Alterity and Identity Refusal: The Construction of the Image of the Crack User[1]

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Abstract: The discourse disseminated in the media shows the user of crack as dependent or criminal. This study's aim was to analyze the construction of otherness around the image of crack users. We interviewed 14 crack users in different places and the data were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis. The participants' reports suggest that the image of crack users is established based on alterity, in which the individual in this condition does not recognize him/herself. Thus, even though users contend that their actions are not determined by the standards provided by their interactional networks, hegemonic representations concerning their contexts of use attest that these activities concerning crack are just as they are perceived to be. Therefore, even though they have other experiences with the drug, these participants believe that the use of crack provides a destructive pleasure and impedes voluntary action.

Keywords: crack (drug), alterity, social representation

Alteridade e Recusa Identitária: A Construção da Imagem do Usuário de Crack

Resumo: O discurso veiculado tanto na imprensa quanto nas comunicações cotidianas tem situado o usuário de crack como dependente ou criminoso. O objetivo desse estudo foi analisar a construção da alteridade em torno da imagem do usuário de crack. Para isso, foram entrevistados 14 usuários de crack de diferentes localidades e realizada Análise Temática de Conteúdo das informações obtidas. Diante desses discursos, pode-se afirmar que a figura do usuário de crack se institui numa alteridade, em que o próprio indivíduo inserido nessa condição não se apropria. Desse modo, apesar dos usuários apresentarem que suas ações não se determinam em relação às normas decorrentes de suas redes interacionais, as representações hegemônicas de seus contextos de uso remetem essas atividades como verdades sobre o crack. Assim, mesmo vivenciando outras experiências com a droga, acreditam que seu uso remete ao âmbito do prazer destrutivo e da impossibilidade de ação voluntária.

Palavras-chave: crack (droga), alteridade, representação social

Alteridad y Rechazo de Identidad: La Construcción de la Imagen del Usuario del Crack

Resumen: El discurso trasmitido tanto en la prensa como en las comunicaciones cotidianas han indicado el usuario de crack como dependiente o criminal. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar la construcción de la alteridad en torno a la imagen del consumidor de crack. Para eso, fueron entrevistados 14 usuarios de crack de diferentes localidades y fue efectuado Análisis Temático de Contenido de las informaciones obtenidas. Ante esos discursos, se puede afirmar que la figura del consumidor de crack está estableciendo una alteridad, en la que el propio individuo insertado en esta condición no lo hace apropiado. De esa manera, a pesar de que los usuarios muestren que sus acciones no se determinan a partir de los estándares debido a sus redes de interacción, las representaciones hegemónicas de sus contextos de uso se refieren estas actividades como verdades acerca del crack. Así que incluso si el usuario experimentar otras experiencias con la droga, ellos creen que su uso se refiere al ámbito del placer destructivo y de la imposibilidad de acción voluntaria.

Palabras clave: cocaína crocante, alteridad, representación social

The dissemination of symbolic forms concerning crack spreads representations that guide practices even though this is not a linear process because representations and practices reciprocally originate, explain and legitimate themselves (Abric, 1994). Such discourse claims that every crack user, in addition to being a criminal (especially among the poor), becomes dependent or addicted, while women end up prostituting themselves to support their consumption, among other beliefs. These symbolic productions are intrinsic linked with an effect capable of establishing and/or keeping moral standards for drug users who are seen as delinquent or ill individuals (Santos, Acioli Neto, & Sousa, 2012).

Given this situation in Brazil, these representations involve the symbolic construction of a social object, the crack itself and a figure of otherness, the drug user: "druggie", "crack head". The construction of this figure arises from differentiation and exclusion processes, based upon which subjective marks emerge. It is an epistemic-ontological production in the sense of creating a subject with an identity based on the practices that develop, but at the same time, a field of knowledge composed amidst disgust with reality.

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Otherness is the product of a dual process in which construction and social exclusion relate to each other, maintaining its unity through the system of representations (Jodelet, 1998). It is the process of recognizing another person but, at the same time, the Self emerges (Jovchelovitch, 1998). This delimitation between the Self and another person enables greater control of identity because the one being excluded clarifies which behaviors individuals within a society should avoid, which performs an important role in the cohesion and identity of dominant groups (Arruda, Jamur, Melicio, & Barroso, 2010).

In this sphere, the image of a crack user is outlined by his/her association with crime. A criminalizing and pathologizing construction is disseminated by the media and science, evoking tension and conflicts triggered by the manifestation of marginalized socio-economic classes. These are socially devalued lifestyles, segregated from what is common. It becomes an extirpation of social problems, due to the "politically correct" objects of expiation are required to be legitimated. Thus, the construction of crack in society seems to place poverty within a mask that may be rejected publicly. As stated by Arruda et al. (2010), otherness projects much of what a society desires to eliminate from its interior, justifying intensive repressive measures.

This aspect draws attention to the fact that crack is more intensively used by populations characterized with greater social vulnerability (Jorge, Quinderé, Yasui, & Albuquerque, 2013). The profile of frequent users is single men, approximately 30 years old, with a low level of education and unemployed (Bastos & Bertoni, 2014; Capistrano, Ferreira, Silva, Kalinke, & Maftum, 2013; Nappo, Galduróz, & Noto, 1994). Even though this profile shows mainly men, female users frequently present specific vulnerabilities such as exchanging sex for drugs and being exposed to AIDS, HIV, hepatitis C and syphilis, in addition to being exposed to sexual violence. Recent data reported by Fiocruz (Bastos & Bertoni, 2014) highlight that there is a severe situation in which users lack assistance: 40% of those intensively using crack are homeless and experience extreme social deprivation. Even though this profile prevails, the use-pattern does not seem to differ according to the user's socio-economic status; the same characteristics are observed among users with greater purchasing power (Freire, Santos, Bortolini, Moraes, & Oliveira, 2012).

In the media, however, the discussion is restricted to specific phenomena, such as the use of crack within a portion of the population excluded from the society, without access to basic social goods. The issue is presented as a problem of individual pathology arising from a wicked drug, diverting attention from the most general conditions in which most of the affected population lives (MacRae, 2013). This population, living in poverty and in situation of vulnerability, is regarded by society as intolerable and is laden with a devalued and stigmatized social status (Paugam, 2001).

In order to deal with this problem, the Brazilian government recently launched measures in which diverse forms of health and social assistance were implemented to meet the needs of these users (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome, 2009). These measures are part of the Plano Integrado de Enfrentamento ao Crack e outras Drogas (Integrated Plan to Cope with Crack and other Drugs), developed by the Federal Government, including immediate actions and actions of a nature to build the structure to face this issue through inter-sector cooperation. These actions are intended to promote an integrated set of interventions focused on prevention, treatment, social reintegration, and combating trafficking (Decree No. 7.179, 2010).

Nonetheless, among these strategies, compulsory hospital admission for homeless drug users is included. This strategy is intended to remove crack users from the streets and place them in institutions to receive compulsory treatment, i.e., without their consent. It is an imposition of mandatory treatment and is based on the conception that the individual does not have a choice. Thus, the use of force, if necessary, is a possibility. In this sense, this imposition disregards the user's decision-making process and seems to be based on representations that indicate the individual is in a process that nullifies them, that consumes him/her (Romanini & Roso, 2012; Souto, 2013).

This primarily repressive official position involves Brazil's long history in which social determinations or effective care delivery and in the context of which, assistance among drug users has been neglected. This conduct, however, refers to a still very current way to deal with this issue. Hospitalization in "reforming" institutions was for decades a common practice in Brazil and was primarily intended for the "insane" (Acioli Neto & Amarante, 2013). Hospitalizing the "different" in madhouses was (and still is) a socially legitimated activity, removing the undesirable, the sick, and the crazy from the streets.

Since the 1980s, movements in favor of psychiatric reform have emerged in response to this model, expecting care to be promoted outside the context of asylums, through the integration of diverse social sectors, especially the health sector, social assistance, education and the legal system (Ministério da Saúde, 2002). In this sense, the transformation of psychiatric policies, a social situation that changed social practices forged long ago, led to the implementation of new services such as the Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPS), which were regulated as entities specializing in the treatment of dependency (CAPS-AD), through Law No. 10.216/2001.

In the scenario of Brazilian policies, however, drug consumption has always been associated with criminal or pathological issues. The official position, through diverse public policies, reflects ordinations conducted in spheres of power that pervade State institutions and society as a whole. In this process, cultural factors are crucial because through them representations and a differentiated process of acceptance, rejection, and incorporation of social achievements on the part of society are historically constructed (Hofling, 2001). Therefore, these policies are an important normative component in the ordination of practices and behavior, and play the main role in the signification of this social phenomenon.

Hence, official discourses related to crack involve a criminalizing/pathologizing logic, assigning to the user a characterization based on a universal pattern in which there is no space for individual or collective singularities. Throughout history, public policies have addressed this issue mainly from a repressive perspective, though it is remarkable that this position coexists with other perspectives such as prevention, reduction of harm, and treatment. On the one hand, actions are based on the creation of CAPS, medical offices on the streets, strategies to reduce harm, psychiatric units in general hospitals. On the other hand, however, there is repression and the compulsory hospitalization of users who refuse treatment, disregarding the nuances of each individual. Additionally, there is a lack of legal specificity concerning the category of dealer, which causes individuals who consume drugs to drift between health policies and public security, which may either place him/her as a user or a small dealer, based on non-standardized criteria.

Hart (2013) considers that the main factor leading people to consume drugs intensively to be environmental. This author states that between 80% and 90% of the individuals consuming crack do not develop dependency on the drug. These data indicate a symbolic nature of the object. The emergence of drugs in a society is related to the meanings assigned to drugs, which acquire signification and symbolic efficiency. It is a process that occurs in a relationship that is dependent on context, because the emergence of drugs is linked to social, political and historical conditions that configure it (Jovchelovitch, 2008).

Therefore, this institutionalized political discourse requires further analysis because it constitutes a symbolic order but it is embodied in institutional practices and, consequently, acquires abilities to produce meanings and define subjective senses. This order reciprocally mediates relationships as it disseminates representations that end up organizing modalities of subjectivities and behaviors, even if only implicitly (Berger & Luckmann, 1996). Therefore, we ask: are the meanings concerning crack produced in different contexts related to the characterization of users? What function does this constituted image assume in social practices developed by these individuals?

This study analyzes the construction of otherness around the image of the crack user and its relationship with the context in which these individuals use the drug. Based on the media coverage of drugs that we observe, this analysis is necessary.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted with 14 crack users, originating from various locations in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, PE, Brazil. The inclusion criteria were being a crack user and consenting to participate in the study. These users' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years old. Most reported the use of crack for up to three years, had dropped out of education at the primary school level and the average family income was one times the minimum wage. Minimum wage current at the time of data collection (2013) was R$ 678.00/mo., approximately U$ 305.47.

The participants were contacted with the help of professionals working in the program Atitude nas Ruas e do Consultório de Rua (Attitude on the Streets and in Street Medical Offices). These programs provide resources for basic care provided to users in situations of high social vulnerability. The main function of these services is to mediate the access of the population in poor social conditions to the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS) and the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS). These are composed of multidisciplinary teams including psychologists, social workers, nurses and damage-reduction agents. The individuals were addressed in areas where they use drugs and invited to participate in the interview.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was the technique used because it enables adding questions to deepen coverage of certain subjects and to address complex and sensitive aspects. In addition to personal information, the individuals were asked about the use of crack (when it began, how it was used, where it was used and when), what activities they performed daily, and the relationship of these activities to their use of crack.

Procedure

Data collection. Data collection took approximately six months (between April and September 2013). The interviews were conducted by the primary author on different days and at different times. The participants were initially contacted by the health and social assistance teams in areas where they consumed crack. They were clarified regarding the study's objectives and invited to participate in an interview designed to delineate the routine of crack users and patterns of use. The teams were instructed by the researcher to make this first contact. Afterwards, place and time of future contacts were scheduled according to the individuals' convenience to take part in the interview. All the interviews were digitally recorded after the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted 20 minutes on average.

Data analysis. Content Thematic Analysis was used to interpret data. Content Analysis is defined as a set of techniques intended to describe the content of communication and infer knowledge concerning the conditions in which such knowledge is produced and transmitted through the classification of reports in categories, which are then regrouped by analogy (Bardin, 1977).

The interviews were categorized and composed families of meanings that emerged from the users' reports, situated in hermeneutic units. In this sense, these categories were organized using the discursive content present in the interviews according to the frequency with which

they appeared. Then, these categories were identified as belonging to a family of meanings and grouped according to their similarity and relationship with the theme under study.

These procedures were performed using Atlas.ti. This software was chosen because it enables systematizing analytical categories. Additionally, Atlas.ti has some advantages in regard to the techniques used in Content Analysis, such as resources that enable taking notes and comments, developing reports, memos, arranging tables and matrices, etc.

It is important to note that the analyses were all manually performed in the software, meaning there were no automatized categorization or interpretation. Atlas.ti only served as an instrument of analysis to facilitate the process.

Ethical Considerations

This study complies with guidelines provided by the Brazilian Council of Health through its Resolution 466, 2012, which establishes regulated standards for studies involving human subjects. This study was conducted after approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, SE, Brazil (CEP-UFPE / CAAE: 13781313.9.0000.5208) and from the Attitude Program.

Results and Discussion

The Image of Crack Users: Constructing and Rejecting Identities

According to the interviewees' reports, the characterization of crack users is based on social practices developed in specific contexts of use, in which the prevailing ethics is to do anything, to do any activity or take any action, to obtain the drug. From this perspective, users were described as lacking control over their actions; the drug dominated and made them act according to their needs (jonesing) caused by the drug. As reported by João

> the druggie is someone who cannot live without crack. He'd do anything, even kill you if he has to, to smoke… So, he's part of violence because you don't want to give it to him so he can use it. So, when the person is jonesing, needing a fix, he'll be even able to kill you. (João, 28 years old)

Additionally, crack users define themselves as victims due to the negative effects caused by the drug, in the sense there is a stigma that removes them from society:

> A crack user is a poor thing, because crack's something that is not worth it, it just destroys. I say it for myself. Sometimes … I was just thinking to myself this morning "man, what is this life? I get all my money and spend it on drugs, next day I have nothing, no benefit, no joy, no joy to live. It just

makes me a zombie, all the money I get is for drugs, it's for drugs". So I was like, considering myself garbage. (Leonardo, 29 years old)

Users are identified as sick persons, with a contagious condition, with no means to work because of the fragility caused by heavy consumption. This condition situates the user as an undesirable individual, a striking alterity figure, recognized and abhorred due to the risks of contagion or threat to citizens.

> I think that most people smoking crack, who use crack, I guess that part of it is due to discrimination. Because you walk by and people say "look at this one, crack head". People get scared, hold their purse tightly. It may cause… prejudice. (Aline, 21 years old)

Therefore, the crack user is acknowledged as someone whom is not guided by moral values or ethical principles. S/he acts according to the body's need for a drug, not concerned with others or social life. This is how users presented their representations regarding people who consume crack, but it is not how they generally describe their own experiences with the drug.

The process of the victimization of crack users implies the impossibility for these individuals to overcome the problem. Their drug use leads society to reject these individuals and the distress they experience is intensified by exclusion. Consumption is merely recognized as "mandatory", an organic demand, from which no pleasure, no delight is obtained; it is rather a relief from pain, the elimination of a need.

The individual feels overpowered by the drug, directing his/her actions according to the drug's impositions. "Crack domination" refers to illness caused by consumption. The individual forgets others and lives in isolation, lacking confidence, and feeling like the carrier of a contagious disease. The following excerpts illustrate this condition: "I think it's like an animal. You fight for a piece of stone, you fight for anything, you do anything to have the drug. You spend days and nights. A really poor situation" (Rafael, 22 years old). "People see users as if they were lepers, as if the guy is in debt, as if they had AIDS, as if the guy is infectious" (Daniel, 18 years old).

It is, however, important to note that these characteristics highlighted by the users do not conform to how delimitations of their ways of being would function. Even though, many fit this description, assigning this relationship to causality is not the only norm for the experience of use, because many users indicate these standard descriptions are something distant from their experience with the drug. For this reason, the image of crack user, the "druggie", acquires a signification because it is associated with crime, even if the experience of a given individual diverges from this construction.

I wonder about the day after. You know? I always thought "wow, and when it's over?" You know? I'd have 50 bucks and I wouldn't spend all the 50 bucks. I'd look at it, buy a pack of cigarettes and start analyzing "If I buy two, how much will be left? I'll still have 25." And then, I'd buy cigarettes, 5 bucks, and still have 25. So before I used it, I'd go home and give 15 bucks to the wife and keep 10, because you know what was I thinking? I was thinking to smoke those two stones, drink a beer and enjoy. (Bruno, 35 years old)

As stated by Malheiro (2013), it is typical not to acknowledge users' informal social control, control strategies users develop in their routine. What is most frequently seen in the experience of use are expectations and representations and not single experiences of what happened.

These representations have a determinant function in the construction of practices and the orientation of experiences of use. These experiences are manifested through norms that originate in the contexts of signification (but which also produce norms) and, consequently, originate from interactional networks in which individuals exist. Thus, an inherent ethics emerges in their daily lives, contingent on the contexts of production.

Therefore, crack users are confused with thieves given the image that is built, but not as an identity they assume. While an action is legitimated in the context of use, theft refers to the image of users, making him/her a criminal, a thief. The reports of these users show: "Crack head, as far as I know, crack head is the person who uses crack. Someone who wanders around dirty, who steals to get drugs, you know?" (Carlos, 18 years old).

Even if considering a user to be someone who is only capable of stealing to access drugs, when the individuals report their histories, they distance themselves from this image.

He thought that all crack users were capable of stealing at any time. Someone you couldn't trust, who would do anything to get the drug, you know? That's what he thought. And it was true. Though I never needed to steal from anyone, nobody from my family. (Bruno, 35 years old)

Otherness and Identity Refusal

The figure of a crack user is established in otherness, in which the individual him/herself exists in a condition in which s/he does not recognize him/herself. The process of identity construction seems to be situated in a refusal in which the individual, on the one hand, disregards hegemonic social values, and on the other hand, does not recognize him/herself as being in such a situation. As noted by Jodelet (2001), the construction of otherness, grounded on representations disseminated and shared by society and media, plays an excluding role, through specific organizations of various interactional networks influenced by such knowledge. Hence, "crack head" refers to images of marginalized groups, signified

as a threat to society: those criminalized are the individuals who belong to peripheral areas, in low socioeconomic conditions. The use of crack is just another activity in the repertoire of practices of these groups, but one that has various associations, and is a scapegoat for many social problems.

I, myself... I didn't considered myself a crack head because I've always worked, you know? I've always worked for… the system. So, not everyone is a crack head, because there are people who use the drug but who work hard. Works and supports their vice. That's exactly it. Not everyone is a druggie, but 100%, 70%, most of those are crack heads. What someone works not to be a crack head, that's it. Because they are able to buy their drug, but then they can, you know? (João, 28 years old)

It is important to note that even though there are many users who are thieves or murderers, we need to pay attention to the process of the mediation of norms, practices, and circumstances in which the effects of a drug take place (Morgan & Zimmer, 1997). The effects of substance use is directly linked to the social context of use, not only arising from its pharmacological properties but also from local practices developed by the groups (Becker, 2008).

In this context, having a job plays a central role in this organization, because it shows autonomy and responsibility with projects of life and with other people. It is, therefore, a landmark, delimiting the symbolic boundaries that embody this figure. Nonetheless, one should keep in mind the fact that even working to support consumption, users regard it as a "wrong" activity. This way of dealing with the situation brings out questions concerning the role social norms play in the development of representations and practices. The moral norm that is constituted in a given interactional context seems to play an important influence. In this sense, crack users are not only defined by their consumption but also based on whether they adapt to the social norms that arise from the sharing of knowledge. Therefore, users are regarded as thieves with no social or financial responsibility.

Long before, I was an obedient man, I'd respect seniors, elderly people, everything. When I started using crack, I stopped respecting anyone. If I were working and doing the right thing, it's ok. But no, I was working and using it for the drug. It doesn't help; all your money goes for the drug. Especially because I have a family I have kids. I have two kids, a wife. So, I saw myself in a poor situation. I worked and would give nothing. All my expenses were for drugs, drugs, drugs. I wouldn't take anything from people, but I was there, doing the wrong thing, using drugs. Using drugs is wrong in any case. It doesn't matter if you're working or not, it is wrong (Marcos, 19 years old).

Having a professional responsibility, the users report they are able to identify the limits to obtaining pleasure from the drug, and control consumption. There is no interest in abstaining from this pleasure, but there is a need to regulate it, to acknowledge the right time and give priority to other aspects of life.

> Those who smoke with control think: this money is for me to enjoy, so later, I'll go home, sleep, and it's going to be another day for me to work. They smoke but are aware of the objective not to put the thing they have at risk, you know? (Aline, 21 years old)

Therefore, consumption was reported as a leisure activity, more frequent during the weekends. The work routine is an obstacle to the use of crack. They would consume during the week, but there was a regulation of quantity, while weekends were reserved for a higher level of consumption. This use is sometimes referred to as the use of drug in its pure version in the pipe, or mixed.

> I smoked more on Saturdays and Sundays, you know? Weekends, parties. I'd smoke less during the week. It wouldn't be much. I'd stay at home or in front of my house, chatting with the boys. Then, they would say "let's go take one, play ball" I'd drink one, play ball and then... I'd have cravings. (Valéria, 23 years old)

Paugam (2001) states that labor has a central role in urban societies because it is associated with social life, becoming a way to access consumption. This is a wage-driven society guided by the capitalist model of consumption that constructs social affiliation based on professional belonging. For this reason, such ties are lost when there is a loss of a job or a situation of job instability.

Therefore, a job provides a sense of identification with citizenship and belonging to a community and is considered a factor of social cohesion. Deregulation of labor relationships may weaken social ties and put individuals in a situation of social marginality (Oliveira, 2009). This relationship with labor is involved with contexts of signification, which act in order to establish ethical criteria for action.

From this perspective, labor assumes the locus of the production of goods and services, but also becomes a matrix of symbolic production, constructing significations that condition possibilities of social organization (Guimarães, 2005). Labor ethics, in this socio-economic model, are no longer centered on satisfaction with social commitment but are centered on the possibility of accessing consumption (Bauman, 1999). The logic of crack use is consolidated as another consumer good in a capitalist society. This ethics is constructed according to the context of the individual and is, therefore, contingent on members of interactional networks in which this concept is legitimated.

The understanding concerning contingency of values refers to the variability of positions of users in regard to the acquisition of crack. While for some, only work is a legitimate possibility; for others the practice of theft and robbery is legitimate. In this sense, those users who take labor ethics as a guidance to consumption do not adapt to the norm of robbery and do not identify themselves with the figure who consumes crack, the thief, as previously shown. These individuals prefer to ask their families for money so they can consume the drug, as is the case of Renato: "I never had the guts to steal. People have the guts to do anything. But I never had the courage for this, no. I'd prefer to get on my mom's nerves and insist until she gives me some money" (Renato, 34 years old).

Roberto, in turn, differentiates himself from thieves, emphasizing his job as an activity that distinguishes him from the other users:

> When the guy is really shameless he only thinks of doing bad stuff to others, stealing, killing, destroying. These guys... I prefer to work hard, go after my goals rather than... I don't want anything from anyone. I don't want anyone getting what's mine, either. (Roberto, 29 years old)

This relationship with otherness puts the individual who consumes drugs in a situation of conflict, around an instituted norm, in a representational system of "crack head" and its ethics, but there is also an ambivalence of values, which often diverge form the normative model, as previously discussed. Hence, one of the aspects strongly highlighted by the users is shame of assuming this place in society, in their families.

> I feel embarrassed because we, chemically dependent people, either we like it or not, people look at us with an evil eye, wondering whether we'll do something, steal to get drugs. So, I guess that society... We feel embarrassed, we... I've been addicted, I'm dependent, but thank God I've always got my money from my work, you know? (Leonardo, 29 years old)

The choice of isolation, of getting away from family and work, was justified by their refusal to acknowledge themselves as crack users. A defensive attitude against reverberations of this otherness figure, in turn, amplifies the risks of drug consumption because important roles are played by belonging to an interactional reference network such as the family and the social responsibility that accrues from having an occupation, in terms of mediating the use of drugs.

> They knew I used drugs and I pretended they didn't. You know? Sometimes, I tried not to chat, because then, I guess I was ashamed they'd find out I used marijuana, crack and whatever. I was really

ashamed, so I wouldn't talk to them for this reason. The only subject I had to talk about was about drugs. For this reason I avoided talking, avoided being around them, you know. (Rafael, 22 years old)

When consumption is initiated, the user faces a number of rules and conditions of use, in addition to the possibilities of effects. These conventions constitute norms, modalities of social control, which involve the user in a repertoire of actions. The contexts of crack consumption regulate relationships, putting the user in the role of managing these possibilities. Many times, however, this normative nature limits interpretative margins and is regarded as the only means of access, the only way.

Defined in terms of direction established between representations that are produced and practices that are developed, the dialogical process may be seen in this sphere, in the associations of crack with crime and with the personal experiences of users. In the face of a context of the criminalization of drugs and intense prejudice around this subject, the circumstances of use are characterized by conflicts in embodying the figure of the crack user and facing social stigmas.

Final Considerations

The reports show that the image of the crack user conforms to otherness, in which the individual in such a condition does not recognize him/herself. Additionally, the knowledge constructed by users in a given interactional network plays a normative role, prescribing actions developed around right/wrong, normal/abnormal, accepted/excluded; therefore, knowledge acquires symbolic efficacy through systems of signification and practices shared by the individuals. The act of stealing, for instance, was accepted and considered a commonplace practice among some users, while others abhorred this possibility. We understand that an object made present in daily life through communication is legitimated based on its use in specific circumstances.

Nonetheless, amidst this normative tension, users experience other ways of being and acting. Even though, in the process of identification and differentiation, users commit theft, this characterization is attributed to somebody else. This relationship with experience and its related representations put the user in a place of identity conflicts. In a defensive move, the negative dimensions of others intensify, transferring all the undesirable load outside the group of belonging. Therefore, some users, even though inserted in networks that legitimate criminal practices, made decisions that diverged from the informal norm of stealing to smoke.

Therefore, even though users state that their actions are not determined by these norms, hegemonic representations of their user contexts imply these activities are truths about crack. That is, even having other experiences with the drug, they believe that this use refers to destructive pleasure, the impossibility of a voluntary action, the incarnation of a repulsive figure. Social norms that prevail informally in these fields summon users to become dependents, criminals, incapable of constructing life plans.

It is however, important to note that, among this study's limitations, there is the fact that the participants live in the metropolitan region of Recife, PE, Brazil and were contacted by Health or Social Assistance teams, which may have influenced the results. The participants already received assistance from these teams and their prior relationship with these professionals may have influenced how they responded to the interviews. Additionally, the fact the study is restricted to a metropolitan region does not permit an analysis of other socio-cultural contexts from which other identity forms may emerge, or patterns of consumption with distinct characteristics. Hence, the results presented here do not represent any single user of crack, though they show possibilities that required further investigation in other contexts and places, such as users from other cities, rural areas, or distinct socio-economic classes. Gender issues, which may imply different attitudes in regard to the use of crack, were not investigated.

This study's results show the problematization concerning the implication of individuals in a normative system that orients the consolidation of actions diverging from one's code of conduct or ethics. This conflictive condition in the face of an *ethos* raises questions in regard to the processes of signification that construct and legitimate a person's ethical ability to make choices in the face of these systems. In other words, these results indicate an aspect seldom discussed in the theory of social representations and that requires further investigation: the ethical dimension of the process of constructing meaning.

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