

Drug Using Youth Groups in Sochi Russia

Abstract

In Russian academic literature, drug use is generally approached as a “social problem” that can be “resolved” through the curbing of the supply of drugs and the punishment of drug users and traders. This approach is rooted in understandings drug use as an “escape” from harsh social reality (often linked to economic transformation and moral confusion following the collapse of the Soviet Union). The research from this case study in Sochi – a city in which young people have relatively good economic and cultural opportunities – undermines a key argument underpinning this problematising discourse. The material suggests, on the contrary, that drugs – especially “recreational drugs” – are becoming an increasingly routine (“normal”) part of the youth cultural environment.

Keywords: xenophobia, drug use, youth, subculture

Introduction

In Russian academic literature, drug use is generally approached as a “social problem”. Thus Zvonovskii and Romanovich (2004) explain the use of narcotic substances by reference to, among other things, a “tough daily life”. Bykov (2000) puts drug addiction down to “dissatisfaction with life in relation to a wide variety of circumstances including: personal difficulties; inadequate socio-cultural provision providing no opportunities for spending free time, which is particularly important to young people; social injustice; disorganisation of everyday life; disappointment in people and the lack of opportunity in these conditions to fulfil oneself (lack of success in work, study, the creative sphere or personal life)”. Zhuravleva (2000) concludes that, at a general level, “sociological research shows deviant behaviour to be compensatory.”

The material gathered in the course of research for the SAL project in Sochi, however, has allowed the development of a critique of the key argument underpinning this problematising discourse. This is, firstly, because of the specific status of the city of Sochi in the Russian Federation. Not only is the city the most popular resort

in the country, attracting thousands of tourists from Russia and abroad annually, but the decision to award the city the 2014 Winter Olympic Games has provided a huge additional impulse for economic, social and cultural development and inward investment. For young people in the city, the tourists – from Moscow and abroad – are points of reference and imitation; they are perceived as a kind of symbol of style, innovation and “progressiveness”. Local young people actively assimilate this important cultural channel and devour information about new and fashionable brands, trends, books and music, modes of moving and dressing, slang and new ideas. Secondly the research offers the opportunity to rethink existing approaches because it was conducted among young people with relatively good levels of material and social capital and thus access to a wide spectrum of socio-cultural practices. Thus the new empirical research conducted for this case study suggests that approaching the issue of the rise of drug use among young people as, first and foremost, a social problem – of “disadapted” or asocial youth – is far from a sufficient approach to the issues involved.

Methods

Two six-week periods of fieldwork were conducted in 2006 and 2007. Access to the groups was gained through existing contacts from earlier research conducted by the research team and snowballing. The following methods of research were employed:

- Ethnographic observation
- Interviews with respondents [recorded]
- Diary-keeping
- Photos including giving cameras to respondents to take photos of the group themselves
- Video recordings
- Researcher reflections on fieldwork
- Walking tours of the city with respondents

A total of 26 interviews and two fieldwork diaries were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo7 software.

Results

From this case study, the following tendencies were discerned:

- There has been a decline in public discourse about the problem of drug use in Russia. This problem is considered to be one related primarily to the “past”. The strengthening of legislation on the sale and possession of drugs, treatment of drug abuse and anti-drugs information has produced the intended results.

At the same time, however, the research indicated that, within the youth sphere, there has been no eradication but, on the contrary, a “normalisation” of drugs. Cannabis has been completely removed from the space of myth and fear in young people’s minds. Intravenous drug use continues to be viewed negatively primarily for fear of HIV infection and because of the generally negative image of these substances which are associated with marginalised representatives of the underclass. However, alongside this negativity about “hard drugs”, other drug practices have become widespread. In particular, thanks to the subtropical climate in Sochi, the cultivation of cannabis has become large-scale; there are whole villages that specialise in the cultivation and sale of cannabis.

- Young people consider some forms of narcotic substances not to constitute “drugs”. For example, cannabis is widely referred to as “grass” (*travka*), making it appear a “natural” and harmless substance. Moreover the use of cannabis by others is generally tolerated even by those who do not use it themselves. In this case study, various groups practised the use of drugs such as cannabis, nutmeg (around 5 at a time), magic mushrooms and so-called “pharmaceuticals” – substances containing codeine and other narcotic substances. These medicinal products (mainly cough syrups and tablets) can be bought without a prescription and thus their affordability and accessibility make them extremely popular among local youth.
- Drug use practices are almost always connected with group solidarity and group practices. If some members of a group begin to experiment with drugs then, with time, almost all in the group assimilate this practice. In one of the groups studied, for example, there were regular “drug-days” when almost the whole group bought and used drugs together. However, abstention from drugs also worked in this way. If a number of people (or a particular group authority) stopped using then, with time, this practice also disappeared from the group as a whole. This mechanism is useful to note in the context of implementing effective anti-drugs campaigns.
- In subcultural and street youth groups, the use of drugs is more widespread than it is in student groups. Space free from the control of adults provides a good deal of freedom for experimentation, and the informational flow about drugs is itself much more intensive. Moreover, in some groups, drug use is legitimated for the purposes of experiencing new sensations, considered necessary for creative people including musicians, artists, graffiti artists and others. In particular, in one of the groups studied consisting primarily of rappers, skateboarders and roller-skaters, almost all the members use drugs. This appears almost as a kind of subcultural prerequisite:

It was the hippies that drew all this before. There were little flowers everywhere, these little hearts, all that kind of stuff. Everything was kind of floating... like when you are smoking [dope], to put it crudely. This was the Old School style of the 60s-70s. (Musician and graffiti artist, 16-year old)

- The use of drugs and the use of alcohol are often considered inextricably intertwined. In all the groups researched, there had been a gradual progression from alcohol to cannabis use and then to other drugs. Some informants even talked about the advantages of cannabis over alcohol since the latter was considered to have greater physical and psychological effects:

Those who like to smoke [cannabis], there are loads of such people now; probably everybody likes to smoke, to be frank. [Then there are] those who down barbiturates and go off to the clubs. They go to the chemist, down some like, and then go [to the club] and they are in this kind of state. ... [Well] alcohol makes you feel sick, but this doesn't make you feel sick and so you just have your own highs. You're on your own wave; you don't heave. ... (Musician and graffiti artist, 16-year old)

- Drugs, their use and the practices linked to their commercial sale are one reason for cultural and even ethnic conflicts. For example, the members of one group were negatively disposed towards Abkhaz and Armenians living in some villages in the far south of Krasnodar Territory, near to Abkhazia, because, in their opinion, these people were producing cannabis and other natural narcotic substances on an industrial scale. Often ethnic labels are attached in this way to drug dealers. At the same time, nationalistically-oriented youth groups attribute what they consider to a negative predisposition towards the use of cannabis among skaters and rappers to the influence of African cultures such as Rasta and Afro-American rap. Another example of cultural conflict is the image among some groups who used "natural" drugs such as cannabis, mushrooms and nutmeg that it was unacceptable to use synthetic or chemically produced drugs, including "pharmaceuticals":

Mainly everyone is downing pills. A really big problem in the city is the use of Terpenkod. I have never touched it though. I might have a smoke, have some mushrooms. But I don't mess about with... I am in favour of natural products. But all these barbs, especially the pharmaceuticals – it's just, it's a problem at the Fun-Box [name of place where hang out], because even if you walk around the area, you find these packets [lying around]. There are a lot of them. ... Many people do up to 10 packets of Terpenkod and then end up on "black" [heroin]. (Rapper, 22-year old)

- One of the channels encouraging a high level of tolerance towards the distribution and use of drugs is the Internet and the mass media as a whole.

In particular books, films and Internet sites that have gained cult status and that contain drugs-tolerant discourse facilitate the manifestation of interest and even sympathy towards some drug use practices.

Conclusions

This research suggests that starting from a study of the youth cultural scene – including the drug using aspects of it – provides a very different understanding of drug use among young people than mainstream approaches which envisage drug use as always “problematic”. It suggests that drug use is related to specific forms of youth cultural solidarities but may be built into a rich and varied cultural repertoire rather than providing an “escape” for troubled young people and always leading to isolated, problem drug use. The understanding of drug use in its wider youth cultural context is vital to developing effective drugs education materials that provide young people with the information they need to minimise the harm that drugs can do.

References

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Santrauka

Rusijos mokslinėje literatūroje narkotikų vartojimas paprastai traktuojamas kaip „socialinė problema“, kuri gali būti „išspręsta“, pažabojus narkotikų pasiūlą ir taikant bausmes narkotikų vartotojams bei prekiautojams. Šis požiūris grindžiamas narkotikų vartojimo, kaip pabėgimo nuo atšiaurios socialinės tikrovės, aiškinimu (dažnai susijęs su ekonomine pertvarka ir moraline sumaištimi, kilusia po Sovietų Sąjungos žlugimo).

Šio atvejo tyrimas Sočyje – mieste, kuriame jaunimas turi palyginti geras ekonomines ir kultūrinės galimybes – sugriauna pagrindinį argumentą, grindžiantį minėtus aiškinimus. Tyrimas pateikia priešingus argumentus: narkotikai – ypač „pramoginiai“ – tampa vis įprastesne („normalia“) jaunimo kultūros dalimi.

Tyrimo naudoti 26 giluminiai interviu su narkotikų vartotojais ir du lauko tyrimų dienoraščiai, taip pat tiesiogiai bendrauta laisvalaikio.

Raktažodžiai: ksenofobija, narkotikų vartojimas, jaunimas, subkultūra.