Reviewer's report

Title: Surviving crack: strategies developed by Brazilian users to deal with the risks associated with the drug, a qualitative study.

Version: 1 Date: 8 June 2010

Reviewer: Wilson Palacios

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Major Compulsory Revisions

The author(s) main focus, an understanding with regard to the practices and social dynamics related to crack consumption among long-term users is novel and very timely since there is a dearth of research concerning long-term users of illicit drugs, especially non-treatment populations. As described by the author(s), the objective of this study was to identify, from the perspective of the user, risks associated in user of crack cocaine and to explore survey strategies imposed. Although the author(s) employ a qualitative research methodology, the accompanying results, conclusion, and discussion sections of the manuscript were found to be underdeveloped in terms of purporting the cultural dynamics central to long-term “crack” cocaine users. The author(s) need to show how this work is different from what already has been done in the field.

1. It is strongly recommended for the author(s) to review the manuscript for grammar; especially in terms of employing specific qualitative research terminology as in not doing so the current manuscript reads rather stilted in many sections. For instance, the author(s) indicate “the sample was intentionally and selected by criteria……information-rich cases…..were selected for indepth interviews.” A suggestion here is for the reword to include wording to the effect that the authors employed purposively sampling……based on a set of criteria which led to the final sample size of.……..then introduce here the fact that a snowball sampling technique was employed. I did notice the author(s) proceeded to provide some wording on the criteria used in the study however I am recommending that the author(s) move this up to this section completely. In addition, there is very basic information provided on the eight key informants employed in the study although they did make a contribution not only to the initial set of interviewees but also to the development of the qualitative interview guide used in the field. Given this I was left wondering why there was little information reported on these eight “critical” key informants. For instance, how were these eight chosen and to what extent were these eight key informants involved in the interviews. How did the author(s) arrive at these eight key informants? Were these key informants already known to the author(s) as a result of having assisted in previous research studies? What narrative did these eight key informants contribute both across the substance of the present study and/or to the development of the research interviews used? A narrative on these eight key informants would help in contextualizing their involvement along the research objectives, as expressed by the author(s).
2. In terms of subject selection, the author(s) indicate “eight chains with a maximum of five respondents in each were identified.” This reviewer did not understand what was meant by reference to “eight chains” - did the author(s) mean to suggest that sampling occurred across eight waves of data collection? In other words, did the author(s) mean to suggest that it took eight waves of data collection to arrive to the final sample size of 40? If so, please just reword accordingly? Also, why did it take eight waves of data collection to recruit 40 subjects? This might be of interest to the readership so I would encourage the author(s) to include such information as a footnote or endnote to the manuscript if the rationale for this was not related to the study’s research objectives. However, if the author(s) purposively employed a eight wave recruitment strategy for purposes of maximum variation then this needs to be noted in the manuscript because it shows the great extent the author(s) went to build subject variability across the major research domains and this is very important for the readership to know. There is plenty of research literature on maximum variation in qualitative research although I believe most of this comes from the educational research literature and it is certainly worth a read. As another point of recommendation, I would urge the author(s) to read the qualitative educational research literature since there is plenty of information on qualitative sampling there. I make this recommendation because the author(s) offered the following comment, “This procedure generated the maximum number of user profiles.” However in reviewing this manuscript I did not have a sense of a user profile and therefore it left me asking the question, “What is a user profile?

3. In terms of enhancing the clarity of the current manuscript the following can and should be reworded, “Topics of interest in the research were explored to exhaustion, and data collection was halted when the original purpose of the study was fulfilled. This was determined as the point when the interviewee became redundant, as demonstrated by the lack of new information and repetition of speech [17]. Using this metric, the study concluded with the collection of 28 interviews.” What is interesting here is that the author(s) purported to have secured 40 interviews but were only now reported on 28 because of saturation and therefore this raises plenty of questions. I recommend rewording the section to where the author(s) simply indicate interviews continued until saturation was reach but then you must demonstrate the process employed to determine this. However I do caution the author(s) here because employing saturation as an explanation for ceasing data collection is a technique that has been found to be abused by some researchers in the field and therefore the more substantive evidence you can provide for such a decision the stronger position you will have.

4. Another section I found confusing was the author(s) results treatment phase; I did not understand what this sub-heading was referring to. In terms of a data analytical section, the author(s) should consider developing a much more succinct section. One point for consideration it to expand on what exactly was done analytically in terms of content analysis and how Bardin’s theoretical framework was used to organize, analyze, and report from the data. The author(s) indicate creation of hypotheses however this was never the expressed research objective. Also, the author(s) employ the term of categorization for
purposes of evidencing qualitative data management however categorization is a simple first-level approach and, at least the way it was presented in this version, is only a first step in qualitative data analysis. I suggest the author(s) reorganize this section as a Qualitative Content Analysis and provide the information correspondent with a content analysis of interview data.

5. In terms of the results section, I would suggest reorganizing along the major themes in the data; as written the bold face sub-headings are too long and they are very non-descriptive. Actually I would suggest to the author(s) that one’s sub-heading in this section should reflect one’s conceptual ordering of importance to the stated research objectives and should also evidence to the readership the great thought given to how these qualitative data, in terms of narrative provided, connected. In terms of sample description the author(s) should develop a table to highlight this information and please provide an explanation as to what is meant by economic class E; a simple footnote in the table should suffice.

6. In terms of the discussion I suggest that author(s) show how these results are similar and dissimilar across the host of studies done in the United States and elsewhere examining some of the similar key concepts, as expressed in this manuscript. After reviewing this manuscript I still did not have a sense as to how this work was different from what other qualitative researchers have done investigating the “crack” cocaine culture. There is ample body of qualitative research literature on the “crack” cocaine culture so my question here is, “how is your manuscript different from what has been done?” I raise this question before the author(s) for purposes of encouraging the author(s) to think how these data connect with the larger body of work out there and, what could be the major findings, how it does not and why?