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CANNABIS FROM THE USERS' POINT OF VIEW IN TURKEY

RUKEN MACIT[1]

ABSTRACT

Cannabis is the most common and the most used drug substance in Turkey and in the world. In general, cannabis is not considered as much as other narcotics, and is even regarded as harmless due to its vegetative nature. However, cannabis is dangerous enough that it cannot be ignored: it acts as a first step in the transition to the use of other narcotics and damages brain functions. In this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 cannabis users living in Istanbul, Mersin and Diyarbakır in Turkey. In this context, issues such as how cannabis users experience cannabis for the first time, their opinions about cannabis, their reasons for using drugs and how they deal with the fact that they are acting contrary to social rules by using cannabis in a conservative country like Turkey are discussed. The findings are interpreted with Akers' Social Learning Theory. Understanding how cannabis users are starting to use cannabis and in-depth analysis of this process provides important information on drug use. This information is thought to be effective in fighting drug abuse.

Keywords: Cannabis, Cannabis users, Social Learning Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Cannabis, produced from the cannabis sativa plant, is used in three forms: herbal cannabis, the dried leaves and flowering tops, also known as "cannabis," "ganja," or "weed"; cannabis resin, the pressed secretions of the plant, known as "hashish" or "charash"; and cannabis oil, a mixture resulting from distillation or extraction of active ingredients of the plant (UNODC, 2012, p. 2). The cannabis plant (cannabis sativa) originated in Central Asia, and has been cultivated for thousands of years because of its versatile properties and because it is an economical plant. Due to these characteristics, it has spread widely throughout the world.

Cannabis is thought to be less harmful than other drugs due to its vegetative nature. However, contrary to the general belief, cannabis use can lead to tolerance development and dependence after a certain period of time. Wagner and Anthony (2002) claim that long-term use of cannabis may lead to tolerance to the effects of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) as well as addiction. The active ingredient in cannabis, THC, is only found in small portions of the cannabis plant, in the flowering tops and in some of the leaves. THC stimulates cannabinoid receptors (CBRs), located on the surface of neurons, to produce psychoactive effects. CBRs are part of the endocannabinoid system, a communication network in the brain that plays a role in neural development and function (UNODC, 2012, p. 3). Cannabis dependence in and of itself is not the only problem for heavy users. By increasing the duration of regular use, dependence may also increase the risk of any long-term health risks of cannabis that may occur after decades of use, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and possibly cancers (Hall, Renström and Poznyak, 2016, p. 24). In addition, investigations show that cognitive functions, mental disorders, suicide risk, ideation and attempts are the main results of long-term cannabis use. A 15-year follow-up study of schizophrenia among 50 Swedish male conscripts found that those conscripts who had tried cannabis by the age of 18 years were 2.4 times more likely to be diagnosed with

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[1] Researcher Assistant Mersin University, Department of Sociology, 33343, Yenişehir, Mersin/ Turkey Rukenmacit@mersin.edu.tr

schizophrenia over the next 15 years than those who had not (Andreasson et al., 1987). Also, some research (Timberlake, 2009; NIDA, 2017) emphasises that cannabis is a gateway to other drug substances in transit. Therefore, cannabis has an important relationship with other narcotic substances.

Cannabis is among the most widely used of all psychoactive drugs. Despite the fact that its possession and use is illegal in most countries, cannabis is used regularly by as many as 20 million people in the United States and Europe, and by millions more in other parts of the world (Iversen, 2000, p. 2). It is the most commonly seized drug, accounting for about eight out of ten seizures in Europe, and reflecting its relatively high prevalence of use (EMCDDA, 2015, p. 20). The area of our research is Turkey has a long history of cannabis use, dating back thousands of years. There is even a saying in Turkish, "It is herbal and has no sin", which is often used for cannabis. As this statement implies, there is a more tolerant point of view in Turkish society.

However, the laws do not agree; especially following recent changes, the penalties for using and selling cannabis have been aggravated. The Turkish Penal Code, which was updated in 2014 with further adjustments in 2015, specifies prison sentences of two to five years for those who use drugs or buy, receive or possess drugs for personal use (EMCDDA, 2017). Despite these heavy penalties, cannabis is the most common illicit drug used by adults aged 15-64 in Turkey, followed by amphetamines and MDMA/ecstasy (EMCDDA, 2017; TUBIM, 2013). This study, conducted by qualitative research method, examines issues such as how cannabis users experience cannabis for the first time, their opinions about cannabis, their reasons for using drugs and how they deal with the fact that they are acting contrary to social rules by using cannabis in a conservative country like Turkey. The theoretical framework of the research is based on Akers' Social Learning Theory. The social learning theory developed by Akers sheds light on these users' cannabis stories.

CANNABIS IN LITERATURE

In the literature of crime, there is countless research on cannabis and cannabis users. These surveys, which have a broad perspective, shed light on the different aspects of the cannabis phenomenon. Research topics in the sociological approach to cannabis can be categorised as follows: becoming a drug user (Becker, 1963; Berke and Hernton, 1977; Chatwin and Porteous, 2013); the roles of family, peers and school in cannabis use (Sheppard, Goodstadt and Willett, 1987; Hamilton, Danielson, Mann and Paglia-Boak, 2012; Liebregts et al., 2013); cannabis and alcohol (Smart and Ogborne, 2000; Hyggen and Hammer, 2015); cannabis and other drugs (Murray, 1984; Smart and Ogborne, 2000); cannabis culture (Pedersen, 2009; Sandberg, 2012); cannabis and stigma (Goffman, 1963; Neale, Nettleton and Pickering, 2011; Hathaway, Comeau and Erickson, 2011); and cannabis dependence (Liebregts et al., 2011).

In the framework of our research, Becker's (1963) study and Chatwin and Porteous's (2013) study are important for focusing on why people start to use drugs. Becker (1963) claims that the drug is used occasionally for the pleasure the user finds in it, a relatively casual kind of behaviour in comparison with that connected with the use of addicting drugs. The term "use for pleasure" is meant to emphasise the non-compulsive and casual character of the behaviour. According to Becker (1963), no one becomes a user without (1) learning to smoke the drug in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognise the effects and connect them with drug use (learning, in other words, to get high); and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations they perceive. On completion of this process they are willing and able to use cannabis for pleasure. Chatwin and Porteous's study (2013, p. 251) points out that the most prevalent motivations for long-term use surround the enhancement of pleasure and general enjoyment of life, the sociability of use with friends and the boost to creativity in

both social and employment arenas. Berke and Hernton (1977) undertook a questionnaire survey of 522 British cannabis users in the 1970s. The main reasons they gave for starting to use cannabis were curiosity and social pressure. When asked why they continued to use cannabis, the most common reasons given were social uplift (pleasure, enjoyment, relaxation, increased sociability) (306 responses), a cheap and harmless alternative to alcohol and other drugs (167 responses), increased awareness and understanding (131 responses) and some said quite simply that they liked it (128 responses).

Despite the diversity of all these studies, we know very little about issues such as how cannabis users experience cannabis for the first time, their opinions about cannabis, their reasons for using drugs and how they deal with the fact that they are acting contrary to social rules by using cannabis. This research also aims to shed light on views of cannabis use and any ill-effects associated with cannabis. It is important for individuals to know their thoughts about cannabis and how they are beginning to have been exposed to cannabis to take important steps in the fight against drugs.

SOCIAL LEARNING AND AKERS

Tarde's (1903) belief that crime is a behaviour learned by imitating has been proved by many studies showing that the social environment of the individual is effective in informing the process of guilt. The most important contribution to social learning theory was made by Sutherland from the Chicago School. According to the Differential Association Theory, developed by Sutherland (1978), crime is a learned behaviour just like any other normal behaviour, and this learning takes place as a result of interaction with people who are important to the individual. Sutherland proposed nine points to highlight his theory of differential association: (1) criminal behaviour is learned; (2) criminal behaviour is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication; (3) the principal part of learning criminal behaviour occurs within intimate personal groups; (4) when criminal behaviour is learned, the learning includes (a) the techniques of committing a crime, which are sometimes very complicated and sometimes very simple, and (b) the specific direction of motives and drives, rationalisations, and attitudes; (5) the specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favourable or unfavourable; (6) a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law; (7) differential association may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity; (8) the process of learning criminal behaviour by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning; and (9) although criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values, because noncriminal behaviour is an expression of the same needs and values (Sutherland, 1947, pp. 6-7).

The social learning theory developed by Akers is a continuation of Sutherland's Differential Association Theory, as well as a restructured and improved version. While adopting the theoretical approach of Sutherland, Akers also reveals what Sutherland left unanswered: what kinds of mechanisms the crime has been learned and sustained through (Cullen and Agnes, 2003, p. 142). In doing so, Akers adds differential reinforcement by making use of behaviour theories and other social learning theories.

Akers builds his theory based on four components: (1) differential association; (2) definitions; (3) differential reinforcement; and (4) imitation. Akers (2003) describes the concept of differential association as "the process of being exposed to positive or negative

normative definitions of a person's illegal or lawful behaviour" (p. 144). Akers' differential association refers to the primary reference groups such as the family, friend groups and the secondary reference groups such as authority figures, schools and teachers with whom the individual has a close relationship. Definitions are rationalisations, ethical values and trends that explain the attitudes and behaviours of individuals and explain the reasons for these attitudes and behaviours, and what is right and wrong. With differential reinforcement Akers refers to empowering reinforcements to encourage or abandon that behaviour once again as a result of punishment or rewards. By imitation, crime is learned from other people through observation.

Akers briefly describes his theory as: "The probability that persons will engage uncriminal and deviant behaviours is increased and the probability of conforming to the norm is decreased when they differentially associate with others who commit criminal behaviour and espouse definitions favourable to it, are relatively more exposed in-person or symbolically to salient criminal/deviant models, define it as desirable or justified in a situation discriminative for the behaviour, and have received in the past and anticipate in the current or future situation relatively greater reward than punishment for the behaviour" (Akers, 2009, p. 50). Becker (1963) argues that continued drug use is typically the result of social learning. Some deviant behaviours that Akers focused and did test on included those of smoking among adolescents, drinking behaviour, and drug use. The findings of our research confirm the findings of Akers' social learning theory when cannabis users start using cannabis.

METHOD

This study is based on a field survey with face-to-face in-depth interviews with a total of 20 cannabis users (7 living in Istanbul, 7 in Mersin and 6 in Diyarbakır). The reason for selecting Istanbul, Mersin and Diyarbakır is because they are the cities where cannabis use is very prevalent, and they have different socioeconomic and cultural structures. The users were reached using the snowball technique. This research was conducted through qualitative research methods between the years 2016-2017. Qualitative research is a way to reveal what people do, know, think and feel through interview and document analysis, observing, interviewing and documenting analysis (Patton, 2002; 145). A qualitative research methodology has been used because it allows us to explain the thoughts of cannabis users and the process of starting cannabis use in the survey.

The participants were 17 men and 3 women. The reason why the female participants were fewer in number than the male participants can be interpreted as the reflection of the male dominant structure to cannabis use in Turkey. In a male dominant society, the influence of social pressure on women can cause women to have less access to the drug market than men. The average age of participants sampled was 29; 33.3% were 18-25, 50% were 26-35 and 17.7% were 35 or older. 33.3% of participants have used cannabis for 1-9 years, 50% for 10-19 years and 17.7% for 20 years and over. In the interviews, we tried to evaluate how cannabis users experience cannabis for the first time, their opinions about cannabis, their reasons for using drugs and how they deal with the fact that they are acting contrary to social rules by using cannabis from a broad point of view.

FIRST TIME EXPERIENCING CANNABIS

One of the most important points in the lives of users is, undoubtedly, the moment when they first experience cannabis. As emphasised by many researchers (Becker, 1963; Akers, 1985), users are acquainted with cannabis through friends, peers and their social environments. In the Differential Association, the main concepts of social learning theory, Akers (1985) considered the intimate personal group vital due to their role in the individual's life being most significant. These are most importantly the primary groups of friends and family.

"I was about 20 years old. We were in our summer house. I was so curious about cannabis. They (friends) told that I would feel very happy and my surroundings would be more colourful. I said okay, I would go. I was not involved in buying or providing parts at the beginning; my friends did all that. ... They made it in the bucket. It seemed strange to me. Honestly, the smell was awful. After that everyone took turns. I was a little nervous at first. I said I would smoke less. I wanted to be a little sober (Psychologist, İstanbul, 24 years old)."

"My first use was with my childhood friends. They are trustworthy people who I spent a long time with. My boyfriend smoked, too. I wanted to taste and try (Biologist, İstanbul, 25 years old)."

The participants' initial experiences of using cannabis are reminiscent of the concept of imitation, which is one of the main concepts of social learning theory (Akers inspired from Tarde). Tarde (1903) replied to the question, "What is society?" with "Society is imitation". Akers explains that imitation is the duplication of a particular behaviour by an individual after viewing another individual who has performed the same behaviour. Two explanations have been offered to explain why imitation occurs. First, an individual who imitates does so because he or she has been vicariously reinforced after viewing another individual being rewarded for a particular behaviour. Second, an individual who imitates does so because of operant conditioning. That is to say, the imitated behaviour occurs because it has been directly reinforced (Akers, 1973).

The four modalities from Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory remain in social learning theory. These involve the variation in frequency duration, priority and intensity. Frequency involves those associations that occur most often. Priority refers to those which occur earlier. Furthermore, Akers believes that duration can be broken into two parts, including the length of time and relative amount of time spent with differential associates. Basically, the greater the amount of time and percentage of all time that is spent with certain people, the greater influence they will have on an individual's behaviour (Nicholson and Higgins, 2017, p. 13). It is clear that the participants began to use cannabis by being influenced by their social environment and particularly by their friends and imitating them. People who learn to use cannabis are often friends or lovers of intensive social interaction. As Akers noted, reinforcement and operant conditioning are necessary for the imitation behaviour of cannabis users. Frequently seeing friend circles using cannabis, and seeing it endorsed by those whom they respect will reinforce the behaviour of a person and is influential in operant conditioning.

"I had a close friend. He brought it, we smoked. We had nice time. …We started. …My friend provided it, but he never pushed me. After that, he told me not to take it from anyone. He said "Smoke consciously, according to the place. ... Smoke according to the dose." So we started (Technician, Mersin, 36 years old)."

"I knew cannabis from my friends before. Then my friend asked me to smoke cannabis. … It was my first use. … At the beginning, it was for pleasure, then I became addicted (Self Employment, Diyarbakır, 40 years old)."

Evaluating the findings, almost all of the users stated that their friends bought the cannabis; the users did not meet the drug dealer and did not pay any fee for their first use. The friends learned to use cannabis, and played a teaching role in this matter. New users learn how to get the cannabis, who to get it from and how to treat it. As time goes by, they also start to play a teaching role.

OPINIONS ABOUT CANNABIS

Understanding drug users' thoughts about cannabis and what attracts them to cannabis is important to understand the drug abuse. Akers (2003) explains the definitions, one of the main concepts in social learning, as "one's own attitudes or meaning that one attaches to given behaviour … that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified. Differential association with others shapes the individual's definitions of one's own attitudes or meanings that one attaches to given behaviour" (Pratt, 2012, p. 767).

> "Cannabis makes you relax when you compare it with alcohol. It has an antidepressant effect. …It doesn't have so many chemical ingredients so I think it is better than chemical drugs. I don't know the medical details (Tourism Professional, İstanbul, 25 years old)."

> "Cannabis is less harmful than other chemical drugs (Self Employment, Mersin, 41 years old)."

> "Cannabis has the ability to reduce blood sugar. Doctors should give cannabis instead of antidepressants; it makes people comfortable, and feels good (Biologist, İstanbul, 25 years old)."

"Cognitively, definitions favourable to deviance provide a mindset that makes one more willing to commit the act when the opportunity occurs or is created. Behaviourally, they affect the commission of deviant behaviour by acting as internal discriminative stimuli" (Akers and Silverman, 2004: 20). According to findings, a large part of cannabis users has very positive opinions about cannabis. Cannabis is considered to be less harmful than other drugs because it is herbal; it is seen as cheaper and having fewer side effects than alcohol. In recent years, taxes on alcohol products have increased with the government getting more conservative in Turkey. However, one of the unplanned consequences of this is that young people have moved away from alcohol because it is expensive, and tend towards cannabis. But not all users are so positive about cannabis. Heavy users and those who use cannabis for a long time complain about the negative effects of cannabis on their memory:

> "For example, I was able to keep 30-40 words in my mind and write them in advance. I came from the Erasmus Exchange Programme (from Poland) and it became 5-10 words. The long-term effect is certainly permanent and seriously damaging. =I feel sorry for people who do not know their limit (Student, İstanbul, 22 years old)."

> "It is all bad (drugs)! Because after a certain time, forgetfulness, fatigue and some symptoms come out, but the other drugs are worse and cannabis is the good of the bad. ... I do not want to be the reason for anyone to become a user, because it affects a person's life (Self Employment, Diyarbakır, 43 years old)."

THE REASONS TO SMOKE CANNABIS

Discriminating reinforcements refer to following a behaviour, empowering reinforcements to encourage or abandon that behaviour in the event of awards or penalties the person will be awarded. Therefore, according to the award/punishment situation after the behaviour, it was awarded to ensure that the behaviour is not repeated again (Akers, 2003, p. 145). If the pleasure, enjoyment and achievement one acquires dominate the penalty one will face, one prefers to commit the crime. When we look at the causes of smoking cannabis in users, we see the differential reinforcement supports cannabis smoking behaviour:

> "I like being numb [laughs]. I live in a metropolitan city. There are so many kinds of people. You can get mad at some of them … you feel bad for some of them …

your feelings change every moment, even walking on the street. I think I am a sensitive person. I smoke it to suppress my feelings. I want to minimise my feelings because I hurt myself. I don't damage anyone. I damage myself. If you ask what my goal is, that is my goal (Student, İstanbul, 22 years old)."

"My goal is pleasure in general, but sometimes I get really angry and I need cannabis (Psychologist, İstanbul, 24 years old)."

"Relaxation. Totally for relaxation (Cafe Owner, Mersin, 37 years old)."

Based on findings from the participants, it is clear that users smoke cannabis to relax. Even for a few hours, their aim is to get away from their stressful lives and have fun. While users can choose many actions to relax and have fun in their lives, choosing to use cannabis is due to the environment and social environment they are in. They are taught to use cannabis by their friends, their peers or their families to relax. It is generally understood, under the theory of differential association, that the timing, length, frequency and nature of contact are important determinants of behaviour; that is, the greatest effect on a person's behaviour occurs the earlier the association is made, the longer the duration of the association, the more frequently the association occurs and the closer the association is (Akers and Sellers, 2004). One of the important reasons why users tend to use cannabis is the economic dimension. Cannabis is the cheapest drug in other narcotics and alcohol. For example, in Turkey, with the increase of the taxes that the state applies to alcoholic beverages, young people can tend to use cannabis instead of alcohol.

> "First, it is neutral. For example, when I wake up after cannabis, I don't have a headache. When I drink beer, my life is ruined the next morning. … Second, the economic dimension is already very important. All the users are not rich or wealthy people. It is not a problem for me. I drink only two beers, but some friends drink seven or eight. That has a huge impact economically (PhD Student, Mersin, 27 years old)."
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> "Do I tell you something? To get rid of my routine life, I need a difference. …It is like driving your car away to a different place, it [cannabis] is a getaway in your mind (PhD Student, İstanbul, 25 years old)."
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> "It is something ambient. If somebody offers cannabis, I can't say 'No' because I enjoy it a lot. I smoke if someone says 'Let's smoke' (Academician, Diyarbakır, 39 years old)."

CONTRARY TO SOCIAL RULES

Definitions, as they are to be understood under social learning theory, are an individual's own values and attitudes about what is and is not acceptable behaviour. That is, "they are orientations, rationalisations, definitions of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified" (Akers and Sellers, 2004: 86). In this section participants were asked what they think about contravening social rules by using cannabis.

> "I think I don't harm anyone. I am generally alone when I smoke. I don't like smoking in a group. I close myself for any social interactions. I think it is not a problem as long as I don't harm anyone (Engineer, İstanbul, 34 years old)".

> "In Turkey, even drinking alcohol is a big problem or if a woman goes outside at 2 a.m., it can be shown as a complete downgrade of the social rules. … Whoever

made the rules, he made them wrong [laughs]. This is my opinion (Officer, İstanbul, 32 years old)."

"Like chewing tobacco, after so many people tried it the taboos about it were broken; or a housewife smoking for the first time in her life. Just like that. … Everyone has tried or will try one day."

According to our findings, participants are able to cope with the following core beliefs about behaving contrary to social rules by using cannabis: (1) they think they are not harming anyone other than themselves; (2) they think society has a hypocritical and irrational moral sentiment; and (3) they think society needs to get used to cannabis as time goes by, like other new things. The vast majority of participants keep their cannabis smoking behaviour secret. Users think they do not bother other people because they smoke cannabis alone or in closed groups. Under the influence of recent conservatism in Turkey, the pressure on women and certain social groups can undermine the belief in social norms. With the decrease of belief in social rules, social control of the community also decreases. Finally, another core belief is that society needs to get used to using cannabis as it gets used to everything new in time. In this regard, users see themselves more progressive than the society.

CONCLUSION

It is very important to understand the points of view of the users to understand cannabis, which is the most used drug substance in Turkey and in the world. In this study, a total of 20 cannabis users (7 living in Istanbul, 7 in Mersin and 6 in Diyarbakır) were interviewed and the authors tried to analyse the issue of the drug abuse in Turkey and in the world using the thoughts of cannabis users.

In this study, the first important point to focus on is that there is only one common point among these users (who otherwise come from different cities, different occupational groups and different age groups): the reasons for using cannabis. No matter what their lives are like, these people have chosen to use cannabis to relax and get away from the struggle in their lives. Second, almost all of them imitate their friends and peer groups to learn how to use cannabis. The importance of social environment cannot be denied when users start using cannabis. Third, the vast majority of users have very positive opinions about cannabis. They especially think it is herbal, less harmful than alcohol and other drugs, and even has some benefits (reducing blood sugar, relaxing, etc.). They know very little about cannabis addiction and the negative health effects of cannabis. Fourth, users do not think they act contrary to social rules by using cannabis. The main reason for this is that they do not believe or trust in the predominant social rules. Conservative social rules, which are not meaningful to users, have especially distracted people from the social rules that provide social order.

Consequently, this research shows that many social, economic and political precautions need to be taken to solve the problem of using cannabis, which is seen as a transition to other drugs. At the beginning of these precautions, parents should be careful about their children's social environment. The vast majority of users have started using cannabis in adolescence. Therefore, from adolescence, there should be studies informing about cannabis and especially the negative effects of it in schools and various institutions. In the future, I would recommend people should study in this field, reviewing the literature on cannabis and finding a subject that has not been studied before. Otherwise, there are a lot of similar studies in this regard.

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