the methodological difficulties experienced by the researcher in terms of locating and interviewing respondents, collecting unobtrusive data from agency records and the data which evolved from the use of the methods utilized in this study were written down in field notes. Additional data collection instruments utilized in this study consisted of two self-report schedules and two observations guides to collect unobtrusive data.

The first self-report instrument was a forty-five-item structured interview utilized to collect data pertaining to subjects' economic situation, education, employment situation, drug history, current use of drugs, legal difficulties and status, perceived support from others (friends, family and the community) and self-concept. Two semantic differential scales to measure self-concept and perception of others consisted of ten items each. The second self-reported schedule, a forty-item likert-type scale, was administered to tap labeling attitudes of family, friends, neighbors, community and self as perceived by respondents.

The observation schedules constructed by the researcher were utilized to collect official record data. The first schedule was designed to collect data at the Police Department pertaining to the present legal status, types and frequency of involvement in illegal activities, legal action taken and incarcerations of subjects after discharge from treatment.

The second observation schedule, designed to obtain data from treatment records at the Department of Services Against Drug Abuse, included items pertaining to marital status, academic background, drug history, legal status prior to discharge from treatment and times re-admitted to treatment after discharge.

Treatment of Human Subjects

The researcher considered the ethical responsibility and human risk potential involved in the study. The project was carried out with concern for the privacy, safety, health and welfare of the participants. The confidentiality of subjects was protected at all times. Participants were informed about the features of the research and were explained other aspects of the project about which they inquired. All subjects were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, right to answer only those items they chose, as well as discontinuing participation in the project at any time without reprisal of any kind. These safeguards to subject participation were stressed by the researcher. Public documents and other external measures were used to collect data in an effort to validate parts of the self-reports.

Summary of Research Findings

The present study was undertaken to explore and describe the methodological difficulties encountered in the process of conducting research, describe the self-reported data, as well as attempt to validate this data collected in Puerto Rico. What follows is a summary of the research findings.

A total of twenty subjects discharged from treatment from drug-abuse programs at the Department of Services Against Drug Abuse were followed up by the researcher for purposes of describing the methodological constraints of undertaking research, describing the self-reported data and attempting to validate this data, as provided by the respondents. The external measures utilized in the validation effort were police, court and drug abuse agency treatment record data. These purposes were accomplished, as is evidenced by the findings of this study. A variety of instruments were utilized by the researcher to collect data. A ledger was kept on a daily basis to record everyday observations of the field experience. Two self-report schedule included items pertaining to areas such as employment, academic situation, legal area, and relationships with others. It was designed and administered by the researcher. The second, a labeling attitude scale, was utilized to assess subjects' perception of labeling by family, friends, community and self. This was also constructed by the researcher and administered by her. Finally, observation guides to collect unobtrusive data at the different agencies were also prepared and completed by the researcher. The data was collected during a period of six months, ranging from January to July, 1981.

The main difficulty in the use of data from treatment records of respondents was the impossibility of locating various records. In an attempt to collect at least minimal data on these subjects, the admissions to treatment on an island-wide basis could not be assessed completely, due to the fact that the agency does not have a centralized data bank where this type of information could be included. Data on re-admissions to private treatment programs are not listed in agency files.

Conclusions

This study has explored and described the methodological experiences encountered by the researcher in conducting follow-up on a group of subjects discharged from drug-abuse treatment programs in Puerto Rico and the data obtained from their self-reports. Additionally, police, court and treatment record data were utilized in an attempt to validate the self-reports.

The data suggests that the diversity of methodological constraints encountered by the researcher are critical factors which affect the assessment of the self-reported data. The findings suggest the possibility that the difficulties present during the research process are related to the labeling phenomena inherent in the context under which they were observed. The legalistic implications of the researcher problem are relevant variables which raise questions about the feasibility of practicing research based on the strict adherence to scientific norms in the quest for valid data.

Overall, the research process, which began with the selection, localization and contact with subjects, up to the attempts to validate specified items of the self-reports, has been plagued with biases arising out of the conduct of the research process itself.

The collection of self-reported data, particularly the process of obtaining and locating contacts in field, constituted one of the major problems faced by the researcher. The significant rate of sample attrition and the amount of average contacts made per interviewed subject was observed to have an impact on the findings of the study. The main biases in this part of the study arose from the selection of cases from specific populations, the high rates of mobility beyond feasible follow-up distance, deaths, refusals

for participation and lack of information as to the whereabouts of subjects. While generalizations cannot be made due to sample restrictions, the difficulties encountered during the process of locating subjects which capitalized on the self-selection of the respondents suggests the possibility of relatively more valid responses than if sample selection occurred under other circumstances.

Once contact had been established, the researcher faced the problem inherent in the participant observer role regarding how much of her purpose and motives to reveal to the subjects. The awareness of the problem of potential physical danger or violence in the natural settings where the study was conducted, relative to the degree of disclosure on behalf of the researcher, was found to be a critical methodological issue. The researcher found that conducting research within an authoritarian structure and, in many cases, in the natural habitat of subjects makes the researcher's legitimacy (in the norm-abiding culture) a questionable one in the view of the subjects. A variety of strategies was developed by the researcher in an attempt to counteract this particular problem. The extent to which these were effective in producing valid self-reported data has not been assessed and should be explored further.

The problem of reactivity observed in this study is mainly associated with the type of settings where the study was conducted, the intimate, controversial and committing nature of a series of items included in the self-reports, and the identity of the researcher. Thus, the nature of that which was studied in itself appears to magnify the common dangers of reactivity. A critical factor which was found to be operating during the research process, in comparison to more conventional settings, was the subjects' concern relative to the researcher's true identity and intentions. This concept may have had some impact on restricting the researcher and her subjects from fulfilling the required expectations of their roles necessary to assure "normal" conduct in the field. The fact of the researcher as being a member of the female sex, given the cultural expectations of the role, may be an additional variable of impact on the assessment of valid self-reported data.

The self-reported data indicates that these adult male residents of the metropolitan area of San Juan have been discharged from treatment within a period of time of one year and are currently involved in different types and frequencies of drug use. Patterns of current drug use, in comparison to past use, indicates a decrease in the frequency and type of drugs used. Involvement in criminal activity was also reported by the respondents. The latter data, when compared to official agency records in an attempt to validate these specific items, demonstrates that subjects report more involvement in criminal activities than what is recorded in agency files.

Responses on items regarding the subjects' perceptions of relationships with family, friends and the community tend to be consistent among themselves, suggesting, to some extent, the possibility of internal validity.

Overall, the interpretation of the self-reported data needs to be reviewed within the context of the entire research process before reaching conclusions as to its validity.

The process of validating specific items included in the self-reports evidences the methodological difficulties encountered in utilizing external measures to achieve this purpose. The procedures of collecting data based on existing agency records provided incomplete information, either for reasons of unavailable records or lack of current up-dated information. Data sought at all the social control agencies, Department of

Services Against Drug Abuse, Police Department and the Court's Administration, was not centralized, thus not based on island-wide data. These limitations weakened the validation process.

The data which was available, in some of the cases, was found to be inconsistent with the self-reported data, specifically those items regarding past drug-use, and involvement in past and present criminal activity.

Overall, any attempts to validate diverse aspects of self-reported criminal activity involvement of subjects, between the period of time ranging from their date of discharge from treatment up to the date of data collection at the Police Department, Court Administration, Department of Services Against Drug Abuse can only be considered relative and not absolute. These findings required the researcher to proceed with caution in the analysis and interpretation of her data.