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Notes on a Cautionary (Tall) Tale about Respondent-Driven Sampling: A Critique of Scott's Ethnography

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An ethnographer's greatest failure is to portray social interaction as disconnected from the larger social context within which it occurs. This is one of the many flaws in Scott's (2008) ethnographic study of a respondent-driven sampling (RDS) project in Chicago. His analysis is disconnected from the long history of outreach intervention research among injection drug users (IDUs) in Chicago, specifically, and worldwide, especially since the advent of HIV. Scott's paper includes a single paragraph alluding to this history, but he fails to make a crucial connection: Virtually all of the problems in recruiting and working with IDU respondents that Scott claims he "discovered" in his study of the RDS project in Chicago are not unique to RDS at all; they are common to virtually all outreach methodologies that offer IDUs rewards for participating. Investigators have been aware of and written about these problems for years. Consequently, to claim that these problems are new, and to associate them with a particular sampling or recruitment method – RDS in particular – is a mistake.

For example, the practices of IDUs demanding "kickbacks" from peers for turning them on to rewards they can earn by participating in research, or of earning money by driving peers to interviews and doing other favours, are not unique to RDS (Stephens 1991; Broadhead & Fox 1990; Preble and Casey 1969). The same goes for the various forms of "street justice" that IDUs have been found sometimes to resort to in settling disagreements (Broadhead and Fox 1993; Goldstein 1985; Agar 1973). Scott's "finding" that respondents spread false and misleading information about research projects is also not unique to RDS (Broadhead 2001; Broadhead 1991). Nor is the problem of outreach projects – and conventional service projects for that matter – sometimes experiencing logistical problems that result in respondents congregating at project sites waiting to be interviewed or served. Some projects, in fact, encourage such congregation, as one finds in drop-in centres, chill-out rooms, on-site coffees shops, and bulletin-boards (Broadhead & Kerr et al. 2002; Brown and Beschner 1993; Broadhead & Fox 1993). Scott's claim that such congregation is a special, problematic feature of RDS is baseless. His insinuation that such congregating increases IDUs' risk of contracting or spreading HIV is not even supported by the references he cites. Finally, there is nothing unique to RDS about respondents tutoring one another on how they can beat a project's screening process to gain admission (Heckathorn, Broadhead and Sergeyev 2001; Brown and Beschner 1993). Because Scott describes nothing that is actually new or unique about how IDUs relate either to research projects or to one another, his analysis adds nothing to the general literature on the ethics and problems of conducting research with this population. Furthermore, his contention that these problems are in some way integral to RDS renders what would otherwise be a restatement of well-known findings into a deeply misleading statement.

Scott recognized some elements of the social context that surrounded his research, but he fails to make the necessary connection to his own research. For example, he notes that Chicago's drug scenes have been so heavily studied that investigators speak frequently of the “professional research subjects” and “veteran respondents” they have encountered over the years in conducting outreach research. Scott also reports that his respondents told him point-blank that they “game” researchers all the time and “burn” everyone around them at every opportunity, but Scott never draws out what relevance any of this holds for his own research. To wit: Scott describes no method he used, or any effort he made, to vet any of the stories his respondents fed him about the “licks” and hustles they pursued in connection to the RDS project. Scott appears to have accepted everything he was told uncritically because, as he blankly explains, his respondents “had nothing further to gain or lose monetarily by speaking frankly...with me” about their recruitment efforts. Yet, a few sentences later Scott notes that he paid each respondent \$10 for “allowing me to interview him or her. Those who allowed me to ‘shadow’ them received \$20 per day.” Scott appears to have swallowed everything his respondents fed him with relish, and then wants us to believe that he feasted on *haute cuisine*. But his findings are all refried beans.

Another significant way in which Scott's ethnography is disconnected from the larger social context is his failure to analyze the structure of human subjects' protections that surrounded the RDS project, and that shaped and governed its every process. In reading Scott's paper, one would never know that all of the project's protocols for dealing with human subjects, including a detailed description of the risks and benefits of their participation, had been submitted to an IRB for approval, and that the project was required to monitor constantly for any *unanticipated* problems and surprises. Scott admits that his research was made possible by a contract with the RDS project to conduct a “formative assessment,” but he neglects to explain that this placed him directly at the very centre of, and even responsible for, carrying-out the project's monitoring process to catch and solve problems, and to ensure the project's compliance. For example, one of the RDS project's managers told me in a telephone interview that Scott informed the project early on that non-injectors were beating its screening process by claiming they injected only in the groin; word on the street had gotten out that the project would not ask respondents to confirm their injection status by revealing groin track-marks. In the paper, Scott describes non-injectors successfully running this con job on the project. But Scott does not mention that because he alerted the project to the loophole, the project revised its screening protocol, had it approved by its IRB, and discontinued accepting respondents who claimed they injected only in the groin. Scott omits a description of the project's ongoing “quality assurance” activities, or how the project mitigated other human-subject and logistical problems; Scott even omits emphasizing that he, himself, was professionally responsible for ensuring the integrity of the project's quality assurance process. Thus, there is a simple dishonesty at the heart of Scott's analysis: He portrays himself as independent of the RDS project, which enabled him to discover a host of human-subject violations to which the RDS project was oblivious and did nothing about. But nothing could be further from the truth. That Scott chose not to discuss the structure of human subjects' protections that governed the RDS project does not mean they were not there, or that they were not effective.

There are still other “disconnects” in Scott's analysis. Scott claims he went to great lengths to ensure that his own sub-sample of respondents was demographically representative of the larger IDU population. Yet in studying the RDS recruitment process, Scott deliberately avoided gathering data representative of the experiences of the vast majority of the RDS-recruiters. Scott only interviewed recruiters who *claimed* they had been totally successful in their recruitment efforts. Yet, as has been found to be true of virtually all RDS and peer-driven intervention projects, the majority of recruiters do not recruit anyone; and among those who do recruit, only a minority reaches the maximum amount (Wang & Carlson et al. 2005; Broadhead & Heckathorn et al. 1998). For this reason, IDU-communities become awash in

unused recruitment coupons shortly after an RDS project starts-up; because each time a respondent is interviewed and becomes a recruiter, three additional recruitment coupons are introduced into the community. Recruitment never catches up to the more rapidly proliferating supply of recruitment coupons out in the community. Scott did not report, as the program manager also told me during our telephone interview, that the RDS project dispensed approximately 1,500 recruitment coupons into recruiters' hands in the mere six-months it operated, but that only about a third of those coupons were ever redeemed by recruits. (This does not mean that the sampling method failed; the project succeeded in recruiting over 500 subjects in only six months. The success of RDS is not based on the assumption that all recruits need to be successful recruiters, but that only a minority needs to be in order for a large and diverse sample to result – one that will approach representativeness [Heckathorn 2007].) The point, however, is that in an environment awash in recruitment coupons, it stretches the imagination to believe Scott's description of how a small number of “capitalist” IDUs cornered the market on coupons to make a ruthless killing by bullying hapless addicts under their control. Had Scott worked to interview a sample of recruiters who reflected the real diversity of experiences and challenges they had in trying to recruit peers, rather than rely on a sample utterly biased in favour of participants who claimed they were totally successful in their recruitment efforts, the data would have yielded a much more balanced perspective, as well as one far less sensational. But it's obvious that the latter was not Scott's goal or agenda. Scott cautions that his findings are not generalizable to RDS projects in other city-sites. In light of the extreme bias in Scott's sample, his results are not generalizable to even the city of Chicago or the RDS site he studied.

Scott claims to offer a cautionary tale about the ethics of research, yet he appears oblivious to the ethical lapses in his own research. For example, consider Scott's description of himself running down the street with an IDU named “Wilma” tethered to his microphone, as she screamed at a young man standing with a group of friends whom she then accosted. Does Scott expect us to believe that, in running down the street with Wilma recording her every word and action, his presence did not influence or even inflame the situation? Are we to believe that Scott's own IRB approved of his methods? In interviewing only respondents who claimed they earned the “maximum finder's fee,” and who bragged about all the cons and hustles they ran on their own peers and the RDS project, are we to believe that Scott's respondents did not give him exactly what he wanted to hear, and did not for his benefit put on a pretty good show, for which he paid them \$20 cash “for allowing me to ‘shadow’ them?” After Wilma got \$5 off the man she and Scott ran down in the street, Scott reported: “As Wilma and I walked away from the young man, she just looked at me and said, ‘What a fuckin' sucker. I got him’.” Wilma was boasting that her performance had paid off. But therein lies another disconnect in Scott's analysis: Was Wilma referring only to the young man she had just accosted, or also to Scott - or to both – or perhaps to the larger social context that enabled Wilma and Scott to turn themselves into running buddies, working together to pull off a mutually-rewarding caper?

Scott makes much ado about the risks to respondents he claims to have discovered in RDS. Some of these risks are potential to any outreach method in which IDUs are paid for their participation, as has long been recognized in HIV-prevention and surveillance research (Semaan & Santibanez et al, forthcoming). Consequently, it is a standard practice for research projects to include means for mitigating these risks and monitoring the recruitment process to ensure that any developing problems are promptly addressed (Brown and Beschner 1993). These practices include limiting compensation levels to ensure against peer-coercion, and instituting requirements that adverse events are reported promptly to project personnel so remedial actions can be taken – practices that RDS projects take very seriously (see Abdul-Quader, Heckathorn et al. 2006).

Scott concludes his paper alleging that “This article documents the manifold ways that the design and implementation of RDS-driven surveillance of IDUs invites if not promotes the violation of federal guidelines governing the protection of human research subjects.” His paper runs amok with hyperbole such as this statement. In a back-handed compliment to himself, Scott ends by recommending that all future studies that involve incentive payments to research subjects should include a process-oriented researcher who will emulate his work. If Scott's analysis is an example of what we could expect - decontextualized, oblivious, reckless and self-serving – perhaps that is not such a good idea.

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