

Sketch Mapping – an innovative method of researching drug users

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Objectives The German-French research consortium DRUSEC (Drugs and urban security Use of alcohol and illicit drugs in public and nightlife – challenges and suggestions for solutions for municipalities) aims at researching security risks associated with drug use in (semi-)public settings, e.g. “open drug scenes” or nightlife settings, with a strong focus on socio-spatial aspects. Therefore –and in addition to other qualitative and quantitative research methods– we use sketch mapping as an innovative method of researching drug use. Sketch mapping enables us to identify measures that may reduce insecurities and risks in the context of drug use in public and nightlife settings. This paper introduces the method and explains its value in drug research.

Method To understand how drug users and non-users individually and collectively experience (in)security in public spaces, sketch maps are used as an innovative and new method. The qualitative GIS (Geo Information System)-based method produces spatial data during research interviews: Accompanied by a qualitative interview, drug users (who use drugs in public or nightlife settings) map their lived space by hand and add different colours from a specified colour scale which represents how they feel in specific public area(s) and which (in)securities they experienced.

Results In order to develop cartographic narratives of drug use in public space, sketch maps are generating knowledge beyond the mapping of official (police) statistics medial representations and other instruments of knowledge production. The maps represent the individually lived experiences of drug users, producing further knowledge about risks and insecurities of a potentially vulnerable population group. Moreover, the use of sketch maps enhances the quality of the interview itself, as the map mitigates the “typical” researcher -subject situation and enables the interviewees to be an expert of their own maps/ their lived space. In this way, sketch maps help to talk about the politically charged topic of public drug use. Nevertheless, potential ethical risks and difficulties within the evaluation need to be discussed and taken seriously for the further development of the method for social drug research. This paper presents our experiences and current practices of sketch mapping within the DRUSEC project and points out its significance in drug research.

Conclusion Sketch mapping as a method for drug research improves the understanding about feelings of (in)securities in the context of drug use in public and nightlife settings and helps to identify measures that may reduce the risks of such “drug places” for users and non-users.

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