

# A Qualitative Study of The Behavioural Aspects of Substance Abuse

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## ABSTRACT

The material in this communication was extracted from a qualitative study among several different populations i.e. heroin users in Bangkok slums, hill tribal opium cultivators in remote mountain areas of the Northern region, long haul truck drivers, labourers on deep sea fishing boats and men who have sex with men (MSM).

Qualitative information is specifically essential in understanding the complexity of decision making and the behaviour of individuals and groups of people in society. It is especially valuable in studying the secretive behaviour of substance abuse caused by its social stigmatization and its illegal nature. The critical components of creating good rapport and confidence, hypothesizing and data collecting instruments has to be translated into feasible implementation with adequate quality results. However, the frontiers of inference from qualitative studies should be advanced to increase the benefits of application indevelopment. The behavioural aspects of supply demand and consequences of use varied considerably in accordance with the individual, using the substance and the environment etc. Hence, a standard result cannot be expected from this type of method and implementation process. Nevertheless, the lessons learned from past experience highlight the need for operational skill and background knowledge of the target population in qualitative studies.

*In developing good rapport*, the sincerity of the data collector in positive thinking, free from target group stigma, honesty and skill in projecting these attributes to the target group effectively is paramount. Caution should be made concerning monetary incentive in exchange for valuable information. The outcome could shift collaborative cooperation to bargaining which might lead to inadequate information and data gathering.

*Data collector* should have good basic knowledge and understanding of the issue, be trusted by the target group, have good verbal and non-verbal communication and good observation skill. The data collector must also be sensitive to the readiness of the target group to disclose confidential information. Non-professional or volunteers from the general population or the actual target group can be, especially in a case where the research team cannot approach the target group. However, in this case appropriate training is needed and extra attention has to be made in checking the reliability of the information.

*The hypothesis and data collection instrument* should be developed with a good understanding in the basic knowledge of the issue. Limitation in this respect should be fully understood and probing issues identified. In studying and unfamiliar subculture, an open mindset ready to understand new issues is a good start towards comprehensive in depth study.

Inferring results from a qualitative study to a wider population is a contentious issue. An optimized approach can be developed through population sampling on criteria and number, comprehensive coverage of the substance and clear linkage between variables. Linkage to good qualitative study is essential in order for it to have a broader application to development implementation.

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