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Scripts of Men’s Heavy Drinking

Elena Zdravomyslova and Elena Chikadze

One Russian is a drunkard,
Two Russians start a fight.
Three Russians make up a queue for vodka.

(Soviet period anecdote)

Résumé

This paper contributes to the research, which has become popular in recent years, on men's drinking habits in modern-day Russia (Liisitsyn 1990, Pokhlebkin 1991, Zaigaev 1992, Nemtsov 1996, White 1996, Simpura & Levin 1997). Heavy drinking and excessive alcohol consumption are widely reported to be typical of everyday life in Russia. It is most often the negative consequences of alcohol abuse that are identified, such as disruptive, anti-social behaviour, economic loss, moral degradation, and a decline in the health of the population.

Our approach has been different. We concentrate on the rationale and justifications that people give to the widespread, excessive consumption of alcohol. We pose the simple questions: If the effects of alcohol are all bad, why do people drink so much – are they insane or irrational? What do the heavy drinking habits of Russian men imply? It can be deconstructed as a practice that either celebrates the man’s identity, or testifies to the crisis of masculinity.

Using the biographical method, we have reconstructed contexts from the life stories of Russian drunkards, which have helped to reveal different patterns of male drinking behaviour. We combined field work with the analysis of the mass media and professional discourse, which provides a basic understanding of the structural features of the contemporary phenomenon of drinking amongst Russian men.
The first part covers the analysis of public discourse on heavy drinking in Russia; the second part provides a narrative analysis of the ‘drinking stories’.

Public discourse on heavy drinking

Heavy drinking as a social problem

The issue of heavy drinking and alcoholism in Russia started to be widely discussed during President Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign (1985). We examined the discourse on heavy drinking and alcoholism from 1980-1998 by scanning Russian newspapers that were in mass circulation at the time: ‘Trud’, ‘Segodnya’, ‘Tcha Pik’, ‘Nevskoe vremya’, ‘Izvestiya’, ‘Argументy i Fakty’ as well as the journals ‘Vestnik Statistiki’, ‘Sotsial’nye i klinicheskaya psikhiatriya’, ‘Sociological Journal’, ‘Sotsioligicheskie issledovaniya’.

The technique of discourse analysis helps to identify the major reasons for heavy drinking in Russia. The discourse on heavy drinking, as the discussion of any social problem, is looked upon as justified ideological discourse that has an action-oriented political implication.

The fervour of the official discourse of the 1980s was directed at the exposure of alcoholism and at ascribing guilt on the alcoholics themselves (Simpura 1997). Since 1990 the discussion has become less politicized, and we are now witnessing a stable professional interest in the topic. Today the opinions are becoming increasingly diverse.

We identified the following basic frames of heavy drinking in Russia: heavy drinking as a Russian cultural tradition; heavy drinking in the Soviet era; heavy drinking as a personal fate; heavy drinking as a result of the post-Soviet crisis.

The theory of heavy drinking as a Russian cultural tradition has a long history (Novgorodtsev 1909, Bekhterev 1927, Bestuzhev-Lada 1996). In this case the authors give convincing examples of drinking in everyday life, but do not discuss the causes of this tradition. Their main idea is that drinking in Russia is a psychological and cultural trait that is difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate.

The discourse on Soviet heavy drinking blames the Communist state for mass alcoholism. The Russian heavy drunkard is seen as a victim of state manipulation who cannot really be held responsible for his/her self-destructive practices. It is often supported by demographic arguments, such as the increased death rate and a low birth rate. This kind of interpretation has been the most popular in the mass media since the beginning of the 1990s. Recent versions of this theory ascribe heavy drinking to a wide range of consequences arising from the anti-alcohol politics of Gorbachev (Medvedev 1996, Filippov 1997).

Heavy drinking as a personal fate. In this frame the authors observe concrete reasons and invent concrete remedies for alcoholism. They argue for empirical research on the causes of drinking. This kind of argument was found to be quite rare, however (Tuchman 1985).

The discourse on heavy drinking as a result of the post-Soviet crisis sees alcoholism and self-destructive practices as negative consequences of the transformation taking place in modern-day Russia, e.g., mass unemployment, disruptions in the pattern of life, social and political instability. In this case reforms are seen as major reasons for the increase in heavy drinking (Biryukova 1996).

Men’s drinking scripts

Research method

Our empirical study aims at the reconstruction of scripts of drinking: (1) the contexts and (2) the meanings of heavy drinking from the life stories related by Russian men.

We consider the biographical method to be an effective tool for the study of meanings and practices in everyday life. In the course of our study, 30 focused biographical interviews were conducted with men who drink heavily. The sample was formed with the help of the snowball technique. Respondents were chosen from those who agreed to discuss their personal drinking problems with the interviewer.

Script Theory as the methodology for interpreting biographical narratives. A modified version of the Script Theory of J. Gagnon was used in the analysis of the narratives presented in the life stories (Gagnon 1990, Temkina 1998). The Script Theory is a useful technique for analysing a text. We use the idea of ‘script’ in a slightly different way, adjusting it to the aims of our research, i.e. to reconstruct social and cultural drinking scenarios. We have retained the term ‘script’ because it points to structural conditions conducive to certain practices.

We understand a ‘script’ as a metaphor. On the one hand it is determined by social structures, and people therefore inadvertently follow it in their everyday life. In this case the scripts are contexts of drinking which define drinking practices. People face these contexts in the course of their lives.

On the other hand, we perceive a ‘script’ as the unity of narrative and
corresponding experience, organised as a semantic unity. We can illustrate this thesis as follows: we cover the story about drinking and alcoholic experience with numerous justifications, explanations and interpretations, i.e. meanings that the narrators ascribe to their everyday drinking practices. We aim to expose the various meanings that are usually interwoven into the contexts. At the same time, we build up a certain hierarchy of meanings by underlining the meaning that has become the main one for a certain group of narratives.

We define a 'script' as the configuration of everyday practices in the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Using the script frame for the analysis of life stories, we focus on the following issues: (1) the contexts that are presented as conducive of specific heavy drinking practices; (2) meanings and justifications for heavy drinking given by the narrators.

The purpose of script analysis as a narrative analysis is to reconstruct the frames of heavy drinking as an exercise in masculinity in Russian culture today. Individual scripts (as presented by the narrators) are looked upon as the frames for cultural scripts. The scripts may cover a whole lifetime or refer to a certain period only. More often than not we can detect several scripts in one biography.

Our sample consists of men who were socially conditioned in Soviet times and whose drinking habits have been influenced by the changes in everyday life that have occurred during the past decade.

The report proceeds as follows. We present drinking scripts based on the modal biographies. Each script is organised into the experiences and relevant contexts that were crucial in certain life stories. Our specific topics are: everyday drinking, the drinking schedule, drinking preferences, hangover, drinking companions, and group drinking rituals, 'negative' and 'positive' consequences of drinking as reported by the narrators; drinking and social control; and personal reflections on the influence and effects of drinking on the life of the individual concerned.

Script 1. Soviet film studio employee: Dima

This script is organised into two semantic units. The first is connected with drinking as an everyday practice and as a part of the many years of professional activity of a man working in a film studio, which is a very special professional environment. The lifestyle of the studio engenders has become the key issue in this description of a 'drinking career'. The second unit of this script is drinking provoked by the destruction of a former life-style.

Family and childhood memories. Dima belonged to a lower-middle-class family. His father was a driver in the military forces and his mother was a salesperson. The image of the father is an important point of reference in Dima's story. Dima stresses his sociability, cheerfulness, good looks and charming social demeanour. At the same time, references to his father's drinking habits are to be heard throughout Dima's story. He sees his father's drinking as an important pattern for Dima's male socialisation. Other childhood memories, including those of a street culture, proved to be unimportant in the framing of his future drinking experiences. As both of Dima's parents had full-time jobs, he attended Soviet childcare institutions and spent much of his time without his parents. He recalls the 1950s as a cheerful time of street games.

Drinking debut. Dima's drinking and sexual initiation took place in his late teens. It was common practice for the youngsters to drink a glass of dry wine for courage before dancing. Later, weak wine was replaced by stronger drinks, and when drunk, they would make rough passes at the girls. Inspirational drinking was considered to be a necessary part of teenage sexual life. We would like to emphasise the following features of this initial period of drinking: 1) its male social character - it is exclusively male drinking; 2) the combination of drinking and sexual experience; 3) the poor quality of the cheap drinks consumed during this initial phase.

Dima's biography includes the experience of military service as a necessary institution for male socialisation. The military service is described as a school of true masculinity. Dima was recruited to the paratroopers for three years. He claims that the army of the 1960s was very different from that of later times. The officers had the heroic flair of World War II veterans.

Heavy drinking at work. Dima had several jobs and got several qualifications before he started to work as a cameraman. Heavy drinking at the workplace marked Dima's working-class experience, as in many other cases. Drinking at the plant taught him to drink vodka, since "they drank every day at the end of the working day". When Dima finally started to work as a cameraman at the studio, his greatest dreams came true. During 25 years of his work there (1970-1995) he advanced from a cameraman's assistant to the position of second cameraman. The job was interesting and afforded Dima a lot of satisfaction. He appreciated the work and the prestige it brought. It also gave him the opportunity to travel a lot in Russia during shooting periods. Adventure was part of the cameraman's professional life. Studio life was a combination of professional and private interaction. It was common practice to have love affairs at work, and drinking at work was habitual. Drinking at work in the studio was regulated by traditions. Usually, drinking was the way of celebrating every small step in the making of a film. For the most part, Dima's drinking took place at the studio and in street-corner cafés.

Drinking during the period of reforms: From celebration to lament. The reforms of the 1990s were crucial to the shift in Dima's drinking from a festive practice, to drinking as a symptom of a crisis of masculinity. The studio was going through an economic crisis and Dima was laid off. He then spent three years working as a plant watchman. The work was boring and poorly paid. Dima assesses the change in his status as unfair. He thinks that most of the men who were dismissed during the economic crisis were high-class professionals. He is convinced that heavy drinking today is caused by individual crises,
resulting from the economic reforms. Dima feels that nowadays men visit drinking places not to celebrate, but to complain. He believes that, in the current conditions, the men of his age and qualification are a lost generation. He looks to the future with horror and expects to remain unemployed. He has already encountered age discrimination when job-seeking.

Now Dima sees himself as a loser. He believes that his passage from customary (normal) drinking to alcoholism is marked by the social changes in the country and, most of all, by the loss of his job. He argues: "Now people drink from grief, from hopelessness."

Script 2. Soviet Bohemian: Oleg
We define this script as Soviet Bohemian drinking. The Bohemian lifestyle — that of the outcasts of the Soviet system — involved artistic creativity, dissident tendencies and forms of cultural protest against the system. Drinking in such an environment was viewed as a part of a culture of protest and a sign of creativity. The contexts for this drinking script are the Bohemian topography and underground cafés in the city.

Childhood memories.
Oleg was born into a well-off, Soviet middle-class family. His mother was a chief engineer in a grocery firm and his father was a construction engineer. He is aware that drinking has been habitual among the men in his family. His father started drinking heavily during World War II. "My father died from cirrhosis of the liver. All of my father's side of the family were heavy drinkers. There are none on my mother's side..."

Oleg claims that the political situation in the mid-1960s—70s was of major importance for his personal formation. Although his school years basically fell in the period of 'stagnation' (end of 1970s – 80s), he was able to enjoy certain political openings of Khrushchev's liberation, one of which was the city's Youth Literary Club (1965). In this milieu, male youth friendship was one of the main attractions for gifted teenagers. Oleg modelled his life on the practices of the older leaders of the Club, who introduced drinking to their juniors.

Drinking debut.
His drinking debut took place in this milieu. The first time Oleg got drunk was at the age of 15. He says that it was the tradition of drinking as described in Russian literature that seduced him. He wanted to try the vermouth that Pasternak describes in one of his poems.

University years. Oleg studied at the philological department of the State University in the late 1960s. He was the head of the class Komsomol organisation. This status proved to be useful: money for drinking was borrowed from the Komsomol membership fees, and later refunded.

The young people and Bohemians developed a network of public places (cafés, coffee shops, restaurants) for their drinking, such as the popular cafés near the university ('Akademichka' and café 'Saigon'). Oleg claims that people went there to avoid loneliness, just to talk, to join in with lively gatherings.

Jobs.
Like many other Bohemians, Oleg was not well integrated into the Soviet structures. He earned money working in poorly paid temporary jobs, as a watchman, assistant, technician, etc. These experiences, as in other cases, were marked by the drinking habits at the workplace.

The initial drinking of his teenage years was coloured by the atmosphere of political liberation and friendly communication at the Youth Literary Club. The heavy drinking of his adult years is reflected against the gloomy background of 'stagnation'.

Oleg's story shows that the political atmosphere of 'stagnation' was conducive to Bohemianism and its drinking patterns. The Soviet Bohemians professed a commitment to united cultural opposition to the Soviet way of life. The Bohemian drinking patterns were embedded in the Soviet structural conditions.

Market and political reforms destroyed the Soviet Bohemian milieu and thus changed these habits. Many former Bohemians tried to quit drinking, and became professionally orientated instead, always claiming to have a lot of things to do. In 1991 Oleg was finally elected a member of the Union of Writers: he became widely published and started to earn money regularly through literary work.

However, for him, excessive drinking never ceased to be a habitual practice. It only became more regulated by his working schedule and health problems. Generally speaking, Oleg sees drinking as a positive inspiring habit which, if excessive, could have bad consequences. He recollects his attempts to stop his heavy drinking. He connects these attempts with his will to work creatively and his attempts to be a good family man.

Script 3. Polar researcher: Vlad
We define this script as the drinking of a Soviet superman who did not have a chance to realise his full potential. It is the story of a 'true man', a 'komandor', or leader. Such people view drinking as the inevitable practice of a true man.

The contexts that shape his drinking habits are: (a) the very 'male' profession of a polar researcher, which strictly defines periods of work at the polar station and vacations, (b) the man's position in the family — in the event of divorce, the husband leaves the house to his ex-wife, hence the lack of a home of his own becomes the key point of the drinking narrative; (c) the collapse of the Soviet superman script during the early period of Russian reforms in the 1980s–90s.

Family, childhood memories and the image of the father.
Vlad's story can be interpreted as the story of a son. This means that the crux of Vlad's narrative is the image of his father as a model of masculinity. Vlad's father belonged to the elite of the polar investigations. Vlad was father-orientated in his school achievements as well as in his choice of profession. Important childhood memories are also connected to his relationship with his father, such as the hunting rifle that he received on his 12th birthday, and the truly male recreations — hunting, fishing and hiking. It was his father's idea that Vlad should become a polar explorer.
Youth.
Vlad became financially independent quite early, when he entered the Marine College in Leningrad and moved to the college barracks at the age of 17 (college years: 1972–1977). Vlad is highly satisfied with his education, because it was "a good school of true masculinity". True masculinity is based on male friendship and solidarity, financial independence, sports, diverse skills of finding for oneself, courage and expeditions.

Job/Professional career.
After Marine College, Vlad went on to postgraduate studies, entered the Communist Party, implementing his strategy for a Soviet career.
The work of an Arctic explorer is tightly scheduled. It involved long "winterings" at the research base; the men doing intensive seasonal work at the polar stations far from society. The men got special salary benefits – one could earn twice as much as on the mainland. After six months' wintering there was a six-month vacation.

Winterings demanded certain personal traits - capacity for intensive and diverse work, feeling of solidarity, tolerance and discipline. Vlad's story brims with professional pride. It arises from his understanding that a wintering is a test of true masculinity. After a wintering term, the men felt strong, healthy, and thirsty for the experiences of male leisure, interaction and sex. During winterings heavy drinking was not common because of the intensive workload, but the vacations were accompanied by heavy drinking.
The beginning of the 1990s was a turning point in many Soviet careers.

For Vlad the reforms were central to the breakdown of the original design of his career. The last wintering at the polar station took place in 1991. Economic decline made it impossible to organise further expeditions.

Vlad could have gone into business, as many of his colleagues did, but he chose to continue his scientific work and started to write his second dissertation. His income fell radically, and he found a supplementary job as a watchman at a car park. Vlad's narrative about his current work situation is full of bitterness and disappointment.

Vlad is quite ambiguous in his assessment of the Russian reforms. He supports them, but on the other hand he is very critical of them. Personal freedom is the main achievement of the reforms, in his view.

Private life, free time and social intercourse.
The private life of the polar researcher was scheduled by his job. Intensive winterings were followed by intensive vacations and romantic adventures. He spent his vacations at resorts that were prestigious in Soviet times (the Baltic, Yugoslavia and the Black Sea). Vlad has been married four times. He believes his third divorce, in the late 1980s, was caused by the fact that he became underpaid and his wife turned into a businesswoman. He married for the fourth time in 1994.

Every time that Vlad returned from a wintering with lots of money and an appetite for social life, he visited friends. Coffee, cognac and vodka accompanied this rediscovered social life. Vlad is conscious of the negative consequences of drinking, and he thinks that people should be wary of this habitual practice. He claims that his new family and his daughter help him to withdraw from the practices of homeless companionship drinking.

Justification and motivation for drinking:
In Vlad's story, drinking has several meanings. The crucial frame is drinking as an essential part of male culture in general - a ritual, a pattern of communication and a tool for managing stress. His drinking became excessive and self-destructive when other masculine characteristics, i.e. a well-paid job, independence, and a stable family life, deteriorated.

Alcohol, in Vlad's opinion, also has a positive effect. It helps people to relax and to cope with difficult situations. He also believes that the widespread heavy drinking in Russia is imbedded in contemporary social changes: "people drink a lot because the times are such... Sometimes I just need to drink to overcome the feeling that I have to provide for my family and that I can't do it in a dignified way. In fact, I know that, with my brains, I have potential... and if I worked in the West and had the same status, I would have a yacht and a country house."

Now things are getting worse and better at the same time. Vlad's status changed dramatically. This is a typical inconsistent status scenario, causing psychological breakdown. However, Vlad feels personally happy with his wife and daughter and sees the breakthrough in his private life.

Script 4. The eternal teenager: Serezha
This script is centered in the experiences of the early destructive heavy drinking rooted in the teenage culture of the newly built, big-city suburbs to which Serezha belonged, and which play an important role in his narrative. Family and childhood memories.

Serezha was born into a middle-class Soviet family of engineers. The family lived in a new district on the outskirts of Leningrad. Describing his school life, Serezha says that, in the final years, he attended school for just two hours a week. In this environment, self-destructive behavioural patterns were common from an early age. The older school children were drug addicts: they sniffed gasoline and drank vodka. The teachers let these boys of 12, 14, and 15 years stay at home whenever the school was to be inspected, in order to avoid the inevitable conflicts with authorities.

Drinking debut and drinking places.
Drinking was habitual amongst the teenagers in Serezha's neighbourhood. They started mostly with cheap dry wine. With a lack of facilities for entertainment in the area, youths came together to drink in the stairways on the wide expanses between the houses, in the backyards, where they were not supervised.

Serezha recollects: "I learned... that there is the circle in which people live only through drinking... I lived in this world and got to know how it all happens. I slept in their dormitory, in one place or another... It is not that your personality is degraded by it, it simply adapts to it, and there is no way out. It is a particular (social) position."
Jobs and military service.
After 10 years in comprehensive school, Serezha entered a technical high school, but soon left it and never continued his studies. He remained jobless for some time, having a lot of free time and nothing useful to do.

Serezha’s years as an army conscript (1984–1986) were also full of drinking experiences. It was his duty to buy drinks for the older soldiers. Serezha’s experience in the army and in his various jobs shows a lack of responsibility, the inefficiency of social control mechanisms, and a lack of discipline. This is why we have called the script the ‘Eternal Teenager’.

After military service, Serezha entered the milieu of the late Soviet underground, mixing with hippies or people of the system, as they called themselves. Their life-style was similar to the one described in the Bohemian script, though there were differences in the meaning of drinking. Bohemians were firmly oriented towards creative work, including poetry, art and underground philosophy. They had their own ‘sense of life’ and they were critical of the regime.

Serezha’s milieu among the younger generation was less romantic. Many of them combined heavy drinking with drugs. Serezha claims to have been apolitical, marginal to the Soviet way of life, and he professes a low level of integration into the Soviet structures.

Justification for drinking.
Serezha can be considered an eternal teenager. In his opinion the consumption of alcohol is a normal male practice. His main thesis corresponds with that stated by the other narrators: men always drink, a normal man must drink. The other meaning of drinking is identified as a way of spending time in the company of friends, when conversation is accompanied by alcohol. Such interaction is romanticised and remembered as a holiday occasion. One more meaning is youth and the counter-cultural nature of Serezha’s drinking as the life-style engendered by his milieu — that of a youth subculture of hippies and ‘people of the system’.

Script 5. Manual worker: Sasha
The backbone of this drinking script is the perpetuation of the working class way of life. Sasha frequently refers to the drinking experiences of the working class, to which he and his parents belong. It is evident that the son has inherited his parents’ way of life. We can speak of it as ‘cultural-genetic drinking’. It affects the whole life of the individual, both during the working day and in his free time.

Family and childhood memories.
Sasha’s parents came from the lower working class. His father was a driver and his mother was a cleaning lady. They drank regularly. Sasha graduated from secondary school in 1985 and entered technical college. He was known as a modest, unambitious young man; he was passive and unimaginative. Although teenage fights were common in his milieu, he did his best to avoid them.

Drinking debut.
The first drinking experience he had was in his final year at the technical college in his friend’s company. They failed an exam and, sitting in a stairwell, drank cheap dry wine straight from the bottle to console themselves. The first time Sasha was really drunk was when he mixed red wine and beer, drinking in the company of his friend. Heavy drinking (large quantities per sitting) became a stable pattern of Sasha’s interaction with his friend. Every time they met, they bought cheap wine, and sometimes mixed it with beer to get more drunk. When they were drunk, life seemed more interesting and adventurous.

Jobs and drinking at work.
Sasha was a technologist by profession, but worked as a machine operator. He was not highly qualified and worked on the old equipment. Sasha then worked in a cigarette factory, where the working conditions were poor: dust, pollution, heavy work, etc. He was fired in 1998 for stealing cigarettes from the factory.

His story refers several times to drinking at the work place, which was considered normal in his milieu. The concrete situations for drinking at work were diverse: the celebration of birthdays and state holidays, pay days, piece-work, overtime and many others. The men in the workshops of the industrial plants usually drank vodka or pure (ethyl) alcohol, which could easily be obtained for free from the plant’s repair shop. Sasha reports that, at the factory where he worked, everybody was constantly tipsy and, although this surprised him at first, he later accepted it as the norm.

Female patronage.
Sasha’s story is a striking example of the female domination in the everyday life of passive men in Russian culture. His life was run by women: first his grandmother took care of him, and later his mother decided on his education, choosing the technical high school that was close to his home. She also arranged his first marriage.

At the age of 18 Sasha married a girl of his age. She studied at the same technical school and lived in the same neighbourhood; their mothers worked at the same tobacco factory. Up until the death of Sasha’s parents, when they moved into their own apartment, the young couple had shared accommodations with either his or her parents. Sasha gave his salary to his wife and left only a little pocket money for himself. They made purchases together and his wife tried to get him interested in various leisure-time activities. They both liked to visit friends, and every visit was accompanied by heavy drinking.

Sasha admits lack of personal autonomy, and female domination in his first marriage: “I did not have anything of my own in the apartment where we lived. My mother-in-law lived with us. She is O.K., but I wasn’t living in my own place, so I didn’t interfere in anything”. He wanted to escape the overwhelming control of women, and he separated from his wife after six years of marriage.

In spite of the fact that from an early age Sasha had a critical attitude towards heavy drinking, witnessing its destructive consequences on his parents, he did not manage to escape the same pattern. Drinking was normal not only at work, but also at home. The family had a stereotype of the Sunday family dinner at Sasha’s mother-in-law’s place. Each weekend she cooked dinner for them and bought a bottle of vodka: this was her ritual of hospitality.
The justification and motivation for drinking in Sasha's story is not sophisticated. He says that he drinks for relaxation and to alleviate the unbearable boredom of his existence. He says, "All my adventures take place when I am drunk.

Script 6. Student: Grisha
The following script is centered in vigorous student drinking as a part of male student camaraderie. A specific feature of drinking amongst the new generation is that drinking is accompanied by drug usage.

Family and childhood memories.
Grisha did not know his father because his parents separated when he was very young. However, the father is often mentioned because he was a drunkard, and now Grisha's relatives and friends who drink believe drinking is a genetic pattern that he has inherited from his father. Grisha lives with his mother and stepfather, whom he respects greatly and regards as a model man.

Grisha went to a typical working class school in his own neighbourhood. It was one of those neighbourhoods where "in the third grade children start smoking, in the fourth they discover beer and develop a taste for it, and in the fifth grade they sniff glue."

Grisha's family orientation and home can be seen as a guarantee for his escape. When he was 15, his family moved to the centre of the city. This move to another environment totally changed Grisha's life and philosophy. In the city centre, the brutal teenage street life was similar to that of the distant neighbourhoods. "The former graduates... beat us up because we were newcomers". This pattern served as an initiation ritual. Seeking revenge in this fight, Grisha took up wrestling. Sport in his story is the part of male culture that provides a means for self-defence and self-assertion.

Student life (end of 1980s - beginning of 1990s).
This period is crucial in the forming of Grisha's drinking habits. After finishing school at the age of 18, he entered the Faculty of Arts of the University. This marked the beginning of his young adult life and drinking experiences. Grisha claims that student life was the golden age for him. It is in this period that he started to write poetry and play the guitar, and his musical tastes changed radically. Everything was new and inspiring in his student life.

Male friendship and student brotherhood are the key values of Grisha's script. He emphasises that their company was exclusively male. Occasional girls were allowed to join them, but, for the most part, love affairs were "parallel stories" and did not overlap with male friendship.

His theory of student solidarity is grounded on common values and practices, its crux being 'intellectual interaction against a background of sport'. "We smoked, we had coffee. We drank when it was cold, or when the first grass appeared in spring, or when we received our stipends. Why not celebrate these occasions?"

Drinking practices.
Grisha frames his drinking as a part of friendly intellectual discussions. The topography of student drinking in this period included a particular set of city cafes. In his drinking stories we see café 'Saigon' as a setting for the youth culture of the 1980s. This place was crucial for several subcultures of late Soviet society. Grisha became involved in the communication patterns of this place, which were strongly influenced by group consumption of Moldavian port. The older generation of the Saigon milieu - people who had been at odds with the Soviet culture of the 1970s (such as Bohemians) - became Grisha's point of reference. Grisha modelled his own drinking habits on theirs.

Excess alcohol caused trouble: fights and conflicts with the police. Grisha distinguishes different patterns of drinking behaviour, depending on the quality and kind of drinks consumed. He differentiates between vodka and dry wine. In his own view, "I behave respectfully on vodka. I get silly, obstinate and start to turn into a different person, whom I don't know". He says that when he wants to change his life-style, he will drink dry red wine only.

Justification and motivation for drinking.
Grisha's drinking has numerous meanings, most of which are assessed positively. He does not see his excessive drinking as self-destructive. In his version drinking is a source of intellectual and communicative liberation and creative work. He says, "Drinking is necessary, because a person may be reticent, but give him a glass of something and we can strike up a conversation and everything is OK". For him drugs and alcohol are means of intensifying sensitivity.

Grisha also appreciates the altered state of mind that comes with drinking and drugs: "...everything becomes different: different thoughts, movements, view, perspective... Reality is transformed..." He also believes that drinking helps him escape from the mundane realities of Russian everyday life, which he hates. This argument gives drinking the meaning of protest against the absurdity of being. Another justification is the simple sense of relaxation that alcohol brings. He also sees heavy drinking as a result of the breakdown of traditional archaic masculinity. "...man is a hunter, who has always been engaged in an active search. It was the men who killed the animals... women were not warriors... This was normal. Modern-day life is detrimental to these patterns. There are no overt ways to respond to the offender, there are no duels, the law prohibits street fights. The result is "an increase in the number of alcohol-related crimes in our society: there is no way to sublimate..." This crisis of primordial masculinity with its justification of force is seen by Grisha to be a major condition for obsessive drinking.

The second frame of his drinking script is his understanding of student life and youth as a period when drinking is normal but temporary. Grisha believes that in the future he will be able to moderate his drinking patterns. When student life is eventually over, the drinking will cease. He will become an adult. The thought of work and typical adult responsibilities makes him reassess his drinking. However, he only wants to control his drinking, not quit altogether.
Discussion

Our research shows that heavy drinking is firmly rooted in the Russian understanding of masculinity, as is well illustrated by the biographical narratives of male heavy drinkers. A certain kind of modestly destructive mischief has been a key emblem of Russian masculinity (Ries 1997).

In our research, we identified six scripts of heavy drinking. These are: Soviet Bohemian, Eternal teenager, Student, Manual worker, Komandor, and Soviet film studio employee. The meanings of drinking are reconstructed from the life stories. We have pointed out the following reasons for drinking: celebration of masculinity, celebration of male friendship, the protest drinking of the Bohemian, student drunkenness, crisis drinking, professional milieu drinking, drinking among the lower circles of the working class. Some scripts include several reasons at a time, others have one clearly prevailing reason.

Research has made it possible to identify the social contexts that are conducive to the following specific features of Russian drinking: drunken bants, group drinking at work, large amounts of alcohol at one sitting, drinks of low quality, fortified liquors.

The contexts conducive to destructive heavy drinking are the teenage milieus of the suburban dormitory; student milieu; professional milieu of the Soviet time; the working class milieu, and the context of the post-Soviet masculinity crisis. Our study showed that most men start drinking in their teens, following the drinking patterns maintained by their fathers.

In many cases the first drinking experiences of teenagers occurred in groups in ‘uncomfortable’ conditions, such as in staircases, in public toilets, and in backyards. Drinking debuts mainly involve low quality drinks. Often teenage drinking experiences are combined with solidarity fights, celebrations of male friendship, etc.

Male student life in all the cases is also accompanied by heavy drinking in a group. However, this kind of drinking mainly has a positive connotation and is seen as a temporary practice, typical to this stage in life.

Heavy drinking in the Soviet era was the resort of people who could not realise their full potential within the strict boundaries for upward social mobility. Many of these individuals became Bohemians because of the Soviet conditions; drinking was a strategy for escapist protest against the regime.

Drinking is also seen as part of the lower working class life-style. The post-Soviet crisis of masculinity provides a major frame for the contemporary reinforcement of drinking in those cases when men feel deprived of their former social positions.

Our research shows that drinking is one of the major practices of masculinity. It is a group activity that accompanies communication. The structure of Soviet leisure, characterised largely by visiting friends and relatives, was also conducive to the specific drinking patterns observed.

Failed masculinity or a crisis of masculinity is a major justification for self-destructive heavy drinking and alcoholism amongst Russian men. In the interviews, as well as in public discourse, the crisis of masculinity is considered an important feature of the gender relations in Soviet society.

‘Crisis of masculinity’ is the catchphrase that embraces the unprivileged deprived position of Russian men in relation to several normative models.

The public discussion on the crisis of masculinity began in Russia at the end of the 1960s. The thesis about the disappearance of true manhood with its corresponding responsibilities and rights was a decent way to criticise the status quo of Soviet society. The Soviet man was seen as weak and, thus, drinking has been seen both as a drug for the failed masculinity and as compensation for it.

In the life stories, social institutions are held responsible for a man’s drinking. Male alcoholics and habitual drunkards are seen mainly as the victims of social circumstances. In public discourse the same explanations for drinking can be found, but the responsibility for alcoholism is also attributed to the individual himself.

Our research has also shown that the boundary between the habitual practices of alcohol consumption and the heavy drinking and alcoholism is unstable and difficult to identify. In a society where the masculinity culture engenders the stereotype of regular group consumption of large quantities of alcoholic beverages, the transition from drinking as a form of celebration to drinking in a crisis can be provoked by any circumstance that may be interpreted as psychologically stressful.

In contemporary Russian society we can observe instances of the normalisation of previously heavy drinkers, the appearance of the AA society, and the emergence of new drinking habits within new contexts.

The changes in heavy drinking can thus be seen as changes in drinking practices and the relevant contexts: access to better quality beverages, better conditions in public drinking establishments, the control of drinking at the workplace, including improved incentives to work and general economic growth, which provides better paid jobs. The change in the patterns of alcohol consumption can also be related to the breaking down of parental stereotypes, when a father’s drinking habits are no longer perpetuated by his son.

Literature


