

Research paper

Beyond ‘peer pressure’: Rethinking drug use and ‘youth culture’

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Received 7 April 2006; received in revised form 28 July 2006; accepted 9 August 2006

Abstract

The study of drug use by young people in the West has been transformed over the last decade by the development of sociological approaches to drug use which take serious account of the cultural context in which young people encounter drugs. One consequence is that the notion of ‘peer pressure’, as the primary articulation of the engagement between youth culture and drug use, has been displaced by that of ‘normalisation’, which envisages ‘recreational’ drug use as one expression of consumer-based youth cultural lifestyles. In stark contrast, academic discussion of drug use in Russia remains primarily concerned with the prevalence and health consequences of (intravenous) drug use while explanations of rising rates of drug use focus on structural factors related to the expansion of drugs supply and, to a lesser extent, post-Soviet social and economic dislocation. In this article, original empirical research in Russia is used to develop an understanding of young people’s drug use that synthesises structural and cultural explanations of it. It does this by situating young people’s narratives of their drugs choices in the context of local drugs markets and broader socio-economic processes. However, it attempts to go beyond seeing structural location as simply a ‘constraint’ on individual choice by adopting an understanding of ‘youth culture’ as a range of youth cultural practices and formations that simultaneously embody, reproduce and negotiate the structural locations of their subjects.

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Keywords: Drug use; Youth cultural practice; ‘Normalisation thesis’; Post-Soviet Russia

Introduction

Over the last decade, the study of young people’s drug use has been transformed radically by the development of a sociological framework for understanding young people’s routine engagement with, and accommodation of, ‘recreational’ drugs. The ‘normalisation thesis’ (Measham, Newcombe, & Parker, 1994) suggests that, by the 1990s, the trend towards the gradual ‘desubculturalization’ of drug use in society had extended such that recreational drug use had become ‘normalised’ within mainstream youth culture (Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998, pp. 153–157). Underpinning the argument is a conceptualization of young people’s drug use as a series of ‘rational decisions about consumption’ (p. 154) rather than an uninformed response to ‘peer pressure’. This understanding of illicit substance use follows a tendency within youth cultural studies to view consumption as the key resource for, and site of, young peo-

ple’s identity formation (Bennett, 1999; Miles, 2000). The sociological study of drug use and youth cultural practice thus go hand in hand; the consumption of a range of legal and illicit substances becomes one element in the creation and re-creation of youth cultural identities (Duff, 2003, p. 443).

The emphasis Parker et al. lay on understanding drug use as an element of broader youth cultural practices, however, has generated growing critique, albeit, paradoxically, on grounds that it is both too cultural and that it is not cultural enough. In the first case, it is argued, the theoretical focus of the ‘normalisation thesis’ – on how individuals make choices about ‘risks’ in the context of information-rich environments – obscures more fundamental, structural determinants of drug use (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Shildrick, 2002). These determinants include the relative availability and cost of different types of drugs (Gossop, 2000, p. 38; Johnston, MacDonald, Mason, Ridley, & Webster, 2000; MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Parker, Bakx, & Newcombe, 1988; Pearson, 1987) as well as traditional patterns of inequality (Shildrick, 2002, p. 45). The conclusion that both MacDonald and Marsh (2002, p. 29) and Shildrick (2002, p. 36) draw is that the

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notion of the ‘normalisation’ of drug use should be recast as ‘differentiated normalisation’ to capture the empirical observation that different types of drugs and different modes of their use may become ‘normalised’ for different groups of young people depending upon the opportunities and constraints placed upon them by their structural location.

A further set of criticisms seek to reconfigure structural and cultural understandings of drug use by envisaging the power relations that MacDonald and Marsh and Shildrick locate in social and economic relations as embedded, rather, in the realm of cultural production and representation. On the one hand this critique is concerned with exposing how commercial systems – such as advertising – define, re-circulate and ‘mainstream’ culture through youth-targeted imagery (Taylor, 2000). On the other hand, the power of the media, and other social institutions, is seen as being used to create a discourse of regulation, which disciplines those – such as drug users – who fall outside the ‘normalizing judgment’ (Blackman, 2004, p. 143). Such approaches illuminate effectively how the discursive construction of drug and alcohol use is interwoven with political discourses that shift responsibility for minimizing risk to individuals, families and communities (Dean, 1999), how ‘excessive’ consumption becomes pathologised (O’Malley & Valverde, 2004) and how this encourages the extension of the surveillance, discipline and regulation of young people (Kelly, 2003, p. 176).

Critiques of the ‘normalisation thesis’ on the grounds of its insufficient sensitivity to the cultural context of drug use have pointed to the dangers, in particular, of extrapolating a cultural predisposition – ‘normalisation’ – from behavioural data. These data, it is suggested, are themselves crudely determined from ‘life-time reported use’ indicators that exaggerate the prevalence of drug use since they fail to distinguish between experimentation and occasional or regular use (Shiner & Newburn, 1997, pp. 515–519). There has been criticism also of the failure to recognise the slippage between ‘recreational’ and other drug use in certain local contexts (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Pilkington, 2006; Shildrick, 2002). Finally, it has been suggested that theories of individualisation of risk foster a too limited understanding of young people’s drug decisions as individual consumer choices; this, it is argued (Pilkington, 2007), underestimates the hermeneutic dimension of reflexivity reflected in the friendship group context of young people’s drug decisions and use.

Drug use in Russia: bringing culture in

In sharp contrast to this increasingly nuanced debate in the West, Russian sociological writing on drug use is characterised by a concern with charting ‘*narkotizm*’ (prevalence of drug use) among young people (Stozharova, 2003) or the ‘narcotisation’ (growth in, and extension of, the prevalence of drug use) of youth (Zhuravleva, 2000) whilst often failing to distinguish between different kinds of drugs being used, or between ‘drug use’ and ‘drug addiction’ (although excep-

tions to this rule include: Malikova, 2000; Omel’chenko, 1999, 2000). Explanations of this process tend to be structural and broad-brush; drug use is presented as the consequence of a combination of changes experienced by Russian society to which young people are particularly ‘vulnerable’ (Aref’ev, 2002, p. 1). Even where sociologists take a consciously ‘cultural’ approach, drug use is understood as an ‘illness’ reflecting an individual’s failure to ‘adapt’ to society (Bykov, 2000, p. 48), or as ‘deviant behaviour’ which compensates for poverty of experiences (Zhuravleva, 2000, p. 43) or reflects the ‘moral dead end’ of post-Soviet society (Stozharova, 2003, p. 108).

Western academic discourse on drug use in Russia to date has focussed on the relationship between injecting drug use and one of the fastest growing HIV epidemics in the world (Grassly et al., 2003; Kramer, 2003; Platt et al., 2004; Power, Khalfin, Nozhkina, & Kanarsky, 2004; Rhodes et al., 1999; Rhodes, Sarang, Bobrik, Bobkov, & Platt, 2004). The link between IDU and HIV has been captured poignantly in the photographs of Ranard (2002) and is the primary focus of international agency concern. The Russian situation is presented as the product of the convergence of two events: the rapid expansion of drugs markets (due to heroin trafficking from Afghanistan and Central Asia); and the emergence of widespread poverty and social dislocation arising from post-1991 economic transition. Attempts to draw more definite causal relationships between these phenomena have suggested that the rise in substance use is driven by the social anomie arising from economic transformation (McKee, 2002). ‘These societies,’ McKee (2002, p. 456) argues in a way not dissimilar from Zhuravleva above, ‘produce people. . . whose outlook is characterised by a sense of futility, lack of purpose, emotional emptiness and despair’.

Rhodes and Simic provide a more comprehensive review of the structural dislocations arising as a consequence of ‘transition’ as they elaborate a ‘risk environment’ approach to understanding (and intervening in) the rapid spread of HIV and the risky drug use practices associated with it. They consider a range of environmental – economic, social and policy – influences that act at both the macro- and micro-level. Social factors, for example, at the macro level include the weakening of civil society and fragmentation of community, while at the micro level they are visible in the prior existence of an injection culture and traditions of ‘aggressive street policing’ (Rhodes & Simic, 2005, p. 221). Thus, unlike McKee – who recognises cultural practices and the supportive social networks that maintain them as conspicuous by their absence (McKee, 2002) – this approach takes seriously the significance of local drug using practices (and the external factors that shape them) in the production of risk (Rhodes et al., 2003).

In a recent, and challenging, intervention in the debate, Fitzgerald takes the cultural approach a step further. Drawing on cultural theories of subjectivity and the body, he argues for a radical rethink of the relationship between economic ‘transition’, drugs markets and drug use (Fitzgerald, 2005).

In contrast to what he describes as the ‘orthodox’ understanding of drug use in transition societies as social pathology (whereby individual responses to economic hardship and social dislocation fuel the development of drugs markets), he suggests that, on the contrary, drugs markets may be integral to the development of new market economies in ‘transition’ societies and that drug use in such societies is attractive to young people because it provides the opportunity to engage in western consumer practices and to develop the new subjectivities that this offers. Flaker (2002), referring to the case of Slovenia, appears to adopt a similar approach, suggesting that drug use is simply ‘a new way of organising life around the (post-modern) values of individuality and subjectivity, primacy of consumption over production, and so on.’ (p. 470). However, Flaker’s vision is one of a deeply polarised society in which neo-liberal ideologies mean that the benefits of a consumer driven economy enjoyed by one part of the population can only be maintained if another section of the population are condemned to unemployment and poverty. Thus, in Flaker’s vision, nonetheless, young people, their cultural contexts and their active choices, disappear while market forces join social dislocation and epidemic disease as the active agents pushing youth into the dead-end of drug addiction.

The empirical research drawn on in this article was undertaken as a collaborative exercise by a team of British and Russian sociologists. It sought to bridge the gap between academic discourses on drug use in the West and in Russia as well as to understand why Russian discourse on drug use was so radically at odds with young Russians’ own narratives of drug use encountered in previous research (Omel’chenko, 1999, 2000; Pilkington, 1994, 1996; Pilkington, Omel’chenko, Flynn, Bliudina, & Starkova, 2002). To this end the research was designed to allow drug use to be understood as it occurs within everyday lives but also to ensure full account was taken of the structural locations that make some young people particularly vulnerable to drug use. Thus, while the approach was consciously ‘cultural’, ‘youth culture’ was envisaged neither as the sum of individual consumer preferences nor as ‘deterritorialized’ (Miles, 2000, p. 159). On the contrary, it was premised on the possibility that drugs markets in different localities facilitate the formation of distinctive drug cultures and routinize (if not ‘normalise’) different kinds of drug use. However, youth culture was not considered to be a mere reflection of structural location but to consist of a range of practices and forms that simultaneously embody, reproduce and negotiate locally configured social inequalities. In the empirical sections of the article, the importance of drug

Table 1
Regional characteristics of the fieldwork sites

Fieldwork region	Fieldwork sites	Geographic and socio-economic characteristics	Local drugs market
Krasnodar territory	Sochi; Belorechensk; Slaviansk na Kubani	Lies in the North Caucasus federal district in the south of Russia. The region borders the Black Sea and the city of Sochi is a centre for tourism and renowned as the summer playground of Russia’s ‘new rich’. It has a well-developed cultural infrastructure including club scene with its attendant drugs market.	The region is one of the three largest natural cannabis growing areas in the Russian Federation. Cannabis growing wild in the North Caucasus is noted for its high narcotic content and ‘can be utilized for the production of marijuana, hashish and hashish oil’ (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003, p. 12). Opium poppy cultivation and the use of poppy seeds for bakery products are also well-established practices.
Samara region	Tol’iatti; Chapaevsk; Otradnoe	Situated in the Volga federal district within the European part of Russia, this is a relatively prosperous region; the city’s regional centre (Samara) is one of Russia’s leading industrial and financial centres. The city of Tol’iatti lies on the banks of the river Volga close to Samara and is a major industrial city focusing on chemical and machine-building enterprises as well as being home to the flagship ‘AvtoVAZ’ automobile plant.	The region lies on a central crossroads for drug trafficking routes from Afghanistan to Western Europe. This is seen as the primary cause of the persistently high rates of drug use recorded in the region. By 2000 Samara region had the highest rate of registered drug addicts in Russia (Kramer, 2003, p. 14) and by 2002 Tol’iatti had a reported 1% HIV infection rate (Vishnevskii, 2002, p. 84).
Komi Republic	Vorkuta; Ukhta; Pechora	Lies in the climatically harsh north-western federal district of Russia and the city of Vorkuta is situated within the Arctic Circle. Komi is historically a ‘republic of prisons’ (Applebaum, 2004, p. 90) and all three fieldwork sites started life as prison camps whose inmates were used to exploit coal and oil deposits in the region. In the post-Soviet period Ukhta has flourished economically due to the expansion of its oil refining activities while Vorkuta’s mines have been gradually closed calling into doubt the city’s future viability.	Komi Republic is isolated from domestic cannabis and opium poppy cultivation areas in the South and the East of the country. Climatic conditions make domestic production of either impossible. The Republic is far removed from the main drug trafficking routes which also come from the South and our main fieldwork site (Vorkuta) is accessible only by air and rail.

markets, social dislocation and inequality in shaping young Russians' drug using practices in a particular location are outlined before the ways in which youth cultural practices themselves transmit and reproduce, but also constrain and resist, structurally rooted propensities to drug use are explored.

Methods

The empirical data referred to in this article are drawn from original research conducted in the Russian Federation in 2002–2003 in three regions – Krasnodar Territory, Samara region and Komi Republic – and in three towns or cities within each region (see Table 1). The data referred to in this article, however, are drawn primarily from Komi Republic; the experience of young people in the other regions is reported only where issues under discussion may be illuminated through comparison.

The project employed three main data gathering methods: survey; semi-structured interviews; and intensive ethnographic studies. The survey was conducted among regionally representative samples of 14–19 year olds ($n=2914$) using a self-complete questionnaire, which was piloted in Ul'ianovsk ($n=60$) before being rolled out to the regions of study. Because of the integrated, mixed-method design of the research, the survey sample was quota-based and the sample unit was educational institution. Whilst recognising that this reduces the representativeness of the survey, this sampling method was adopted in order to facilitate access points to young people for the purposes of recruiting respondents for the interview stage of the research and because the primary purpose of the survey was to generate descriptive statistics that would provide a base line for cross-regional comparison in the absence of existing comparable data on drug use prevalence. Data from the survey cited below therefore are drawn on for their descriptive value only.

Semi-structured interviews ($n=95$) were conducted in parallel with the survey in each of the nine towns and cities. Respondents were invited on a volunteer-basis to participate in interviews following completion of the questionnaire. No strict quota system was used to select respondents but details of interviewees were recorded and monitored on a daily basis to ensure that interviews had been conducted with young people of both sexes, from all types of educational establishment and all three age cohorts used in the survey sample (8th class, 10th class and first year Higher Education institution). Interviews took place either immediately after completion of questionnaires in a quiet place close to the school or in another (public) place at a convenient time for the respondent. All interviews were recorded, transcribed (in Russian) and analysed using ATLAS.ti. Coding was conducted by a team of five coders including the author. Initial codes were generated on the basis of approximately 20% of the interview transcripts after which a single common coding scheme was assembled and used to code the remaining transcripts.

Ethnographic studies were undertaken in three field sites – Sochi, Vorkuta and Chapaevsk – with a total of nineteen friendship groups of young people. A young researcher was located in each of these sites for a period of 6 weeks. Initially contacts were taken up with respondents who had offered their help at earlier stages of fieldwork but researchers subsequently followed respondents into their friendship circles and were not bound by quota criteria in developing their respondent network. The researchers were supported by two training sessions prior to fieldwork and used mobile phones and internet cafés to maintain contact whilst in the field. Each researcher compiled a diary of observations and invited key respondents to assist the research by making their own diaries (audio or written). All textual materials were transcribed and analysed by the ethnographers independently in order to allow the cultural practices of the groups they worked with to be presented with maximum validity.

In order to preserve anonymity, where excerpts from interviews with respondents in the research are cited below, the respondents are referred to only by age, gender, place of residence and drug-using status. Drug-using status was determined by responses given to a question during the semi-structured interview when respondents were invited to choose one of 14 descriptions presented to them on a card to describe their own drug experience. These responses were used to classify respondents into four broad categories: 'abstainers' (*otkazniki*); 'experimenters' (*razoviki*); 'regular users' (*regulatory*); and 'future users' (*budushchie*).

The use of a mixed method research design constitutes both the main strength and the main weakness of this research. When evaluating the evidence presented readers should bear in mind in particular the limitations that arise from the fact that this study: was multi-sited regional, rather than national, in scope; employed a quota-based sample in its survey element; provides a snapshot rather than longitudinal view; and that the ethnographic studies were relatively short and conducted by three different researchers.

Structural forces: markets, locality and social inequality

Public discourse in the Russian Federation emphasises the supply led nature of the country's drugs problems. Media, government and academic sources concur that, prior to 1991, Russia was characterised by low levels of illicit drug use supplied from domestically grown poppy straw and cannabis but that by the end of the 1990s, the country had become an important transit route for drugs from Central Asia and Afghanistan to Western Europe and Japan (Bykov, 2000, p. 51; Paoli, 2002, p. 22). By 2001, drug seizure figures indicated that 96.5% of the heroin, 60% of the opium, and 53% of the cannabis had come from, or through, the Central Asian states (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003, p. 14). This increase in the volume of trafficked drugs is viewed as the primary cause of structural change in the

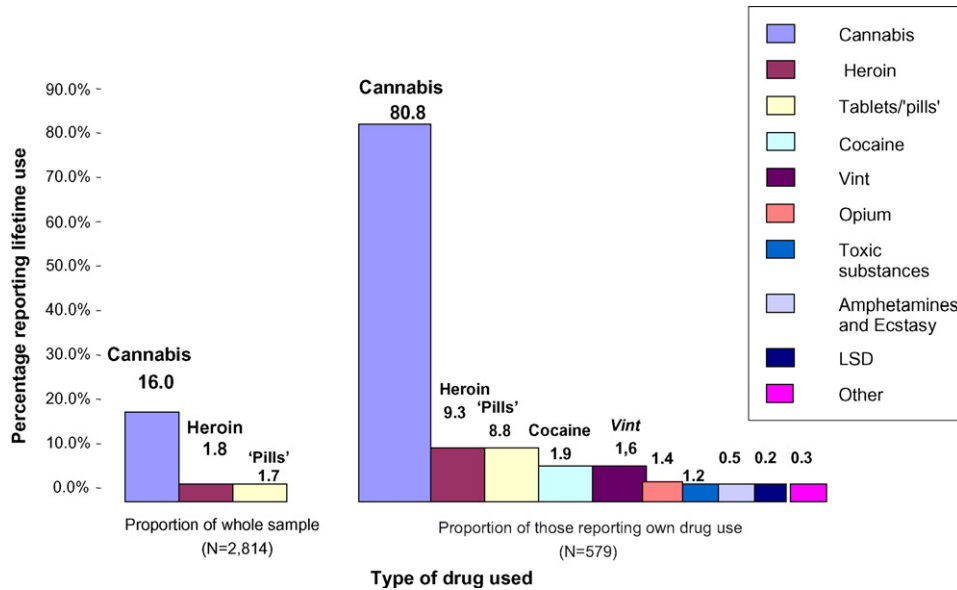


Fig. 1. Life-time reported drug use by drug (%).

domestic Russian drug market as an increasing proportion is absorbed locally. By October 2005, the Russian Federal Service for the Control of the Drugs Trade claimed that an ‘epidemic of drug addiction’ had spread to around 4% of the total population (Itar Tass, 2005) and declared young people to be particularly at risk. This claim is supported by data from the Ministry of Health which show a seventeen-fold rise in the number of ‘teenage drug addicts’ between 1991 and 2001 (Koshkina, 2003, p. 126) while the UNODC has estimated that over two-thirds of ‘drug addicts’ are under 30 years of age (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003, p. 22).

Empirical research confirms the importance of supply in shaping young people’s drug use. The virtual invisibility of Ecstasy and cocaine revealed by the survey element of

the research (see Fig. 1) reflects the relative availability and affordability of different drugs in Russian provincial cities. The average street price for 1g of cocaine in 2001, for example, was reported to be US\$ 120–150 compared to US\$ 30–35 per gram of heroin (Paoli, 2002, p. 24; The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003, p. 19). Moreover, in the remoter cities in which research was conducted for this project the differentials are even higher; the street price of cocaine in Vorkuta was US\$ 150–200, compared to just under US\$ 7 for a single dose of heroin.

Young people’s access to the most commonly used illicit drugs – cannabis and heroin – is more regionally and seasonally dependent (see Table 1). Following the logic of the argument that drug use in Russia is supply-led, prevalence of cannabis and opiate use would be expected to be highest

Table 2
Life-time reported drug use by region and city

% of total sample		Regions and towns											
		Samara region	Tol'jatti	Otradnoe	Chapaevsk	Komi Republic	Vorkuta	Pechora	Ukhta	Krasnodar Territory	Sochi	Belorechensk	Slaviansk
Have used (any drug)	20.6	16.5	18.9	15.4	12.0	29.2	30.3	16.8	34.2	15.9	21.1	13.0	10.2
Have not used (any drug)	79.4	83.5	81.1	84.6	88.0	70.8	69.7	83.2	65.8	84.1	78.9	87.0	89.8
Have used heroin	1.8	2.2	3.6	0.4	0.9	2.1	2.1	1.5	2.3	1.2	2.0	0.4	0.8
Have used heroin as % of those reporting any drug use	9.3	14.1	19.8	2.7	8.0	7.2	7.0	9.4	7.0	7.9	9.6	3.3	7.7

in Samara region (through which the busiest drug trafficking routes pass) and Krasnodar Territory (where cannabis and opium poppy grow wild and ports on the Black Sea are exploited for the transshipment of drugs). The empirical research drawn on in this article, however, revealed the highest regional rate of life-time reported drug use among young people (29%) to be in the region (Komi Republic) most isolated from known sources of drug supply (see Table 2).

The remoteness of Komi Republic – and in particular the fieldwork site of Vorkuta, which is located within the Arctic Circle and inaccessible by road – means that drugs are more difficult to access, and more expensive, than in other parts of Russia. Nonetheless, of the nine fieldwork sites, the cities recording the highest rates of life-time reported use of any drug were both in Komi Republic (see Table 2).

Equally excluded: explaining drug use prevalence on Russia's periphery

This finding provides a clear challenge to the understanding of drug use trends in Russia as wholly supply-led and any attempt to understand the situation in Komi Republic suggests the need for two important qualifications of the role of drugs markets in determining drug use prevalence among Russian youth.

The first is that young people are active shapers, rather than passive 'victims', of drugs markets. This is particularly evident in Komi Republic because, in contrast to respondents in the other regions of study who reported both cannabis and heroin to be easily obtainable 'on the street, in the yard, through friends or acquaintances' (Tol'iatti, male, 18 years, 'regular user'), they had to develop strategies to overcome their structurally disadvantaged position in the drugs market. Thus, in the relative absence of major organised drug dealers, low-level, spontaneous drug trafficking emerges often on the basis of traditional street gangs (Vorkuta, female, 17 years, 'experimenter'). This is illustrated by the following respondent's description of a job he was asked to do for the gang.

Respondent: 'Well, I was asked to carry cannabis to Vorkuta. And I did. I did it for the money really. I carried it via Moscow—a little packet of it. I needed the money, otherwise I wouldn't have just done it.'

Interviewer: 'So you transported it from Briansk?'

Respondent: 'Yes, from Briansk. The most frightening thing was that I was travelling on my own. From Moscow I was on my own, without my parents or anyone. I had the cannabis in my bag. I had a sizeable [packet]. . .'

(Vorkuta, male, 17 years, 'abstainer')

Young people also shape the market by actively adapting their substance use to the conditions of relatively short

supply of expensive drugs. The comparative data show, for example, that young people in Komi make later drugs debuts compensating for this via higher alcohol (especially vodka) use (Pilkington, 2004, pp. 45, 50) and that drugs debuts are strongly correlated with young people's temporary access to more hospitable drugs markets during their summer trips to the South of Russia (see below).

The second qualification relates to the importance of deindustrialisation and social exclusion alongside drugs market as indicators of propensity to drug use. During the Soviet period the development of geographically remote parts of the country like Komi Republic was made possible by the planned economic system. The introduction of the market in post-Soviet Russia, however, led to the collapse of mono-industrial development and this, combined with the harsh climate, and remoteness from the economic 'core', has left such populations stranded. This is quite literally the case in Vorkuta where the rapid closure of the mines upon which economic activity in the city is based has turned many of the outlying mining settlements (*poselki*) into semi-ghost towns as residents leave in large numbers amidst speculation that the city has no more than another 50 years of economic sustainability.

The connection between deindustrialisation and drug use is well-established; in the UK, studies of new heroin outbreaks have pointed to high unemployment (Pearson, 1987, p. 74), social deprivation, poor educational experiences (Parker et al., 1988, p. 22) and high levels of social exclusion (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002) as key factors, alongside local drugs markets, in explaining why, in some localities, young people 'cross the rubicon' from recreational to addictive drug use. In Vorkuta, the painful nature of massive deindustrialisation and depopulation is tangible and vividly reflected in young people's cultural practices. As people leave the city, their abandoned flats, cellars and garages are turned by young people into spaces for their own leisure. These spaces compensate for the complete lack of cultural infrastructure especially in the outlying mining settlements and provide warm, secluded spaces for cultural practices including the use of illicit substances. While in and of itself poor cultural infrastructure is not unique to Vorkuta – respondents in all the fieldwork sites complained about constraints on leisure activities – its residents articulate a real sense of isolation and abandonment:

Interviewer: 'Okay. But what about restaurants or cafes—are there any round here?'

Respondent: 'No [embarrassed]—our settlement is small. There used to be one, but not any more.'

Interviewer: 'When was that?'

Respondent: 'About 5 years ago probably it closed. There was a bar there.'

(Vorkuta, female, 16 years, 'experimenter')

However, the exceptionally deep pocket of social exclusion in Vorkuta cannot account for the higher drug use reported in Komi Republic as a whole; a similarly high rate of use is reported in a second fieldwork site in the region—Ukhta. The city of Ukhta, although on the same railway route north of the Republic's capital (Syktyvkaar) as Vorkuta, has prospered in post-Soviet times due to the development of oil and gas extraction and refinement industries in and around the city. The very different economic fortunes of Ukhta and Vorkuta, alongside their shared high levels of drug use, thus suggest that definitions of 'social exclusion' need to be sensitive not only to economic opportunities but also to cultural factors.

Drug use in context: youth cultural identities in Russia's 'badlands'

In this final section of the article, interview and ethnographic data from Komi Republic are examined in an attempt to take some first steps towards explaining how the experience of marginality is reflected in, and reproduced, by young people's cultural practices including drug use. In order to give a sense of how drug practices sit within 'real lives', particular attention is given to the story of one respondent 'Nadia' (pseudonym) who participated in all three (survey, interview and ethnographic) stages of the research. This is primarily for illustrative purposes; the arguments advanced are based on the analysis of interview and ethnographic data for Komi Republic as a whole and will be tested in the course of fieldwork planned in the region in 2006–2007.

Going south: confronting youth cultural isolation

A long-established parental response to the geographic isolation and hostile climate of Komi Republic has been to send children to holiday camps in the South of Russia in the school summer vacation period. Even though previously subsidised youth camp places have largely disappeared, many young people continue to travel in the summer to stay with friends and relatives in more climatically hospitable areas of the country. While these practices provide important respite from Arctic living conditions, travelling to the 'outside' world can expose young people's isolation in a way that makes them feel deeply uncomfortable. Indicative here is the story of 'Nadia', a 17 year-old school student from Vorkuta. When she was interviewed initially she was an 'absolute abstainer' who had no illicit substance experience, declared a dislike for alcohol and had never tried anything stronger than wine. A year later, her life had been transformed. She had ended all contact with her old group of friends, started hanging out with a completely new crowd and progressed through experimentation with alcohol, cannabis and *vint* (a methamphetamine solution based on ephedrine found in many over-the-counter and prescription medications and either 'brewed' at home or sold in ampules or 'ready to go' syringes for intravenous use) in quick succession. The key moment in this transition

was the intervening summer holidays, which she had spent away from home, in a provincial city 350 km South-west of Moscow. During that long summer vacation she had made friends with a group of young people who used alcohol heavily but had felt isolated and inadequate in their company. This is how Nadia explains that experience:

'There I met some young people who didn't particularly care about avoiding them [drugs]. At first I was very much the odd one out. Because, for example when they went round to visit someone or something, they had beer, and wine and vodka. Once they even went as far as *samogon* [home distilled alcohol]. But I wasn't drinking any of it. I just sat there. They were all drunk, all having fun. They all felt great. And I was sitting there on my own, scared and intimidated.'

('Nadia', Vorkuta, female, 17 years, 'regular user')

Nadia articulates her youth cultural isolation through her association of a physical, spatial separation with a position of inferiority – 'I was sitting there on my own. . . intimidated' – and in order to re-connect herself, to feel part of things, she began to drink. Furnished with her newly acquired youth cultural skills when Nadia returned to Vorkuta she did not go back into her former friendship group – in which drug abstinence was the norm – but actively sought to meet 'new people' by going to discos on her own. The new friends she found in this way were users of both alcohol and illicit drugs and with them Nadia made her drugs debut, first with cannabis and then with *vint*.

Nadia's narrative illustrates the way in which structural and cultural factors are entwined in shaping alcohol and drug use trajectories. The territorial isolation of Vorkuta means drugs are expensive and delays young people's drug debuts. Thus, when young people are sent away for the summer vacation – itself a cultural response by Vorkuta parents to compensate for their children's difficult living environment – they are relatively ill-equipped to manage the youth cultural environments they encounter. As in Nadia's case, this can mean those trips are experienced as a painful exposure of their marginalisation resulting in a 'catch up' youth cultural strategy when they return. This strategy works for Nadia to the extent that by redefining her 'risk reputation' (Green, Mitchell, & Bunton, 2000, p. 113) she is able to reposition herself within the youth scene in Vorkuta in a way that makes her feel more 'connected' to the wider youth cultural body. At the same time, however, this strategy – a late drugs debut followed by rapid progression to intravenous drug use – potentially reproduces the social marginalisation it originally sought to overcome.

'Walking the walk': symbolic displays of marginality

A striking characteristic of Nadia's story is the way in which she narrates it without any recourse to neutralisa-

Table 3

How would you react if one of your friends began to...?

	% of total sample	Regions and towns											
		Samara region	Tol'jatti	Otradnoe	Chapaevsk	Komi Republic	Vorkuta	Pechora	Ukhta	Krasnodar Territory	Sochi	Belorechensk	Slaviansk
...experiment with or start to use 'grass' (cannabis)?													
I would continue the friendship unchanged	35.4%	28.2%	31.9%	22.9%	26.1%	47.0%	48.0%	33.7%	52.6%	31.1%	36.5%	29.4%	23.6%
I would draw back from the friendship but continue occasional contact	30.7%	34.9%	33.8%	35.9%	36.2%	28.3%	29.3%	29.0%	26.8%	28.7%	27.0%	33.8%	26.8%
I would cease all contact	22.5%	26.3%	25.0%	30.2%	23.7%	14.1%	12.5%	23.3%	11.3%	27.2%	22.9%	24.1%	36.8%
Don't know	11.4%	10.7%	9.3%	11.1%	14.0%	10.5%	10.1%	14.0%	9.2%	13.1%	13.6%	12.7%	12.8%
Total no. of responses	2831	1008	539	262	207	948	375	193	380	875	397	228	250
... experiment with or start to use heroin?													
I would continue the friendship unchanged	5.1%	3.3%	3.4%	2.7%	3.8%	7.5%	6.4%	8.6%	7.9%	4.5%	6.4%	4.1%	2.0%
I would draw back from the friendship but continue occasional contact	24.1%	22.7%	22.1%	22.4%	25.5%	29.1%	30.0%	21.9%	31.5%	20.3%	22.9%	19.8%	16.8%
I would cease all contact	59.8%	64.9%	66.1%	64.7%	61.5%	51.7%	52.5%	62.6%	45.8%	62.7%	56.7%	62.2%	72.4%
Don't know	11.0%	9.1%	8.4%	10.2%	9.1%	11.7%	11.0%	7.0%	14.8%	12.4%	13.9%	14.0%	8.8%
Total no. of responses	2795	997	534	255	208	938	373	187	378	860	388	222	250
... begin drinking alcohol regularly?													
I would continue the friendship unchanged	23.2%	22.6%	26.8%	19.4%	16.7%	27.4%	26.1%	25.0%	29.6%	19.3%	21.6%	20.8%	13.9%
I would draw back from the friendship but continue occasional contact	39.2%	41.3%	40.9%	36.5%	47.8%	43.2%	46.0%	42.0%	41.3%	32.5%	32.6%	31.0%	33.9%
I would cease all contact	27.9%	27.8%	25.5%	32.1%	28.6%	21.3%	20.2%	26.6%	19.8%	35.1%	32.4%	35.8%	38.6%
Don't know	9.7%	8.3%	6.8%	11.9%	6.9%	8.1%	7.8%	6.4%	9.3%	13.1%	13.4%	12.4%	13.5%
Total no. of responses	2789	985	530	252	203	938	372	188	378	866	389	226	251
... get involved with a criminal gang?													
I would continue the friendship unchanged	14.9%	14.3%	16.6%	13.2%	9.8%	18.4%	22.0%	10.5%	18.9%	11.6%	13.3%	13.4%	7.2%
I would draw back from the friendship but continue occasional contact	19.3%	18.9%	20.9%	16.7%	16.7%	22.8%	23.6%	18.3%	23.9%	15.9%	18.9%	15.6%	11.6%
I would cease all contact	53.7%	55.4%	52.1%	57.0%	61.3%	47.0%	42.1%	62.3%	44.4%	58.8%	53.6%	56.7%	69.2%
Don't know	12.2%	11.4%	10.3%	13.2%	12.3%	11.8%	12.3%	8.9%	12.8%	13.6%	14.3%	14.3%	12.0%
Total no. of responses	2803	997	535	258	204	940	373	191	376	866	392	224	250

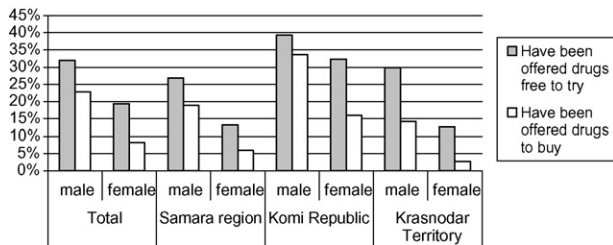


Fig. 2. Drug offers by region and gender.

tion techniques. While she might easily have explained her changed situation as a result of having been ‘influenced’ by a ‘bad crowd’ while on holiday, in fact she recounted her alcohol and drugs debuts as a conscious desire to experiment and showed no compulsion to explain or justify her drugs choices. This reflects a feature of the youth cultural scene in Vorkuta, and Komi Republic more widely, which, relative to the other regions of study, is distinguished by heightened tolerance towards drug use and other ‘deviant practices’ (see Table 3) and a high level of exposure to drug offers (see Fig. 2). Research in the region is ongoing and it is too early to make firm conclusions about whether these findings reflect a greater propensity to, and tolerance of, alcohol and drug use among young people or simply a lesser degree of inhibition about talking about such practices. For the purposes of the argument here, however, it suffices to note that, either way, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that young people in Komi Republic show a strong desensitization to practices usually censured.

Current interview and ethnographic data do suggest, however, that young people’s uninhibited talk about drug use should be understood within a wider set of individual and collective cultural practices that negotiate their structural location – quite literally – on the margins of ‘acceptable’ society. Such practices include the symbolic deployment of the region’s ‘deviant heritage’:

Interviewer 1: Are people from Vorkuta distinguishable in any way?

Respondent: Yes, of course. You can always tell someone from Vorkuta wherever you are.

Interviewer 1: Seriously?

Respondent: By their jacket, by the way they look at you, by their clothes.

Interviewer 2: What is it about their clothes that distinguish them?

Respondent: Almost the whole of Vorkuta wears ‘gangster jackets’ (*banditki*) in the winter.

Interviewer 1: What are *banditki*?

Respondent: Those kind of leather jackets, like ‘Vova’s’ [pseudonym]. And they walk with their shoulders swinging. . .

(Vorkuta, male, 16 years, ‘regular user’)

The ‘gangster’ image being celebrated in this description of local youth culture cannot be seen outside of the cultural context of the historical development of the urban centres of Komi Republic. All three fieldwork sites in Komi owe their existence to the geological expeditions beginning in 1929 that sought to locate and exploit oil and coal deposits in Komi. The very first expedition used prisoners from the Solovetsky camp system (specialists imprisoned as ‘wreckers’) but once a base camp had been established at Ukhta, it was used to set up new camps across the region, among them one at Vorkuta established (in 1932) to exploit a major coal deposit. By 1951, 70,000 prisoners resided in the Vorkuta camp whose social infrastructure by this time included specialist educational institutes, theatres, swimming pools and nurseries (Applebaum, 2004, pp. 94–95). Of course, it is difficult to make substantiated statements about how, or if, this heritage impacts directly on young people’s cultural practices and dispositions today. Not only were the original camp populations diverse – including professional criminals, political prisoners, dispossessed kulaks, those deemed to be Nazi-collaborators and ordinary people convicted of petty theft or poor labour discipline – but over time the city’s population was supplemented by friends and relatives who followed prisoners to their place of exile and, later, by young specialists attracted to the region by the high salaries offered in the extraction industries. Like many of the prisoners released from the camps following the death of Stalin, these young workers and professionals subsequently found it difficult to leave a city that had somehow become ‘home’. What is suggested here then is simply that as young people in the region live out the real life stories of post-Soviet deindustrialisation in splendid isolation, the marginal, deviant heritage of the region may be one of the few cultural resources that can be drawn upon to form workable, local youth cultural identities. Just as ‘the look in their eyes’ (Applebaum, 2004, p. 4) marked out Gulag inhabitants for each other years after release, so today the ‘gangster jacket’ and swaggering walk of the region’s youth are symbolic displays of a shared understanding of what it means to live on the margins.

Reproducing social relations: beyond ‘peer pressure’

Young people’s ‘deviant’ inheritance is not only symbolically displayed, it is also reproduced through specific social formations. The most striking of these are gang structures (*gruppировки*) whose practices range from traditional (‘yard against yard’) fighting between gangs of lads often at, or after, local discos (Pechora, female, 16–17 years, ‘abstainer’) to minor extortion:

Respondent: ‘...A lot of people do it, it’s simple, you go up to some little one and say “Do you want a hassle-free life? Then give us 500 roubles and everything will be fine.

Interviewer: Protection?

Respondent: Yes. He’s little—of course he wants it. A day is fixed and the little one brings the money. Then you tell him, if he wants to be rid of you, he has to bring the same amount again. This is the most widespread method.’

(Vorkuta, male, 17 years, ‘abstainer’)

This kind of gang structure is not unique to Komi Republic, but in the other regions of this study respondents’ narratives suggested it was disintegrating as cultural infrastructure and consumer lifestyles developed. The continued significance of gangs in the field sites in Komi, it is suggested here therefore, is indicative of the continued scarcity of resources and the need for collective strategies for maximizing those resources and controlling their distribution.

However, even in Komi, the usual site of such collective negotiation of structural location is the less hierarchical, although often still territorially based, friendship group (*‘kompaniia’*). Young people’s access to drugs, for example, comes first and foremost via their *kompaniia* and results in high levels of offers of drugs ‘for free’ rather than ‘to buy’ (see Fig. 2).

Contrary to dominant discourses of supply led drug use, however, what underpins these ‘free offers’ is not a commercially driven desire to ‘get people hooked’ but a cultural practice known as ‘treating’ (*ugoshchenie*); a norm of hospitality in Russian culture that is particularly established in relation to paying for drinks, food and other ‘treats’ by a host for his or her guests or by men for women. Whilst this practice was reported also in the other regions of study, it is particularly widely practiced in Komi. This, it is suggested here, is because of the constrained access to drugs combined with the relatively stronger presence of gang structures in the region. In such a context the practice of *ugoshchenie* makes drugs (particularly cannabis) a shared commodity (Vorkuta, female, 14 years, ‘experimenter’) thereby allowing those young people without the necessary financial means to participate nonetheless in collective drug using practices. At the same time it asserts youth cultural – collective – control over drug use. A particularly striking example of this relates to the restriction of girls’ access to drugs to occasions when they are ‘treated’ by preventing their inclusion in drug-purchasing practices (see Fig. 2); although, of course, this does not prevent young women carving out spaces for their own drug use either within a ‘safe space’ created by the presence of a boyfriend within the friendship group or in a separate – ‘close girlfriend’ – space. At the same time being ‘drugs-wise’ is an important marker of secure masculinity as illustrated by the following respondent:

‘Generally people don’t start doing drugs of their own volition. . . Imagine a group of friends get together, right? Five to seven people, of my age, maybe more. Maybe somebody who is 21 turns up. He goes—come on lads let’s shoot up, it won’t cost anything, or you’re a ‘div’ (*lokh*), something like that, something insulting. For many this undermines their sense of self. They go like—hey, I’m no ‘div’ . . .’

(Vorkuta, male, 17 years, ‘abstainer’)

‘Treating’ with drugs thus provides a resolution to the general condition of scarcity whilst reproducing within the youth cultural group the dominant power relations of wider society.

Studying drug use in its natural cultural context reveals that young people are far from despairing individuals negotiating post-socialism unsupported by emotional bonds and social networks. Their friendship groups mediate between the macro youth cultural environment – saturated both materially and symbolically with drugs – and individual drugs choices. In so doing that friendship group often acts as the point of encounter with, and offers of, drugs. In this sense it embodies and reproduces the inequalities of young people’s structural locations and transmits the pressures and constraints of the drugs market. At the same time, it is important not to make any prior assumption that strong collective practices in relation to drug use necessarily constitute ‘peer pressure’ to engage in drug use. Interview and ethnographic data in Komi Republic and elsewhere reveal numerous instances of the peer group acting as a constraining influence in drug use decisions. The friendship group is thus better understood as providing a set of reference points underpinned by bonds of emotionality and mutual accountability about acceptable and unacceptable drug use and a secure and supportive environment in which to enact the ensuing drug decisions (Pilkington, 2007).

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the study of drug-use in Russia has been dominated by public discourse, which emphasises the supply-led nature of the country’s drug problems, and international research that has focused on the relationship between intravenous drug use and the transmission of HIV. It has been argued that a cultural approach can enrich our knowledge of these processes by providing a fuller picture of an increasingly diverse range of drug using attitudes, practices and meanings. In seeking to understand and explain these cultural practices, however, it is essential also to continue to recognise the importance of structural factors in young people’s drug use. The ‘softening’ of borders following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 allowed widespread access to drugs for the first time, including the extensive distribution of cheap heroin from the Central Asian region, and these new drugs markets are a crucial explanatory factor

in regionally differentiated drug use trends in Russia. Economic transition, moreover, has created serious pockets of deindustrialisation and impoverishment and the experience of Russian cities where levels of such social marginality are ‘the norm’ among young people – such as the case of Vorkuta described in this article – confirms evidence from the UK that in such social contexts young people’s drug careers can move quickly from occasional recreational drug use to addictive, ‘problem’ drug use (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002).

Given that conceptualising drug use can become an exercise in dodging the shifting plates of structural and cultural explanations, interventions in the debate such as those by Rhodes and Simic (2005) and Fitzgerald (2005), which seek to synthesise such explanations and to understand individual and group responses to their environments themselves as an important facet of that social context, are particularly productive. In similar vein, the intention of this article has been not to evaluate the relative importance of structural and cultural factors in a particular local context but to show how by understanding ‘culture’ (or rather cultural practice) in its territorially and structurally rooted form, the interwoven nature of these factors is revealed. Thus, this article shares a concern with Fitzgerald and Rhodes and Simic not to take at face value the causal relationship between economic ‘transition’, anomie and drug use but to explore and question the interaction between individual actions, micro-social context and macro-social change. The specific empirical research it draws on, however, has led it to focus on the micro level in order to reveal how young people’s drug using practices are located in, and shaped by, the micro cultural context of the peer (friendship) group and to argue that such friendship groups both embody and reproduce, but may also resist, young people’s structural locations.

The cultural practices of drug use described in this article confirm both Fitzgerald’s (2005) argument that it is wrong to portray drug users in ‘transition’ societies as ‘unwilling economic victims’ (p. 574) and the applicability, in broad terms, of notions of ‘differentiated normalisation’ (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Shildrick, 2002) to ‘transition’ societies. However, the emphasis in both cases on the role of consumption in driving drug use remains contested. Fitzgerald (2005) argues, for example, that drug use presents itself as an accessible means of forming desired (western), consumer based subjectivities (p. 571). The research presented here – the case of Nadia being illustrative – however, suggests that while the need to secure subjectivities in the dislocated spaces of post-socialist societies is an important factor in understanding drug use, that ontological security is more often located in and through social bonds and friendship networks that not only pre-existed, but may even have been strengthened by, the constraints of ‘transition’ (Pilkington, 2007). Similarly, while the notion of ‘differentiated normalisation’ qualifies the concept of the ‘normalisation’ of recreational drug use on the basis that individual choice is subject to structural constraint, it fails to challenge the understanding of ‘youth culture’ as the sum of individual consumer preferences that underpins

the ‘normalisation thesis’. Instead, it has been proposed here, we should understand ‘youth culture’ as a set of practices – including drug use and abstention practices – that individuals and groups enact, not only as responses to, but as strategies for negotiating and shaping, their structural contexts.

This understanding of young people neither as the lost souls of ‘transition’ nor the victims of some externally located ‘peer pressure’ has clear implications for drugs education and interventions too. While the primary current concerns in Russia are with tackling drugs supply alongside individual ‘treatment’ of problem drug users, this research suggests that young drug users in contemporary Russia are better approached not as ‘noble victims’ (Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 574) but as active individual and collective agents in the negotiation of the structural constraints they face. This implies that the very bonds and networks that living in ‘transition’ enables may be as much a source of mutual restraint and protection in risk-laden decision-making as they are a source of risk production and are thus an important missing layer of potential intervention in drugs education strategies.

Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by the ESRC (Ref. R000239439) under the Research Grants Scheme. The project was a collaborative one between the University of Birmingham, UK and Ul’ianovsk State University, Russian Federation. It was designed and led on the UK side by Hilary Pilkington and, on the Russian side, by Elena Omel’chenko. This article was written by Hilary Pilkington but is based on research conducted by the whole team which consisted of: Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko, Erica Richardson, Natal’ia Goncharova, Evgeniia Luk’ianova, Ol’ga Dobroshtan, Irina Kosterina and El’vira Sharifullina. The team was assisted in the regions of fieldwork by Svetlana Iaroshenko, Oleg Oberemko, Dmitrii Nechaevskii, Aleksandr Shekhtman and Svetlana Teslia. The author would like to thank also two anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for their extremely helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

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