Recreational Cannabis Users in Estonia and Russia

Abstract

The aim of the research has been to pay attention to two aspects concerning recreational cannabis use in Estonia – firstly, how young recreational drug users diminish and deal with the risks of cannabis use and, secondly, how the gender order and recreational drug use are related to each other.

Cannabis has spread from the capital of Estonia and become part of the “mainstream” youth culture. Informal social networks are used for selling the drug. Smoking and dealing in cannabis is common for young people, and even non-smokers accept it. Cannabis use is considered to be everyone's free choice and seen as a “natural” drug which is not as harmful as synthetic drugs are. The aim of the research has been to investigate what kinds of social sanctions and other control mechanisms (extrinsic and intrinsic) regulate cannabis use, and the risks of diminished health – both short-term and long term – which the young recreational cannabis users have experienced.

In analysing the gender order of drug use, we performed a comparative study analysing the differences between gender order and drug use in two different countries – Estonia and Russia. Different roles, responsibilities, activities and contributions of women and men are expected, allowed and encouraged in relation to different drug use contexts and countries. In this comparative study, we paid attention to many aspects concerning gender order and drug use such as the initiation to and context of drug use, hierarchy, norms and frequency and the amounts and types of drugs used in these two countries.

The analysis is based on 30 open-ended interviews with cannabis users aged 16-20 conducted in Autumn 2006 under the auspices of the SAL project in Estonia. Informants were reached employing the snowball method. For the analysis of the comparative study with Russia, we used 11 interviews and field notes on Russian drug users carried out by Russian researcher, Irina Kosterina, in the framework of the SAL project in Russia.

Keywords: recreational drug use, normalisation, gender, risks, cannabis use, young people
**Introduction**

The aim of the subproject has been to investigate and analyse different issues in relation to the recreational cannabis users in Estonia. The study focused on different topics such as drug use and material relations; trust, friendship and drugs; gender and drug use and communication with society.

**Theoretical background**

The term "recreational drug use" means that drug use does not disturb daily activities like working or learning and does not cause evident physical harm. Furthermore a drug user has no compulsory need to consume drugs, and it is limited only to leisure time.

The spread of illegal drugs in Estonia took place at the time when society had to face social problems previously unknown during Soviet times. Since there were no widely-accepted explanations for the spread of illegal drugs, representations constructed by the media became greatly influential (Parker et al., 1998). The result was a generational gap between the attitudes towards illegal drugs (Allaste, 2006).

The concept of “normalisation” means that drug use, which used to be deviant and subcultural in negative sense, is adopted by the mainstream culture. It does not mean that all young people take drugs but that drugs are easily available, people have tolerant attitudes towards drugs and a rather large proportion of people experiment with drugs (Parker et al., 1998).

The approach of social-constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) was employed for discussing risks and cannabis use according to which social problems (illegal drugs) and risks are dynamical social constructs. In a risk society, awareness of risks and risk calculations have become a natural part of daily life (Giddens, 1991).

The term “gender order” was used in the comparison of two case studies. This, according to Carolyn Hannan (2006), is defined as the way society is organised around the roles, responsibilities, activities and contributions of women and men; in other words, it relates what is expected, allowed and encouraged in relation to what women and men do in different contexts. An important starting point is the fact that “gender order” is not set in stone – it is possible to challenge and change it.

**Methods**

The analysis is based on 30 open-ended interviews with cannabis users aged 16-20. Of these 15 are from Tallinn (interviewed by Peeter Vihma) and 15 from Rakvere (interviewed by Maarja Kobin); the interviewees were 14 young women and
16 young men. The data was collected in Autumn 2006. Informants were reached via the snowball method.
Interviews are analysed from the perspective of the constructive grounded theory by using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Commonly accepted proximate codes were used relative to the comparative case studies (Estonia and Russia).
To compare drug use in Estonia with that in Russia, Russian data were also used. The latter consisted of empirical data based on ethnographic research conducted among two youth groups in Sochi. The data drawn for this study consisted of 11 interviews with drug users and extensive field notes by Irina Kosterina.

Results

**Meaning of drug use and its risks from the perspective of cannabis users**

(Airi-Alina Allaste and Vaike Võõbus)

Cannabis use is becoming more normalised (Parker et al., 1998) in certain youth cultures in Estonia. Nonetheless, the perception of recreational use (especially cannabis) is more critical than it is in Western Europe. Recreational users are often “invisible”; publicly these users are still linked with drug addicts.

According to the analysis, it can be said that the generational gap between teenagers and their parents is decreasing. Cannabis has spread out of the capital and become part of the “mainstream” youth culture in Estonia. Informal social networks are used for selling the drug; smoking and dealing cannabis is common for young people, and even non-smokers accept it. Cannabis use is considered to be everyone’s free choice and seen as a “natural” drug which is not as harmful as synthetic drugs are.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social sanctions and other control mechanisms protect the institutional order. It is possible to distinguish extrinsic control mechanisms (control by police, parents, teachers, other non-users, norms and values in cannabis users groups) and intrinsic control mechanisms (internalised norms and values). Health risks can be subdivided as short-term (worsening of short-term memory, incapability to concentrate and process difficult information, anxiety or panic) and long-term (chromosome impairment, might predispose cancer, addiction) as per the perspectives of young recreational drug users themselves. The main strategy to diminish risks is to limit drug-use to leisure time only (party, company of friends). Next it is to limit the quantity of the drug and the frequency of drug use (making a pause); constant self-reflection is necessary. Recreational cannabis users are worried about the impact of their illegal leisure and they attempt to regulate their behaviour to cause as little harm as possible. Still, awareness about possible health risks is low.
Gender order and drug use: Cases in Estonia and Russia

(Airi-Alina Allaste and Irina Kosterina)

Initiation to drug use

In both countries, mostly the young women first get involved in companies where drugs are used; they get used to the surroundings where drugs are part of “going out” and having a party and then, some day, they start using drugs themselves. There were also young women who were in such companies but had not experimented with drugs. Especially in the case of Russia, the young men found the situation where drugs were offered to be more demanding than the young women did. Experimenting with drugs was often considered part of masculinity, and this made it much more difficult for the young men to refuse using drugs.

Context of drug use

Most frequently drugs were used at parties in someone’s home or an alternative club. In Estonian cases, young people tend to go out more to clubs and use cannabis prior to going. Motives for using drugs differentiate especially in Russia. There it is mostly considered as fun for young women and associated with more spiritual motives such as “open doors” for young men.

Frequency, amounts and types of drugs used

The young men tend to take drugs more often and in greater quantities in both countries, the same as with alcohol. The types of drugs were different in Estonia and Russia. In both countries, the most common drug was cannabis. Some of the informants in Estonia had had experiences with club drugs and hallucinogens. Young people in Russia had experiences with mushrooms and legal drugs from pharmacies. Especially in Russia, there is a clear division of drugs which are suitable for young women and which are for young men.

Norms

When discussing norms, it is important to keep in mind that drugs (including soft drugs) are not tolerated, neither in Estonia nor in Russia – the older generation only knows the exaggerated disastrous side of it and is strictly against it. However, in patriarchal societies, it is more readily accepted that males are wild and break the law; whereas, females should be always act nice. Drug use in youth cultures reflects traditional gender roles – women do not have same rights as men; they tend to consume less and are more critical on questions related to drugs. From previous studies, it was known that males often control female drug use and, even if they take drugs themselves, they prefer women not to do so.
Hierarchy

Males hold the stronger position relevant to their drug expertise and have better access to drugs. Females are almost never in the position of a dealer. Especially in the Russian drug culture, males have the authority because of their ability to take risks and put up with dangerous situations.

When referencing access to drugs, there is also lot of information about legal drugs (from pharmacies) in Russian web pages. This is not common in Estonia (and in other countries). An open drug market does not exist in Estonia; thus a person must be involved in the drug culture to get drugs. As mentioned, mostly young men buy drugs – in many cases, circle of friends have a small scale dealer or at least contact to a dealer.

References


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„Rekreaciniai“ kanapių vartotojai Estijoje ir Rusijoje

Santrauka

Šio tyrimo tikslas buvo atkreipti dėmesį į du aspektus, susijusius su kanapių vartojimu Estijoje: a) sveikatos ir kiti pavojai, su kuriais susiduria jauni narkotikų vartotojai; b) lyties ir narkotikų vartojimo sąsajos.


Tyrimo tikslas buvo ištirti, kokie egzistuoja socialiniai draudimai ir kiti kontrolės mechanizmai (išoriniai ir vidiniai), reguliuojantys kanapių vartojimą, taip pat išsiaiškinti susilpnėjusios kanapės vartojimo požymius – tiek ilgalaikiai, tiek trumpalaikiai.

Nagrinėdami abiejų lyčių atstovų narkotikų vartojimą, tyrėjai pritaikė lyginamąją analizę, kuria atskleidė abiejų lyčių narkotikų vartojimo skirtumus dviejose šalyse – Estijoje ir Rusijoje. Pastebėti skirtingi vyrų ir moterų vaidmenys, jų įsipareigojimai, aktvyvumas ir indėliai, kurie yra leidžiami ir skatinti skirtingose šalyse. Tyrėjai analizavo daugelį aspektų, susijusių su abiejų lyčių atstovų narkotikų vartojimu, pvz., narkotikų vartotojų iniciacijos, hierarchija, normos, vartojimo dažnumas bei narkotikų kiekiai ir tipai.


Raktažodžiai: „rekreacinis“ narkotikų vartojimas, normavimas, lytis, rizika, kanapių vartojimas, jaunimas.