

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Case Study

University: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 27 sociology & anthropology

Title of case study: *Enhancing Drug Rehabilitation Policy and Practice through Researching Illicit Drug Abuse Across Generations*

(1) Summary of the impact

Relapse is a challenge to the recovery of illicit drug abusers. The drug use pattern has changed from the older generation of heroin addicts to the younger generation of psychoactive drug abusers in Hong Kong. Against this context, this research has enhanced drug rehabilitation for two generations of illicit drug abusers at both the policy and service levels. These impacts involved (a) strengthening government policy on the rehabilitation of heroin addicts, (b) establishing a standard of counselling service and reconfiguring the counselling model for methadone treatment clients who were primarily heroin abusers, (c) integrating vocational and peer support services, and (d) raising the agenda of post-treatment policy for psychoactive drug abusers, who were usually younger than heroin abusers. The key beneficiaries included the policy maker (the Narcotics Division of the HKSAR Government), the largest NGO drug treatment service provider (The Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers), and heroin and psychoactive drug abusers.

(2) Underpinning research

The research consists of **two prospective longitudinal studies of illicit drug abuse conducted by Professor Yuet-wah CHEUNG (Y.W. CHEUNG) and Professor Nicole W.T. CHEUNG (N.W.T. CHEUNG)** between 2000 and 2012. Both studies adopted a multidisciplinary framework to examine multiple socio-demographic, psychosocial, treatment and addiction factors. They complemented each other, and together captured the rapid change of the drug scene from heroin addiction to recreational use of psychoactive drugs during the last two decades in Hong Kong, as well as the transformation of drug subcultures across generations of Chinese drug abusers.

The first study, “**A Longitudinal Study of Chronic Drug Abusers in Hong Kong**”, focused on an older generation of adult users of heroin, which had been a dominant drug in Hong Kong before the late 1990s [R1; R2]. Conducted from 2000 to 2003 and funded by the Government’s Beat Drugs Fund (BDF), the study recruited 571 heroin addicts from voluntary and compulsory treatment and rehabilitation organizations. The analysis was based on a panel sample of 319 addicts who completed all three waves of surveys. The key findings were:

- A period of short-term abstinence achieved before relapse contributes to longer periods of short-term abstinence among chronic heroin users in their future. This challenges the conventional ideology of treatment effectiveness, which views sustained abstinence as the only goal.
- Life satisfaction, an active job attitude, support from non-drug-using peers, and self-efficacy consistently lead to longer periods of short-term abstinence.

Consistent with the global trend of normalization of recreational drug use, Hong Kong has seen heroin replaced by psychoactive drugs, especially ketamine, as drugs of choice consumed for recreational purposes among young abusers since the late 1990s [R3]. This backdrop propelled the second longitudinal study to address a younger generation of users of ketamine and other psychoactive drugs. “**A Longitudinal Survey of Psychoactive Drug Abusers in Hong Kong**”, also funded by the BDF, was conducted from 2009 to 2012 [R4; R5]. Based on a sample of 754 young abusers of psychoactive drugs recruited from youth-serving bodies and drug treatment agencies who joined six waves of data collection, the major findings revealed the distinctive features of the younger generation of psychoactive drug abusers:

- Permissiveness towards occasional/recreational drug use has a strong and significant effect on continuation of psychoactive drug use. This result echoes the “normalization of recreational drug use” thesis, which states that increasingly receptive attitude towards recreational drug use predicts a rising prevalence of drug use in young people. In Hong Kong, this trend has also been accompanied by a neutralization process, which rejects heroin use and views psychoactive drug abuse as a bad habit rather than drug abuse.
- Life satisfaction is a robust predictor of discontinuation of psychoactive drug use. It also predicts a decrease in permissiveness towards occasional/recreational drug use.

(3) References to the research

- [R1] Cheung, Yuet-wah, Ch'ien, James M.N., Tang, Catherine S.K., Pi, Peter W.L., Cheung, Nicole W.T., Choi, Jonathan F.M., Au Wong, Amy M.L. and Ho, Sammy C.C. (2003). *A Longitudinal Study of Chronic Drug Abusers in Hong Kong*. Report submitted to the Research Advisory Group, Narcotics Division, Government of the Hong Kong SAR. <https://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/Longitudinal%20Study%20of%20Chronic%20Drug%20Abusers%20in%20Hong%20Kong.pdf>
- [R2] Cheung, Yuet-wah. (2009). *A Brighter Side: Protective and Risk Factors in the Rehabilitation of Chronic Drug Abusers in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- [R3] Cheung, Nicole W.T. and Cheung, Yuet-wah. (2006). “Is Hong Kong experiencing normalization of adolescent drug use? Some reflections on the normalization thesis.” *Substance Use & Misuse* 41(14): 1967-1990.
- [R4] Cheung, Yuet-wah. (2012). *A Longitudinal Survey of Psychoactive Drug Abusers in Hong Kong*. Report submitted to Research Subcommittee, Action Committee Against Narcotics, Narcotics Division, Government of the Hong Kong SAR. In website of Narcotics Division: <http://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/Longitudinal%20Survey%20of%20Psychoactive%20Drug%20Abusers%20in%20Hong%20Kong%20-%20report.pdf>
- [R5] Cheung, Yuet-wah and Cheung, Nicole W.T. (2018). *Psychoactive Drug Abuse in Hong Kong: Life Satisfaction and Drug Use*. Singapore: Springer Nature.

(4) Details of the impact

The size of the drug-user population has shrunk markedly in Hong Kong. According to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse managed by the Narcotics Division, the number of reported drug abusers in Hong Kong has been declining from 10,260 in 2013 to 8,777 in 2015, and to 6,725 in 2017 [C1, p.49]. Such reduction of relapse in treated drug abusers has likely been a result of the collective efforts made by various parties, including government policy makers, treatment providers, and researchers. As treatment providers were unable to maintain records of the drug-using status of clients after treatment, the effects of policies, agencies, or research studies on relapse prevention could not be individually ascertained. Because CHEUNG and CHEUNG’s longitudinal research findings informed policies and motivated changes in practices (see below), we submit that their research has made significant contribution to relapse prevention since 2013.

4.1 Strengthening Government Policy on Treatment of the Older Generation of Chronic Heroin Abusers

Findings from CHEUNG and CHEUNG’s longitudinal research have shaped the directions of government treatment policies on the social reintegration of adult chronic heroin abusers after treatment. Their work was extensively cited and adopted in 2015 by the Narcotics Division in its Seventh Three-Year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong 2015-2017 [C2, p.27]: “According to a study, self-efficacy, satisfaction with life, an active job attitude and association with as well as support from drug-free friends are important elements which determine the treatment results of chronic drug abusers...” In particular, the value of employment in the continued abstinence from chronic drug abuse shown in CHEUNG and CHEUNG’s research has

been promulgated by the Narcotics Division, calling for further efforts to strengthen cross-agency collaboration in this regard [C2, p.41]: *“The road to abstinence is very often lengthy and arduous and relapse is widely known to be a challenge to T&R (Treatment & Rehabilitation) services... We encourage service providers to continue along the direction of relapse minimisation, including cross-agency partnership involving professional support such as occupational therapists as experimented in some BDF (Beat Drugs Fund) projects. We also encourage partnership with agencies providing education and/or vocational training services, as well as collaboration with trade associations and enterprises to offer job placement opportunities for rehabilitees.”* The Three-Year Plan set service goals and guidelines for 29 government and non-government health/social service providers in the drug field in Hong Kong. The contribution of the longitudinal study of chronic heroin abusers to the drug rehabilitation policy is also shown in the government appointment of Y.W. CHEUNG as the Convenor (2009-2017) of the Narcotics Division Research Advisory Group (a consulting and funding committee that sets research agenda for drug service and policy development) as well as awarding him the Medal of Honor in 2008, as nominated by the Narcotics Division and presented by the HKSAR Government [C3].

4.2 Enhancing Treatment Services to Chronic Heroin Abusers

The Society for Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers (SARDA) has exploited the longitudinal findings for the treatment of chronic heroin addicts [C4, p.4]. SARDA is the largest NGO voluntary treatment agency in Hong Kong. Among the 19 voluntary residential treatment organizations in the community, SARDA has contributed to 20% of the treatment places [C5]. It is also the sole agency to offer counselling services in the outpatient methadone treatment programme delegated by the Department of Health of the HKSAR Government. Y.W. CHEUNG has been SARDA’s research partner and executive committee member since 1995 [C5, p.1]. His research prompted SARDA to **“establish the standard of counselling service for methadone patients** who are primarily heroin abusers...The standard moves beyond the goal of full abstinence to acknowledge the progressive nature of achieving drug free and the goal of short-term abstinence from illicit drugs under methadone maintenance” [C5, p.2]. Specifically, his research has led to SARDA’s adoption of Harm Reduction Psychotherapy (HRP) in 2013, a programme that motivated clients to set goals to reduce illicit drug use. HRP was developed into the ADAPT (Addiction Dimensions for Assessment and Personalized Treatment) model in 2017. The model did not require clients’ commitment to full abstinence as a prerequisite for accessing counselling services. It identified methadone clients’ bio-psycho-social problems and channelled their coping to reduce addiction severity. The ADAPT model had been an essential tool in SARDA’s methadone treatment counselling service, which had benefitted over 1,900 methadone clients per year [C5, p.2].

In addition, evidence pertaining to the beneficial effects of life satisfaction in CHEUNG and CHEUNG’s research has inspired **the evolution of SARDA’s counselling model of the methadone treatment programme from its original group training mode to a more personalized one, integrating life satisfaction** into life domains of varying significance to different individual clients [C5, p.2]. As stated in SARDA’s 2013 Year Plan of Counselling Service for Methadone Treatment Programme Patients, “we help our clients to increase satisfaction in family relationships, recreational activities, social networks and vocation for reducing the probability of continuing or resuming drug use.” This model has been practiced in 630 counselling sessions annually, with each session serving 10-12 clients and their family members. During the assessment period, at least 7,800 methadone clients and their family members benefitted from the service [C5].

Finally, as stated in its annual report 2016-17, SARDA has **integrated the healing roles of employment and non-drug-using peer support, which were highlighted in the research, in its implementation of the ‘Peer Counsellor and Internship Scheme’** for chronic drug abusers: *“The schemes mainly employ drug rehabilitants as peer counsellors to act as role models. Peer counsellors inspire rehabilitants by sharing their successful rehabilitation experiences... They will further receive vocational training so as to develop positive work attitude, experience challenges in the actual workplace and build self-confidence, preparing for future reintegration into society...”* [C4, p.6; C5,

p.3]. The scheme had benefitted a total of 26 full-time and 15 part-time peer counsellors in 2017-18. The full-time peer counsellors worked at residential treatment centres and served 1,370 inpatient addicts. The part-time peer counsellors worked at the outpatient methadone clinics and served over 1,900 methadone clients.

4.3 Raising the Agenda of Post-treatment Policy for the Younger Generation of Psychoactive Drug Abusers

CHEUNG and CHEUNG's second longitudinal study highlighted the importance of life satisfaction in reducing psychoactive drug abuse and permissiveness towards occasional/recreational use of drugs. Their findings **inspired the idea of "post-treatment life planning" specifically tailored for the younger generation of psychoactive drug abusers**. CHEUNG and CHEUNG proposed that life planning can be an effective means to help young abusers to progressively reach a realistic life goal. Through the reinforcing effects of goal attainment, young abusers' capacity for self-reflection on personal growth is nurtured, vocational paths are planned, social life is boosted, and a drug-free attitude is sustained. The Commissioner for Narcotics supported this idea [C3] and in November 2018 invited CHEUNG and CHEUNG to discuss their longitudinal findings and the idea with members of the Drug Liaison Committee (DLC) [C6], which was chaired by the Commissioner for Narcotics and comprised 36 NGO representatives.

The post-treatment life planning idea inspired by CHEUNG and CHEUNG's research was further recognized by the Narcotics Division through the appointment of Y.W. CHEUNG as the Chairman of its Subcommittee on Treatment and Rehabilitation of the Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) in February 2019 [C3] to advise the Committee on treatment policies. ACAN is an advisory body in the Narcotics Division chaired by a non-official member and consists of community members from social work, education, medicine and community service alongside drug rehabilitation experts. N.W.T. CHEUNG has also been appointed as a member of the Narcotics Division Research Advisory Group to advise on drug service and policy development research (2017-2021).

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] [Central Registry of Drug Abuse Statistics 67th Report published by Narcotics Division, Government of Hong Kong SAR](#), corroborating the decrease in the number of reported drug abusers and the relapse problem between 2013 and 2017 in Hong Kong. [Appended]
- [C2] Narcotics Division, Government of the Hong Kong SAR. (2015). [Three-Year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong 2015-2017](#). [Appended]
- [C3] Testimonial provided by the Commissioner for Narcotics, Narcotics Division, Government of Hong Kong SAR, on 15 August 2019, corroborating the value of research informing the drug rehabilitation policy. [Appended]
- [C4] [Annual Report 2016-17 of The Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers \(SARDA\)](#), a NGO treatment agency, corroborating SARDA as the largest treatment agency in Hong Kong as well as the value of research informing the peer counsellor and internship service for recovered addicts. [Appended]
- [C5] Testimonial provided by the Executive Director of The Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers on 12 August 2019, corroborating the value of research enhancing various aspects of drug rehabilitation service development. [Appended]
- [C6] See [73rd Meeting Agenda of Drug Liaison Committee, Narcotics Division, dated 14 November 2018](#). [Appended]