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# Abusing alcohol and other drugs in students' dormitories: knowing it in order to face it

USO PROBLEMÁTICO DE ÁLCOOL E OUTRAS DROGAS EM MORADIA ESTUDANTIL: CONHECER PARA ENFRENTAR

USO PROBLEMÁTICO DE ALCOHOL Y OTRAS DROGAS EN RESIDENCIAS ESTUDIANTILES: CONOCER PARA ENFRENTAR

Marília Rita Ribeiro Zalaf<sup>1</sup>, Rosa Maria Godoy Serpa da Fonseca<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article deals with the abuse of alcohol and other drugs in the students' dormitories of the University of São Paulo. The purposes of the study were to understand how the health-disease process of the dwellers occurs, regarding drug use, and to analyze the underlying manifestations to the gender issues related to drug use by students. The analysis is supported by the Social Determination Theory. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews focusing on the history of the health-disease process related to the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, before and after the students moved into the USP students' dormitories - *Conjunto Residencial da USP* (CRUSP). With the results obtained, the students' dormitories were identified as another element that favors the abuse of drugs, allied to depression, unemployment and the particular characteristics of this academic space. Gender stereotypes related to drug abuse, such as female subalternity, prejudice and culpability were shown to exist in the students' dormitories.

## KEY WORDS

Alcoholism.  
Substance-related disorders.  
Students.  
Health-disease process.

## RESUMO

Este artigo trata do uso problemático de álcool e outras drogas na moradia estudantil da Universidade de São Paulo. Seus objetivos foram compreender como se dá o processo saúde-doença dos moradores referente ao uso problemático de drogas, identificar as condições objetivas do uso de drogas e analisar as manifestações subjacentes às questões de gênero relacionadas ao uso de drogas pelos estudantes. A análise está apoiada na Teoria da Determinação Social. Os dados foram coletados em entrevistas semi-estruturadas que focalizaram a história do processo saúde-doença relacionado ao uso problemático de álcool e de outras drogas antes e depois do ingresso no Conjunto Residencial da USP (CRUSP). Nos resultados obtidos, a moradia estudantil apareceu como mais um elemento favorecedor ao uso problemático de drogas, aliado à depressão, ao desemprego e às características próprias desse espaço acadêmico. Estereótipos de gênero relacionados ao uso de drogas, como subalternidade feminina, preconceito e culpabilização, mostraram-se refletidos na moradia estudantil.

## DESCRIPTORES

Alcoolismo.  
Transtornos relacionados ao uso de substâncias.  
Estudantes.  
Processo saúde-doença.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo trata del uso problemático de alcohol y otras drogas en la residencia estudiantil de la Universidad de San Pablo. Sus objetivos fueron comprender como ocurre el proceso salud-enfermedad de los residentes en lo que se refiere al uso problemático de drogas, identificar las condiciones objetivas del uso de drogas y analizar las manifestaciones subyacentes a las cuestiones de género relacionadas al uso de drogas por los estudiantes. El análisis está apoyado en la Teoría de la Determinación Social. Los datos fueron recolectados en entrevistas semi-estructuradas que focalizaron la historia del proceso salud-enfermedad relacionado al uso problemático de alcohol y de otras drogas antes y después del ingreso en el Conjunto Residencial de la USP (CRUSP). En los resultados obtenidos, la vivienda estudiantil apareció como otro elemento que favorece el uso problemático de drogas, aliado a la depresión, al desempleo y a las características propias de ese espacio académico. Estereotipos de género relacionadas al uso de drogas, como sumisión femenina, prejuicios y culpa, se mostraron reflejados en la residencia estudiantil.

## DESCRIPTORES

Alcoholismo.  
Transtornos relacionados ao uso de substâncias.  
Estudiantes.  
Proceso salud-enfermedad.

<sup>1</sup> Social worker. Masters in Collective Health Nursing. Social worker of the Social Work Coordination at the University of São Paulo. Student of the Collective Health Nursing Graduate Program. São Paulo, SP, Brazil. mazalaf@usp.br <sup>2</sup> Nurse. Full Professor of the Collective Health Nursing Department at School of Nursing at University of São Paulo. Advisor of the Collective Health Nursing Graduate Program. São Paulo, SP, Brazil. rmgsfon@usp.br

## INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

This article is based on a study about the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, a problem for students living at CRUSP, the students' dormitories at the Butantã campus of the University of São Paulo. The objective of the study was to obtain support to plan prevention and care program specifically focused on that population.

The theoretical-methodological basis used in this study was the Theory of the Social Determination of the Health-Disease Process. In it, the health-disease phenomenon is a part of a single process, where the biological and social aspects interact and result in the quality of life of the subjects, according to the insertion in social production and reproduction processes. Therefore, different social classes have different conditions of life, with different health-disease conditions<sup>(1)</sup>.

A literature review performed using the Virtual Healthcare Library revealed that there are approximately 150 scientific studies referring to drug abuse in student environments in the United States and Latin America, a significant amount of them referring to high school students. Most of them are epidemiologic reports of use, or deal with physical and psychological effects. Many of them address the violence resulting from drug abuse; others focus on sexual behavior or the discourse of parents and teachers. A large amount uses multiple-choice questionnaires filled out by the subjects themselves, in order to collect numerical data about the use of psychoactive substances. Most of these questionnaires lack approaches relating socioeconomic conditions with alcohol and drug abuse. A large share of them refers to studies about drugs in general, and there are several literature reviews.

One of the studies found about the use of alcohol and other drugs by undergraduate students at the University of São Paulo<sup>(2)</sup> evaluated consumption patterns in the São Paulo campus, concluding that the prevalence was high in relation to the general population, but similar to findings in students from other Brazilian universities. It also concluded that males use alcohol, inhalants, steroids, crack, cocaine, hallucinogens and marijuana more often, while females use tranquilizers, amphetamines and opioids. For the author of that study,

the family aspects, norms that are favorable to the use of alcohol and sharing drugs with the social networks that the students build within the university, usage of alcohol and drugs both individually and with friends are variables that are positively associated with the current use of alcohol and illicit drugs<sup>(2)</sup>.

Another conclusion is:

students with weaker social support, fewer commitments and fewer bonds and collective activities within the university

are at a higher risk of developing abuse and addiction to alcohol and other drugs<sup>(2)</sup>.

Only one study was found addressing the issue of drugs in the students' dormitories of the University of São Paulo (CRUSP). It is a master's degree thesis presented in 2003 at USP's nursing school – *Escola de Enfermagem da USP*, with the title *CRUSP: processes of socialization and drug consumption*<sup>(3)</sup>. The author studied the discourse of the students living in the CRUSP with the objective of knowing the ideology of their processes of socialization and drug consumption. The study concluded that the students living in those dormitories have little knowledge of its history, finding solutions for their problems individually, having both the older conception of *war on drugs* and the recent conception of *damage reduction*. Regarding prevention, specifically, the ideas of the CRUSP inhabitants are favorable to the assumptions of damage reduction and suggest that the theme should be widely discussed within the community.

Since the students' dormitories are meant to be provided to students with socioeconomic difficulties, several of them face situations of difficulties – not only financial, but also affective and social. Furthermore, they cannot keep contact with their families constantly due to lack of financial conditions, time and distance. They dedicate the weekends to housework, studies and leisure, according to their financial conditions. The spaces that they use for parties are the common grounds of the dormitories, such as collective kitchens, for example. On these occasions, alcohol and other drugs are always present, often as the main aspect of the party, favoring consumption, both for those who are already users and for those who have not started using these substances yet. Such conditions facilitate access for those with lower preventive support.

Nowadays, at the University of São Paulo, there is no clearly established policy related to drugs. Some educational and service units engender timid, individual and respectable initiatives of prevention. However, there are no general standardized and institutionalized prevention programs focused on both the employees and the student community. There are no referral protocols for cases requiring treatment. The records of the Community Action and Safety Service – *Serviço de Ação Comunitária e Segurança*, part of the Social Service Coordination – *Coordenadoria de Assistência Social*, show a significant number of cases of alcoholic intoxication in the students' dormitories area that result in arguments, physical aggressions, sudden heart ailments and even problems with the police, with a few specificities. The number of recorded occurrences involving women is higher than those involving men, although this does not necessarily mean that women abuse of alcohol and other drugs more often than men. Such figures lead to the hypothesis that the cases of intoxication in women are more pronounced and observed by community agents,

Most of these  
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and drug abuse.

perhaps due to the reproduction of the prejudice and low tolerance in social acceptance of this problem in women<sup>(4)</sup>.

Social prejudice marks the woman who uses alcohol as promiscuous and amoral; the stereotype that shows women as weak, inferior and with sexual difficulties strengthens the resistance to accept the existence of this problem<sup>(5)</sup>.

When a female student housed at the CRUSP is involved with alcohol and drug abuse, the problematization of the phenomenon is more difficult than if the problem involved a male student.

Several studies present important considerations about the problematic use of drugs by women. As the use of drugs is historically more characteristic of men than women, the interest in addicted women has developed only recently. The preventive programs are mostly structured to rehabilitate men, rarely including specific lines of support for women<sup>(5)</sup>.

In view of the exposed aspects, the object of this study is the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by students living in the CRUSP, in order to provide scientific bases to direct preventive and supportive actions focused specifically on this population, considering the gender differences.

## OBJECTIVES

This study had the following objectives: understanding the health-disease process of the students living in the students' dormitories regarding alcohol and drug abuse; identifying the objective conditions of drug abuse by CRUSP inhabitants and analyzing the underlying manifestations of gender issues related to this usage.

## METHOD

### Setting

The students' dormitories of the University of São Paulo – *Conjunto Residencial da Universidade de São Paulo (CRUSP)* are located in *Cidade Universitária Armando de Salles Oliveira* – USP campus, in São Paulo. It is managed by the Social Service Coordination – *Coordenadoria de Assistência Social da USP (COSEAS)*, a direct administration unit, which is also responsible for the daycares, college restaurants and programs that support the permanence of the students with financial difficulties who cannot conclude their studies.

It consists of seven dormitory blocks, five of them available for undergraduate students and two for graduate students, with six floors and eleven apartments per floor. Each apartment has three regular tenants who can host another student per apartment, as long as this guest student is also a regular USP student. There is a floor for students with children, with physical facilities adapted to children. In the CRUSP, there are collective kitchens and study rooms. Stu-

dents are exempt from paying rent and the permanence of the inhabitants depends on the time of the course and a yearly socioeconomic and academic re-evaluation. Considering the regular inhabitants and guests, the current population is around 1,500 students.

### Study subjects

Male and female students regularly living at the undergraduate and graduate students' dormitories and guest students who had been involved with alcohol or drug abuse at the time of the study were the subjects for this research. Of the eight participating subjects, seven were identified by means of the records of the community action service, since they received care from social workers or were referred by other programs. The eighth subject of this study was not supposed to participate, since he died before this study was started. However, when his partner was informed about this study, she submitted a written testimony on behalf of the dead student requesting that he could also be included as a research subject.

The project was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee at School of Nursing of University of São Paulo, which authorized the utilization of the testimony of the eighth participant, as long as his anonymity and that of his family were guaranteed. All ethical precepts for research involving human beings were followed, according to Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council (File #535/2006).

### Data collection, analysis and treatment

Data collection occurred from June to August 2006, with semi-structured interviews, using multiple-choice and open-ended questions about the history of the health-disease process related to drug and alcohol abuse, before and after coming to the CRUSP. The interviews were held in places selected by the subjects, which could either be their own apartments, depending on favorable conditions for the researcher and the student to have privacy, or the researcher's office, a place where some of the subjects mentioned they would feel more comfortable.

The collected data were treated using content analysis, seeking the comprehension of the meanings of the discourse with the connection between the addressed theme, the conflicts and the contradictions that build the discourse<sup>(6)</sup>, combined with the methodology in which short novels showing the suffering reported by those who experience it facilitate the comprehension of why people do what they do<sup>(7)</sup>.

Data analysis was anchored in the Theory of Social Determination, incorporating the gender categories, understood as historically and socially-built gender. This conception explains, in the light of power relationships, the social manifestations of women, including the health-disease process<sup>(8)</sup>. As an analytical category in the healthcare area, it allows for better comprehension of the social inequalities and the quality assumed by the health-disease process in each subject or each social group<sup>(9)</sup>.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data treatment revealed eight empirical categories: Drugs in life; CRUSP as a facilitating space for alcohol and drug abuse; alcohol and drug abuse: heredity or family influence?; alcohol and drug abuse as an instrument to escape reality; alcohol and drug abuse and discrimination; alcohol and drug abuse by men and women: sex and gender differences; alcohol and drug abuse and mental health; alcohol and drug abuse and violence.

For the category *Drugs in life*, the results revealed that, of the eight study subjects, six started abusing drugs during childhood or adolescence. These findings agree with a study performed at Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), which says that people start abusing drugs at the age of 13<sup>(10)</sup>. For the participants of the present study, the frequent use of drugs caused significant losses in the social, academic, health and financial spheres. A study done at Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de São Paulo (FMUSP)<sup>(2)</sup> found that most students who abused drugs thought that this practice did not interfere in any sphere of their lives. Most of them were from average and average-high income classes and had access to a better quality of life, different from the conditions of life the participants of our study are inserted in, i.e. low-income social classes (a minority at USP), with problematic family situations since childhood, and living in precarious, restrictive situations that would not allow for better conditions of life. Moreover, these students had their emotional dimension affected by states of grief, apathy and depression that could be soothed with either use of both illicit drugs or medication. According to the Theory of the Social Determination of the Health-Disease Process, drug abuse was observed to reflect differently in different social classes with a specific health-disease process for these population groups.

For the empirical category *CRUSP as a facilitating space for alcohol and drug abuse*, the students' dormitories are shown as an element that favors alcohol and drug abuse. Some subjects mentioned the environment of freedom and easy access to these products. Some of the subjects mentioned the environment of freedom and easy access to these products. The Butantã campus of the University of São Paulo is near a huge shantytown, with several *bocas* (points where illegal drugs are sold) that provide drugs to USP students and employees, as reported by the students themselves. At the same time, they note that the compulsion and need for the drugs, the difficult situations of survival and the emotional conflicts are also strong favorable conditions for this consumption in the students' dormitories.

Regarding *Alcohol and drug abuse: heredity or family influence*, the results showed that four out of the eight subjects mentioned that their initial use occurred because of family influence (parents, siblings and other relatives). This empirical category shows that, according to the Theory of Social Determination, the socioeconomic conditions and

quality of life which the interviewees have been subject to since childhood are favorable to trigger the abuse. The form of these people's insertion in the processes of social production and reproduction determined the levels of consumption and, therefore, access to material goods in life, such as food, housing and access to healthcare became difficult. In addition, the lack of family and educational support, as well as other elements, exposed the students to risks and contributed to the development of the health-disease process. Still, according to research<sup>(11)</sup>, heredity is a factor of risk for drug abuse, although not by itself – it needs other conditions, as those mentioned above, for dependence to become established. When they are adult, the children of alcoholic parents have higher rates of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, conditions that are favorable to higher consumption of alcohol and other drugs<sup>(12)</sup>.

In the empirical category *alcohol and drug abuse as an instrument to escape reality*, all subjects reported that they used drugs to be able to withstand difficulties, soothe their pains, forget about problems, necessity of things and unresolved situations. Again, the findings are different from those found in the study about drug abuse in the university<sup>(2)</sup>, whose subjects justified consumption as a means to enjoy their effects and reduce stress.

In the empirical category *alcohol and drug abuse and discrimination*, seven subjects mentioned having already faced some sort of discrimination in several places. However, specifically within the dormitories' environment, they mentioned feeling little discrimination. Some of them mentioned *self-discrimination*, i.e. they disapproved their own habits each time they abused drugs. Both women manifested great concerns about their image in the face of society due to the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, concerns that are justified since there are social prejudices against women who abuse drugs. An USP psychologist<sup>(3)</sup> verified that, in the students' dormitories, there are conservative-styled discourses about drugs and devaluation, according to inhabitants who feel threatened. The stigmatization of drug abusers is common due to the generalization of the forms and reasons for use that depreciate the condition of the social class and the consequences of this condition in the way of life. In this sense, approaches that consider the historic and cultural moments and the social condition of the user contribute to the comprehension of the users' health-disease process.

Another empirical category analyzed was *alcohol and drug abuse by men and women: sex and gender differences*. These are similar to the findings of Centro Brasileiro de Informações sobre Drogas Psicotrópicas (CEBRID)<sup>(13)</sup> regarding the number of addicts per gender, i.e.: it was observed that alcohol addiction is three times higher for males than for females, while the percentage is higher for females regarding addiction to benzodiazepines and barbiturics. In this research, although a qualitative methodology was used, for which figures are not important, one of the two partici-



pating women mentioned addiction to medication. This category also yielded the relation of seduction and alcohol use for women and the use of alcohol by men related to demonstrations of sexism, which was confirmed by the results. The risk for women to be sexually abused when intoxicated was manifested by most subjects. Both female respondents mentioned having been victims of this sort of abuse in the form of rape. It is known that society finds that women addicted to drugs are worth of contempt, and some of these attitudes are also seen in healthcare professionals, as confirmed by the reports of both students. Perhaps due to these facts, women choose to hide their consumption of drugs from healthcare professionals, which causes addiction to go undetected. Such a fact could be changed if there were a gender-based focus when these professionals provided care, since this is a theoretical category of the analysis that considers the social construction of femininity and masculinity and the social inequalities between men and women, resulting from the established relationships of power. The representations of the social construction of femininity and masculinity were reflected when *the duty of man, of being strong and showing power* and *the duty of woman, of being weak and needing protection from man* were noted. Another evidence of the gender issues was the separation of the public sphere – the streets – as man's territory and the private sphere – the home – as woman's territory, in addition to situations of female submission to men. One of the interviews showed the woman's relationship of submission, who, in order not to lose the man with whom she maintained an affective relationship, let herself be exploited financially so that she could use drugs, in addition to submitting herself to the joint use of drugs. Another significant aspect was the guilt that women feel for being drug abusers, coming both from themselves and from others. They were aware that society demands them to preserve their image and moral values so that they can play their role in an idealized way. When there is self-guilt and they take on deterministic stances, they strengthen this kind of conceptions, which make it difficult to comprehend drug addiction as a health problem, in addition to the possibilities of overcoming the problem.

Analysis of the empirical category *alcohol and drug abuse and mental health* shows that all subjects suffered from some sort of mental discomfort, reported by most as depression. Three of them reported the occurrence of psychotic episodes. A research done at Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP) showed that 44% of the participants had severe depressive disease and 75% manifested depression before the addiction<sup>(14)</sup>. Studies in the United States of America and Europe showed negative effects of the use and addiction to drugs in patients with mental disorders, confirming that even recreational use could result in mental disorders<sup>(15)</sup>. Psychiatric comorbidity can be present in cases of drug addiction and alcoholism, and has been analyzed in several recent studies. Drug abuse is the most frequent aggravation among people with mental conditions such as mood and behavioral disorders,

anxiety, depression, short attention spans, hyperactivity and schizophrenia<sup>(15)</sup>.

In the last empirical category analyzed, *alcohol and drug abuse and violence*, all respondents mentioned that they practiced or suffered some sort of violence (physical, verbal, domestic, sexual or against public property) when intoxicated. Both women presented the highest count of episodes characterized as some sort of violence, usually as victims. As mentioned before, both reported being victims of sexual violence (rape) when under the effects of drugs along with their partners. This reveals great gender inequality, since the men did not report any sexual aggressions as victims. All subjects of this research mentioned that they became involved in risky situations, such as arguments, fights and going to drug dealers to obtain their drugs, which confirms the findings of the CEBRID study<sup>(12)</sup>, which verified that men practiced the highest number of aggressions under the effect of drugs, nearly five times as much as women. Regarding arguments, 5.9% of the men stated in that study that they had had arguments when they were under the effect of drugs, against approximately 1.8% for women. Alcohol abuse was also observed as a favorable condition for the many situations noted as domestic violence (between partners, between parents and children and vice-versa). Still, physical violence (the use of strength with the intention to wound), psychological violence (humiliation, disrespect) and verbal violence (use of words) were present<sup>(16)</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study focused on the health-disease process of students living in the CRUSP who already had a situation of drug addiction established before entering university. It aimed to comprehend how this process had developed, considering the conditions imposed by the environment of a students' dormitory. It also sought to understand how gender issues are manifested in this context.

The life histories of the eight study subjects, as well as the histories of most students living at the CRUSP, are marked by financial necessities, social limitations and family problems, socially determined according to their insertion in processes of production and social reproduction.

According to the interviews held in this study, the students' dormitory was not shown as the element responsible for drug abuse, although it was present as a facilitator. The favorable conditions of this environment for drug abuse referred, basically, to the freedom to lead one's own life, away from the control exerted by the family or other adults. The situations of grief, stress, lack of money, unemployment and family problems, allied to the context of the college environment, were all present, despite frequent reflections about social and philosophical issues.

It is worth noting that all respondents were adamant in not blaming CRUSP for their disease, but said that it works as a protecting element, especially for the actions devel-

oped to cope with this serious problem. Therefore, it is extremely important to strengthen projects focused on improving quality of life at the CRUSP, so that they will soften the situations of isolation and grief, especially for those who are already in a situation of chemical addiction. Social-occupational programs could also help those in the process of recovery positively, since idleness caused by unemployment and the lack of psychological conditions to attend classes, according to the reports, work as propellers for drug abuse. CRUSP should also be seen as a viable space for drug dealers who have already infiltrated the place, and relevant public institutions should be aware of this fact.

Although discrimination towards drug abusers was not as present as labeling, the awareness of the phenomenon of drug addiction as a global problem could be better addressed, especially to show the extent of the consequences to the students and the implications for society in general and for the students' environment, focusing on the dormitories in particular.

Regarding the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by men and women, it was observed that gender issues are reproduced. Already existing projects like *SOS woman*, developed by COSEAS social workers, could broaden discussions about the theme, so as to increase the awareness of an issue that has been widely addressed by the Brazilian scientific community – gender studies.

Mental disorders in this research, generalized as depression, were also present in 90% of the interviews. Escapism from reality and the need to use drugs to withstand the unfavorable conditions of life were expressed insistently. An *active search* program that could detect cases of de-

pression early would allow for preventive actions and avoid the aggravation of the situation. Perhaps the agents of such a program could be CRUSP inhabitants themselves, oriented by professionals, since they have better access and acceptance within the dormitory environment.

Violence related to alcohol and drug abuse was present at the CRUSP. Actions aiming to promote awareness, problematization and prevention of all sorts of violence should be elaborated, involving both the COSEAS institution and the people who live in the dormitories.

Considering the reports of the subjects in this study, people who were addicted before coming to the CRUSP, it was observed that an established program of monitoring and treatment support in the environment itself made the difference in the health-disease process of these people. It is necessary to intensify this program, as well as to promote a prevention program for non-problematic users, to avoid the aggravation of their situation or the establishment of a chronic condition.

The University of São Paulo should have a clear, uniform and effective policy to face the issue of drugs, prevention and treatment, focused specifically on the community, workers and students, and which sees to their necessities, avoiding that students in situations of addiction abandon their courses, join the criminal underworld or die.

Finally, to improve the current situation – since transformations in the structural dimension (public policies of security and healthcare) in the setting of this study are being undertaken on a long-term basis, interventions that could transform the private (CRUSP) and singular (inhabitants) are indispensable and possible in the short term, as long as they are approved and supported by the appropriate institutions.

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