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NAHRPP - New Approaches in Harm Reduction Policies and Practices"
WS2 "Cannabis selfregulation model in a harm reduction perspective"

About research design
Notes from NAHRPP Researchers' Workshop (Florence, 9-10/10/2017)

Purpose

The aim of the research is to investigate:
a) patterns of cannabis use and users' perceptions of "controlled"/"uncontrolled" patterns of use
b) informal rules applied by users to self regulate cannabis use
c) users' expectancies about self regulation capacities and users' beliefs about what kind of support they may need in case of diminish control

Some Key issues

1) Differences in cannabis controls: daily use is very frequent and is not usually perceived as an indicator of "loss of control" by users (cfr. Tuscan study, 2013); similarly, one of the most important controls for other substances (cocaine for example) – limiting its use to recreational occasions with friends- does not appear to apply to cannabis, or not so rigorously. Also, the related rule "do not use alone" is hardly applied by cannabis users. Rather, in the quoted Tuscan study, the opposite is mentioned by some: *when I am alone, I just smoke one joint and that's all, when I am in a group it is easier to pass the joints* (a-ca). These findings suggest a sort of "loosening" of some common controls (such as use in recreational settings only, avoiding everyday use), following the process of "normalization" of cannabis consumption. The high prevalence of daily use seems to confirm the increasing "intertwining" of cannabis use in everyday life.

2) How can we interpret the "loosening" of these controls in cannabis use? A suggestion may be drawn by specific alcohol patterns of use: in the so called Mediterranean pattern of alcohol use, daily drinking is prevalent and the choice of milder drinks (wine or more recently beer) consumed in low doses makes drinking "flexible" and adaptable to different occasions, without interfering with life engagements.

3) While cannabis prohibition policies are shifting towards regulation in many countries, there is a persistent emphasis on "problematic cannabis use" (see 2017 Italian Report on Drug Addiction), investigated through specific scales such as CAST (Cannabis Abuse Screening Test) in epidemiological studies (see ESPAD Italia in the quoted 2017 Italian Report). These tests have been in depth discussed, mainly because they only rely on the "drug" factor while ignoring the set and setting variables (see Asbridge et al., 2014). Also, it is important to investigate cannabis users' perceptions of "problematic use", an important feature in the "control" perspective.

4) The "normalization" process regarding cannabis use is a critical context topics to be evaluated and analyzed particularly with regard to self regulation strategies. "Normalization" deals with both users' perception of their own behaviours, and with social perception, and includes the role of cultural norms and social learning. How the social perception of a cannabis use as a "normalized use" influences users' self regulation strategies and effectiveness in control?

5. CSC and other organized groups create a different setting of use, including a collective /social dimension, a shared way to produce /buy the drug, a more effective exchange of information, knowledge, harm reduction competencies. To what extent has this setting changed - and is changing - users' strategies and perception of controlled use? and how does this process work in the daily life of users?

Approach.Some key points

- The research adopts the users' perspective about cannabis use. Narrative items, relevance of events and changes, meanings and reasons of use etc are his/her choice, the researcherplays a role of facilitator not of "director" of the narrative, according to the qualitative /narrative interview methodology
- It is focused on user's capacity to decide, change and adapt his/her use in a controlled use /self regulation perspective. This approach must be clearly communicate to the interviewee, also thanks a correct and effective use of the research tools (timeline and narrative interview)
- The language issues are crucial to communicate this approach and not to suggest stereotyped concepts on drug use and users, great attention must be paid to this. The issue of a "neutral language" by the interviewer is crucial.The research team and the expert consultants can share questions, doubts and proposals about any possible language dilemma. As one of the aims of the project is to give a feedback to professionals about innovation in harm reduction and risk limitation interventions, just based on users' competencies and strategies, the interview includesalso items dealing with possible seeking helpin periods of diminished control. Just to respect the user' perspective and not "force" his/her narrative, the researcher will not use "closed and direct questions" on professional help, but will consider if and how seeking help has been included in the interviewee' narrative and will put "open questions" about if and who has influences / supported the decision /change. In a step by step approach, the preliminary question might be "Have you ever thought some kind of advice/support would have been useful to you in specific periods of your use career?". In case of positive answer, the interviewer might ask: "Which kind of support do you think it would be appropriate to you? Information and/or advice from peers? From internet drug dedicated web sites? From drug professionals?" As for language, it might be appropriate to avoid terms like "help" or even "support" in first instance and starting from "advice"
- The interviewer is committed to comply with users privacy rights

Participants

Number: 48 (16 per Country)

Two groups of participants will be interviewed in each Country:

- cannabis users who are not in contact / are not members of users' formal or informal organized groups /CSC*[Ind users]*(n° 8 each Country)
- userswho are members of formal or informal organized groups /CSC*[SCS users]* (n° 8 each Country)

Recruitment of respondents:

[Ind users]: snowballing starting from researchers' contacts

[SCS users]: researches' contacts in CSC context. In Spain and Belgium, Social Cannabis Clubs; in Italy organized groups of cannabis users/producers/activists.Common characteristics of the groups: organized (both formal and informal), shared cannabis production / supply; social activities / relationships (not only commercial); including information, exchange between members, harm reduction attitude

Sampling:

- Experienced users (in the perspective of studying significant trajectories and strategies of self regulation): minimum 10 years of use [this value can be lower in case of 18-20 years old users] and at least one month of regular use(at least once a week)
- Balance between ages (18-65)
- Balance between genders
- Balance between different social conditions(education, employment)

Methods and instruments

Qualitative methods will be employed.
48 qualitative / narrative interviews will be carried out.

To conduct interviews a visual tool (***time lining interview***) will be used, helping the interviewees to recall and "organize" their attitudes, feelings and behaviors, placing them in a significant temporal succession. A Cartesian plan is used, where x-axis represents time and y-axis represents the intensity of use. The peaks (higher and lower points) as well as the trend (each point of the trend which is significant in the interviewee's perspective) will be asked to be described (and will be recorded) in a ***narrative way***, qualitative data collected through this narrative description will be focused on

- Changes in pattern of use, decisions and turning points
- Description of decisions/turning points in terms of reasons, influencing factors, feelings, results
- Deepening and meanings of controlled / not controlled use in the personal perspective of the user related to his/her decisions/ strategies
- Description of the personal strategy to maintain / recover a controlled use after a period of diminished control (with attention to who influenced / supported the choice / decision)

The researcher will conduct the interview in a non-directive way, supporting the interviewee's narrative both through the timeline and through open questions (questions that invite / facilitate narrative answers)

related to the above mentioned items. At the end of the interview, the interviewee would be invited to draw a second line, the line of "perceived control". The reason is that the peak periods of use might not coincide exactly or always with the perception of diminished control.

Some biographical data will be collected (better at the end of the interview): gender, age, nationality, qualification, job position, civil status

Data Analysis

Qualitative data (from the word-for-word transcription of the interview) will be analyzed by means of **Thematic Analysis** (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Braun, & Clarke, 2012).

Reports

Three national reports (in English) will be produced following a common structure (under development) and a final Research Report will describe common outcomes and comparisons between Countries. Indicatively the more significant chapters would focus on:

- Pattern of use and trajectories
- Items of control/ non control
- Factors influencing / supporting decisions and changes
- Setting factors influencing patterns, decisions, and strategies (role of CSC / groups in supporting self regulation)

Steps and timetable

20 November 17: Finalizing research design and tools assessment
20/11/17-10/01/18: 6 pilot interview (1 individual and 1 SCS per country)
By 31 January 2018: researchers' on line meeting for finalizing tools assessment. Dates of expert seminar (within end of October) and list of participants to be invited (15 from Italy, 12 other countries)
February-May 18: interviews and first step of analysis (themes)
By 31May 18: researchers' on line meeting to share first outcome of analysis
By June 18: template of country report. Agenda for the expert seminar 31 August 18: 3 Country reports
15 October 18: Final Report
End of October 18: Expert Seminar in Florence

References
Timeline
Kolar, K., Ahmad, F., Chan, L., &Erickson, P. G. (2015). Timeline mapping in qualitative interviews: A study of resilience with marginalized groups. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *14*(3), 13-32.
Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., &Dupuis, A. (2011).Timelining: visualizing experience. *Qualitative Research*, *11*(5), 552-569.
Analysis methods
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012).Thematic analysis. *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*, *2*, 57-71.