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University residence halls: socialization processes and drug consumption

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To investigate and analyze the discourse of students living in university residence halls regarding socialization processes and drug consumption.

METHODS: This was qualitative research among 20 undergraduate students living in university residence halls in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, in 2003. Residence halls were taken to be socialization spaces for young people that enable the presence of low-income students at university. The interviews covered students' knowledge of the history of the residence hall, their experience of living in student residences and their perceptions regarding drug consumption. The methodological procedure that served as the basis for collection, organization and analysis of the interview data was examination of the collective discourse of the subjects.

RESULTS: It was shown that the students had little knowledge of the history of the residence hall; solutions for problems they faced in the residence hall were sought individually; and the two main concepts observed among the people living there for preventing drug consumption were war on drugs and damage limitation. It was seen that there was a negative view regarding student residence halls that related to the constant publication of disturbing events and lack of knowledge of the importance of residence halls for enabling poor students to remain at university.

CONCLUSIONS: In the opinion of the people living in student residence halls, such accommodation enables access to university, despite the difficulties in living together and in administration by the university. With regard to the use of drugs in the residence hall, some of the people living there emphasized the need for less tolerance towards drug consumption, while others stressed the importance of educational work, particularly among those who are just starting to live there.

KEYWORDS: Social behavior. Students. Low-cost housing. Street drugs. Health knowledge, attitudes, practice. Interviews. Qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, young people started rushing into higher education in the 1950s. By the following decade, these people formed a group with political expression that acquired social visibility.¹¹

In the case of Brazil, middle-class young people started to have greater access to university in the 1960s. Until then, university had been the privilege of the rich.¹⁰ But it was only in the final years of the twentieth century that some access to higher education institutions for the lower classes was seen, restricted to around 10% of young people.¹⁹

Taking a sociological reading of the contemporaneous dissemination of drug consumption around the world would lead to the belief that this was associated with the clear condition of merchandise that drugs have taken on from capitalism.³ Consumption would come to “meet” the needs, which would go from placating anxieties that originate from situations of insecurity in which the mechanisms of trust and certainty have been weakened, to reproduction of values that today furnish the basis for life within society – competition, individualism and hedonism.²⁰

Epidemiological studies on drug consumption among university students have been characterized by their descriptive and multifactorial nature, with a concern for establishing which drugs were used most, the patterns of use, the factors that might lead to their use, the profile of users and attitudes towards consumption. Studies conducted among university students have led to the belief that living far from the family would increase the chance of using drugs.^{2,7} Such an association is particularly delicate, considering that it could assist in maintaining the stigma that living in student residence halls means having a liberal attitude towards drug consumption or even being a user.

The association between the variables of student housing and drug consumption deserves deeper investigation to broaden the understanding of the meaning of living in university residence halls or experiencing the sociability of youth under such housing conditions.

The few qualitative studies relating to the theme of “drugs and university students” have suggested that changes in sociability and socialization patterns are capable of affecting the frequency of marijuana consumption.¹⁶ For students of health-related subjects,

the university environment stimulates abusive consumption of alcohol, which is seen as fashionable and a sign of maturity, thereby causing isolation of those who have contrary attitudes.*

Within the field of prevention, two approaches can be highlighted: war on drugs and harm reduction. Each of these approaches receives feedback from a set of theories and practices that go from explaining drug consumption to sets of preventive strategies.²⁰ Harm reduction fits in with the reference points adopted for the present study, emphasizing the need to put drug consumption within the circumstances of the means of production and the specific contexts produced by such consumption and within which such consumption takes place. In the war on drugs, which is an imperialistic mechanism of domination, consumers are persecuted and the weight of behavioral change is placed on them by using the methods of prohibition and terrorization.²⁰

The importance of the present investigation lies in: 1) the absence of scientific studies on student housing; and 2) the importance of such housing as a socialization space that democratizes the access to university for many students.

With the aim of contributing towards preventing the harmful consumption of drugs among young people, the objective of the present investigation was to analyze the perceptions of university students living in residence halls regarding drug consumption, as mediated by socialization processes within the specific context of student housing.

METHODS

This study was conducted in the municipality of São Paulo in 2003, in a university residence hall belonging to the State of São Paulo. This was a qualitative study of exploratory nature that empirically attained its objective by means of individual semi-structured recorded interviews. The itinerary for the interviews was as follows: knowledge of the history of the residence hall; description of what it was like to live in the residence hall; participation in social, political, leisure or sports activities in the residence hall; weekend activities; perceptions regarding the use of drugs in the residence hall; opinion about drug users; stance adopted towards the set of ideas put around that residence halls are an environment that favors the use of drugs; suggestions for facing up to the problem of drug consumption in that location.

*Santos LV, Silva WO, Damásio VF, Stacciarine JM, Munari DB. Percepções de estudantes da área de saúde sobre o abuso de álcool no meio acadêmico. In: Anais do VI Encontro de Pesquisadores em Saúde Mental e V Encontro de Especialistas em Enfermagem Psiquiátrica: 2000 abril.17-20; Ribeirão Preto. São Paulo: EERP-USP; 2000, p. 199-209.

The total number of residents officially registered was 1,348 (970 undergraduates and 378 postgraduates). The residence hall is composed of seven blocks named A to G, each with six floors and 11 apartments per floor. Each apartment is designed for three students. There is no charge for the accommodation and it is destined for undergraduate and postgraduate students at the university who are regularly enrolled and have gone through a selection process at the start of each year. This process produces a classification based on an assessment of the student's socioeconomic level that is made by social workers from the university's social promotion division. At the end of each year, the students are reassessed.

Among the students living in the hall, it was found that 37% were aged between 22 and 24 years, 96% were single and 95% had no children, 54% had some type of study grant (including trainee schemes), and 88% had an income of between one and two minimum wages.

The snowball interview technique was utilized. This made it possible to obtain better reception and availability from interviewees in relation to the investigation, since the investigator could in some manner be presented to the interviewee.⁶ As the interviews were conducted, interviewees were asked to nominate another female or male colleague for interviewing, according to the quantity of interviewees of each sex obtained up to that time.

There was a concern to interview undergraduate students (equal numbers of the two sexes) who had lived in the different blocks that make up the residence hall for more than one year. This information was obtained from the resident profile records that are kept by the institution that administrates the hall. These records served as the basis for making up the sample. In an attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the residents, and respecting the general recommendations for qualitative research regarding theoretical saturation, 20 interviews were undertaken.

The operational procedure that served as the basis for collecting, organizing and analyzing the material was collective discourse of the subjects,¹⁵ while also utilizing Bardin's recommendations for thematic analysis.⁴

Collective discourse is a set of methodological procedures that has the aim of organizing the verbal material into the form of syntheses of the discourse relating to the different ideas of a given group of subjects. In this way, to find out what a given social group thinks about a certain topic, it is necessary to

access each individual's own words and group them according to similarity or complementarity.

At the end of this procedure, the investigator unified the discourse from the various key expressions with the same meaning. This discourse was grouped into three broad categories: what the residents said about the history of the residence hall; what it was like to live in the residence hall; and the residents' opinions about drug consumption.

RESULTS

The interviewees showed that they had little knowledge of the history of the residence hall, but some recalled, in the manner of talking about myths, that its origin might have been connected with possible accommodation for athletes in Pan-American games that did not take place because of an epidemic that was also somewhat uncertain. The words of many interviewees reflected knowledge of the struggle of the student movement, relating this to a tumultuous history and making reference to the conflicts that would herald the start of the stigma that marks the residence hall.

The residents emphasized that living in the hall made it possible to be at the university.

"Here you're able to manage your money very well because, as well as the accommodation, you have support in the form of the food grant and work grant. Another thing that also changes (...) is your consumption pattern. I think it would be very different if I was living in my city and studying here. For example, I'd think twice about going into a bookshop and spending 30 reais on a book, and I went to the cinema [for the first time], here at the university".

The exceeding of expectations regarding living together in the residence hall seemed to depend on encountering people who, contrary to the stigma put about, were "normal", could hold conversations, tidied up the home, made food and lived their daily lives. Disappointment with living together was attributed to the individualism of students who did not have any collective spirit, "even if they were studying humanities".

The sociability patterns of these young people were seen to be abnormal because of the isolation they were subjected to at weekends. Few were able to visit their families with any frequency, and loneliness was indicated as the consequence of this isolation.

"I think it's very strange that you end up being isolated. You end up starting to live in a world apart,

because there are different rules and different customs, and you joke that you're in a bubble, an island, even in a zoo, because everything is so organized, and you leave thinking that society is really like this. There are fewer advantages than in those closed condominiums in the classical sense, but this matter, this detachment from social reality... it's the fact that you suddenly... when you leave, it takes a certain time to realize that unemployment exists and that people don't have money to buy such things".

The alternatives for facing up to the problem of loneliness and isolation varied from transforming the apartment into a convivial space, to organizing a variety of leisure activities that could constitute opportunities for socialization.

There are rules in the residence hall, but they do not need to be complied with. This excess of liberty accompanied by lack of authority was not seen solely as a positive feature. It was pointed out that the consequence was failure to learn to respect public spaces.

Apparently, the students do not have anyone to turn to, to sort out problems in the residence hall. The management is slow in resolving matters like electricity or water failures, and is also omissive in relation to drug trafficking.

"And another thing is clear, I'm not saying that we're innocent in this story – there are drug dealers here because people buy the stuff – but it's a heavy matter. We feel that certain complicated things happen here mainly [because of] these drug dealers that we know are here. It's like it's something that's kind of in the corner: a subject that no one talks about, so they keep quiet as if it would sort itself out. The residence hall appears to be free because of these things: because on the administration's side we get the impression that they don't do anything and because of ourselves who let these things happen".

The students considered that society has a very distorted view of the residence hall and the people living there, and there is prejudice even within the university.

"Everyone already has an idea of student housing. People already say that any type of student housing is a mess, with riotous living and goodness knows what else. But people say a lot about what they don't know about, because when I came to live here, they painted a picture for me of a totally horrible place that I would be afraid to come and live in. But as soon as I came here, I saw what it was like and got rid of this view completely. [Today] I don't think that it's

such an open matter to say that everyone who comes into here uses drugs: I don't see anything of this (...)".

To understand the theories presented by the students for explaining the drug consumption, the material was organized by aligning their words to the two major contemporary currents: the war on drugs and the harm reduction movement.

"The people who use drugs here in the residence hall are a bit strange: things get kind of heavy around them, I think. But then it's more difficult: there are other people that I thought were really great and who started to use drugs. Then they stopped studying properly: they use marijuana and don't study so much. They were very intelligent and now they just mess around. [Now in general, there is the question] of weakness that arises: wanting to experiment, going there, trying it and not managing to get out. It's not always the person's fault: there are some that we know are really stupid, who go there because it's cool and think it's the thing to do, but there are people who go there through pure innocence (...)".

Among the prevention strategies situated within the field of the war on drugs that were mentioned, it was noted that some of the students took an incisive stance against any use of drugs.

"First, what's done in society as a whole [should be done], because however much they want it to be, the university is not outside: it is not an entity that is independent of society; it is within society. [The problems] are reduced only by having policing inside [the residence hall], by pulling everyone out and really making a rigid inspection. Imprisonment is a legal response for this type of practice".

Within the field of concepts conforming to the harm reduction movement, the discourse was less reductionist.

"(...) It seems that sociability necessarily passes through drug use, which is an interesting thing. It's not right or wrong, but it's at least interesting how sociability occurs: it necessarily has to pass through drugs. [With regard to] the university itself, it is very, very empty in questions of relationships, questions of interpersonal relationships [it's like this] here in the residence hall. People who use drugs tend to deepen this here, if only because you've got to study and switch off. Sometimes it seems that you're a bit forgotten here".

It was possible to characterize a series of suggestions from the students regarding how to proceed in the

light of drug consumption, in alignment with the concept of harm reduction.

"I think there needs to be greater debate regarding individuality: about how people really perceive drug use and how this affects people's lives, whether this consumption is in their families or their own. That's how the work should be started, so that drug use is reduced and drug trafficking is weakened. Today, drug trafficking has really become as highly profitable business".

It was considered that activities should be developed with new arrivals:

"But for newcomers it's advice, but not like don't take drugs [because] drugs are an evil monster. It's to show how harmful they can be at the start of that person's course, if he gets involved in drugs and doesn't know what he's doing. In this sense I think it's OK to get advice because many people start in some way and don't know what to do, and they lose the year or the semester: in this sense. [So] I think that one of the things would be to create activities for welcoming freshmen and creating a more convivial atmosphere (...). The activities [could be] cultural, especially with freshmen. Such as trying to create an environment, a style of sociability that does not necessitate [drugs], in which passing through drug use is not really needed".

There was also a suggestion that the university should make access to treatment and support available for dependent students who want help. The suggestion was that there should be investment in publicizing the reality of the residence hall from the point of view of those who require such accommodation to turn their studies into reality.

On the more tolerant side, a considerable proportion of the students recognized that drug consumption did occur in the residence hall, but did not cause them any problems. The problems with drug consumption were put into relative context through the acceptance that there were different types of users and that not all of them had problems with drug use.

DISCUSSION

Although the residents' factual and fragmented knowledge of the history of the university residence hall related to its origin, they did not know the details of this history, its location at the heart of more general events in the country and the political implications. It was known that the history of the residence hall was marked by students' demands and struggles,

troubled by deaths and invasions, but it was not known what role the university had in this process. One important analysis presented by the students spoke of a possible relationship between the troubled history of the residence hall and its present negative image.

The students considered that, despite the problems, the residence hall fulfilled its main function, which is to make university courses possible for poor students and those who live far from the university.

One of the problems presented by the students is that the public university offers the minimum needed for the students to have somewhere to live, while the structural problems that place difficulties on access to the residence hall and on students' daily lives are not presented for discussion and solution. This relationship between the residents and the university reflects the broader social dynamics that are governed by the laws of the market, which confer the status of merchandise on university education and other rights.⁹

University residence halls help in democratizing the university by making life easier for students who have gotten round the neoliberal capitalist scheme and, even being poor, have managed to get into a good-quality public university.

For the young people who break through the class barrier and get to university, the impact of experiencing a new reality from a cultural point of view is much greater than the impact from the material taught in the classrooms. This paradox is presented to the extent that it might give rise to unreal bedazzlement. Students coming from wealthier classes have had the opportunity to gradually go on building up this cultural repertoire, which makes this experience part of a process started at an earlier stage.¹⁰

The students also raised the problem of leisure activities in their daily lives in the residence hall, which seemed to be sporadic for many of them. Leisure activities have been little studied and are even perceived as secondary in academic studies, even though "leisure activities for young people (...) [constitute] an especially important space for developing relationships of sociability and the searches and experiences through which they seek to structure their new references and their individual and collective identities".¹¹

They also raised the difficulties that the residents had in living together, with predominance of individualism in their relationships. Once again, this is a broader social question, since this the main form of relationship between people today.

The students also mentioned that they suffered prejudice because of living in the residence hall. In turn, they showed that they were prejudiced against drug consumers. Generalizations coming from the media, which has taken on the task of throwing light on the explosive negative events regarding the residence hall and its residents, and those coming from the so-called "law of least effort" that characterizes these people's daily lives, are mechanisms that induce prejudice.¹⁴

In the case of drug consumers, the category "drugged" is utilized as an accusatory category that in itself comprises a whole range of negative factors, in which those accused are morally repugnant and might threaten the status quo.²²

The perception that the residence hall was not responsible for drug consumption among the people living there was present in many students' words. A variety of explanations for why people started using drugs were given, which did not necessarily relate to the residence hall. The residents formed a heterogeneous group, since they came from different cities, states and countries, and this was reflected in the views on drug use and users and in their suggestions for smoothing out the possible resultant problems.

On the one hand, there was conservative and repressive discourse containing proposals to restrain freedoms and severely punish drug users, thereby putting the blame on them for the problems stemming from drug use. The strategies of the war on drugs have not even reduced the criminality rates,²³ and the maintenance of this policy constitutes a form of imperialistic domination of Latin American countries.¹² Moreover, "the hostility and fear triggered facilitate the intensification of social control, expansion of the State's power to punish and, simultaneously, the weakening of the democratic rule of law".¹³ The media has collaborated in building up a veritable state of panic among the Brazilian population, by carrying alarmist information on illegal drugs, while the drugs most used by the population are alcohol and tobacco.¹⁸

On the other hand, the opposite position was shown

in the discourse of students who recognized the importance of putting drug use into context and taking a relativistic overall view. These students put forward prevention proposals that started from knowledge of the users' realities, with the aims of overcoming prejudice and promoting a wider social debate. Velho²¹ emphasized the importance of putting matters into context and stated that generalizations have only contributed towards placing stigma on users.

The students perceived the relationship between drug consumption and socialization processes in the residence hall. Generally, the first contact with drugs takes place during social activities, party situations, barbecues and meetings of friends.⁵

Several authors have pointed out the need for universities to rethink their role. Chau⁹ reported on the consequences in universities of neoliberal ideology that proposed to decrease public spaces and expand private spaces. Foracchi¹⁰ pointed out universities' submission to technological society, with opposing groups of interest that did not have any commitment towards culture, while principally concerned with trading their products.

One important suggestion presented by the students, which would be a viable alternative in the search for solutions for the problems experienced by residents was the conducting of scientific research that would deepen the knowledge of the residence hall.

Some of the prevention proposals presented by the residents are in line with the presuppositions of harm reduction strategies, thereby suggesting educative actions of an emancipatory nature.

The wider social debate suggested by residents is a step that analysts in this field have emphasized. This debate could also contribute towards understanding the roots of the problems among young people today and favor the development of a public project for young people at university, who seems to be fragmented and absorbed by "postmodern values"⁸ of discontinuity, indeterminacy and discredit of utopias.

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