



Research paper

The mutual extraction industry: Drug use and the normative structure of social capital in the Russian far north

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ABSTRACT

Background: The article contributes to the literature on the role of social networks and social capital in young people's drug use. It considers the structural and cultural dimensions of the 'risk environment' of post-Soviet Russia, the micro risk-environment of a deindustrialising city in the far north of the country and the kind of social capital that circulates in young people's social networks there. Its focus is thus on social capital at the micro-level, the 'bridging' networks of peer friendship groups and the norms that govern them.

Method: The research is based on a small ethnographic study of the friendship groups and social networks of young people in the city of Vorkuta in 2006–2007. It draws on data from 32 respondents aged 17–27 in the form of 17 semi-structured audio and video interviews and field diaries. Respondents were selected from friendship groups in which drug use was a regular and symbolically significant practice.

Results: The risk environment of the Russian far north is characterised by major deindustrialisation, poor health indicators, low life expectancy and limited educational and employment opportunities. It is also marked by a 'work hard, play hard' cultural ethos inherited from the Soviet period when risk-laden manual labour was well-rewarded materially and symbolically. However, young people today often rely on informal economic practices to generate the resource needed to fulfil their expectations. This is evident from the social networks among respondents which were found to be focused around a daily routine of generating and spending income, central to which is the purchase, sale and use of drugs. These practices are governed by norms that often invert those normally ascribed to social networks: reciprocity is replaced by mutual exploitation and trust by cheating.

Conclusions: Social networks are central to young people's management of the risk environment associated with post-Soviet economic transformation. However, such networks are culturally as well as structurally determined and may be sites not only of cooperation, support and trust but also of mutual exploitation, deceit and distrust. This does not imply these regions are devoid of social capital. Rather it suggests that the notion of social capital as a natural by-product of a self-regulating economy and its institutions needs to be reconsidered in the context of local configurations of capital and social relations as well as their cultural and normative context. This reconsideration should include further reflection on whether the kinds of social networks described might be better understood not as motors for the generation of social capital but as sites of its 'mutual extraction'.

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The complex connection between deindustrialisation, social exclusion and risk-taking is well-established in the study of young people's drug use in the United Kingdom (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005, pp. 170–89; Pearson, 1987, p. 74; Shildrick, 2002). Moreover, where structural dislocation is associated with major social and economic transition – such as in the former Soviet Union

and Central and Eastern Europe – particular 'risk environments' emerge in which structural factors and personal decisions combine to facilitate intravenous drug use and the associated rapid spread of HIV (Rhodes & Simic, 2005; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedman, & Strathdee, 2005). Yet, not all people, neighbourhoods or communities affected by economic restructuring and its consequent social dislocation engage in such practices or fail to adopt appropriate harm reduction techniques when they do. This has led researchers to explore what lies *between* structural conditions and individual drug use behaviours that might explain this. For epidemiological, public health and policy research key variables include patterns

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of inter-personal communication, inclusion/exclusion from social institutions, information provision, and access to health, including harm reduction, facilities. Another factor gaining increasing attention – and of particular interest to sociologists researching drug use – is ‘social capital’.

The interest in social networks and social capital follows from research into economic transformation and health outcomes, which suggests social cohesion is ‘a crucial determinant of population health’ (Kennedy, Kawachi, & Brainerd, 1998, p. 2029). At the micro-level published research provides evidence that social relationships such as parental support (Springer, Parcel, Baumler, & Ross, 2006), sexual partnerships (Rhodes & Quirk, 1998) and friendship groups (Pilkington, 2007b) manage and mediate risk environments. This suggests that ‘social networks’ (Latkin, Forman, Knowlton, & Sherman, 2003, p. 472) and ‘social capital’ (Lovell, 2002, p. 806) may act as protective factors in reducing risk associated with drug use and risky sexual practices.

This research into drug use confirms the significance of the notion of social capital in illuminating the ‘value added’ to society of social connectivity as indicated by Putnam’s classic study of the relative political effectiveness of regional governments in Italy (Halpern, 2005, p. 8) and reflected in the application of social capital by economists to account for the “residual” economic growth beyond that explained by physical and human capital’ (Fine & Green, 2000, p. 89). However, in seeking to explain the relationship between risk environment and individual behaviour more concretely, it is important to avoid understanding ‘social capital’ as the pivot around which a virtuous circle turns; social connections breed familiarity and trust, which foster cooperation and social stability, which, in turn, confirm trust and encourage social connectivity. Indeed, as noted already by Rhodes et al. (2005, p. 1032) when ‘social capital’ is used in this way as a proxy for the general level of political and economic stability, it becomes difficult to isolate its particular value for understanding vulnerability to risk-taking practices. Indeed, evidence from empirical studies of drug users provides conflicting evidence on the role of social networks. Lalander (2003, p. 27), for example, notes that the ‘feeling of community and belonging and shared experience’ promoted by drug use allows young people to extend their social ties and deepen social bonds. At the same time, addictive drug use has long been associated with the withdrawal from social networks (see for example Parker, Bakx, & Newcombe, 1988, p. 52; Zinberg, 1984, p. 77). Drug users report that the onset of addictive drug use sees ‘genuine’ friendships turn into pragmatic associations – ‘necessary companions in [their] pursuit of drugs’ (Sherman, Smith, Laney, & Strathdee, 2002, p. 116) – and a withdrawal from friendship (Pearson, 1987, p. 56). Lalander’s (2003, p. 65) ethnographic study of drug users in a deindustrialising Swedish city thus concludes that the drug use that at first cements social bonds gradually becomes something which dictates the individual’s social life and causes them to become ‘more and more solitary’.

If being socially ‘connected’ can both encourage and inhibit risky practices, it follows that the successful application of the notion of ‘social capital’ in the field of drug use requires a consideration of not just the presence or absence of social connections and networks but the nature of those networks and of the value they produce. This is not new—the cultural embeddedness of social capital is recognised by both Putnam (1995, p. 665), who defines it as ‘social connections’ and their ‘attendant norms and trust’, and by Reimer, Lyons, Ferguson, and Polanco (2008, p. 258), who point to the significance of the normative structures in which social capital is embedded. The substantive part of this article thus takes a step back from the question of how particular social networks might impact on individuals’ drug-use practices and instead seeks to contribute to teasing out how the economic, social and cultural dimensions of a

particular risk-environment are manifested in the normative structure of micro-level social relations and reflect on the implications of this for our understanding of social capital located there. To this end, although the broader ethnographic study of peer-based social connections it draws on includes material on young people’s drug using careers and practices, in this article drugs are considered primarily from the perspective of their role as a commodity for sale, exchange and group relaxation.

Method

This paper draws on empirical work conducted as part of a transnational European project on Society and Lifestyles: Towards Enhancing Social Harmonisation through Knowledge of Subcultural Communities (SAL), 2006–2008. The research was not designed to investigate drug use as a distinct ‘subcultural’ practice or to study ‘drug users’ in isolation from broader youth cultural scenes. Rather, drawing on our previous work (Pilkington, 2007a), we were interested particularly in the role of the friendship group (*kompaniia*) in mediating young people’s drug use and the research was centred not on interview-based narratives of drug use and risk management but on observing the drug practices of young people from within the group context and as part of the full spectrum of everyday cultural practices.

The project was designed around two 6-week periods of ethnographic research in the city of Vorkuta, Russia in autumn 2006 and 2007. (El’vira Sharifullina was the principal field researcher, Hilary Pilkington joined her for 2 weeks in each year.) In line with the rationale set out above, respondents were not sought solely on the basis of their reported drug use but rather with regard to their willingness to introduce the researchers to their friendship group. It was essential that drug use was a regular and symbolically significant practice within the group but not that the group met primarily for the purpose of drug use or that all members of the group were drug users. A number of starting points for developing access to groups were initiated upon arrival in Vorkuta; these drew on contacts from earlier research in the city and from everyday encounters with young people. Consequently the study can be described as including a total of 32 respondents (26 male, 6 female) aged 17–27 but centring on a core group of around 10 young people who took part in both stages of the research and were part of the same, broadly defined, ‘friendship group’. Of the 32 respondents, 18 reported previous or current illicit substance use (that is use of narcotic substances not including alcohol and tobacco). Of the 10 core respondents, all except one had extensive current or past drug use experience. Over the course of the research (especially between the first and second fieldwork periods) the drug careers and degree of participation in the networks originally identified changed for a number of respondents. Where this is considered to be important for understanding respondents’ reflections on their lives, it is noted at the relevant point in the text.

The materials analysed for this article are: 17 semi-structured audio and video interviews; and field diaries written by both authors. A parallel case study with another group of young people was conducted in the city at the same time under the auspices of the SAL project (principal field researcher, Al’bina Garifzianova). Although the two case studies were thematically differentiated and the field researchers worked independently, some practices (including drug use) were common across both case studies and some respondents were known to both researchers (they shared living space and close informants sometimes hung out at the researchers’ flat). However, in this article, material is drawn only from those respondents who formally belong to the case study of ‘drug users’ with the exception of one interview extract (‘Roman’,

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