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Social Representations of polydrug use in a Finnish newspaper 1990-2016

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to study the social representations of polydrug use in the Finnish mainstream media. Social representations are shared ways of talking about socially relevant issues and have ramifications on both individual and socio-political levels.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The social representations theory and the "What's the problem represented to be?" analysis provided the theoretical framework. In total, 405 newspaper articles were used as data and analysed by content analysis and thematic analysis. The key tenets of the social representations theory, anchoring, objectifying and naturalisation, were used in data analysis.*

Findings – *The study found that polydrug use was written about differently in articles over the study period from 1990 to 2016. Three social representations were introduced: first, polydrug use as a concept was used to refer to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs. This was seen as a problem for young people, which could easily lead to illicit drug use. Second, illicit drugs were included in the definitions of polydrug use, which made the social representation more serious than before. The typical polydrug user was portrayed as a person who was addicted to substances, could not quite control his/her use and was a threat to others in society. Third, the concepts were naturalised as parts of common language and even used as prototypes and metaphors.*

Originality/value – *The study provides a look at how the phenomenon of polydrug use is conceptualised in everyday language as previous research has concentrated on its scientific definitions. It also adds to the research of media representations of different substances.*

Keywords *Finland, Drugs, Social representations, Print media, Polydrug use, WPR-analysis*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

Adding to studies on alcohol and other substances, research regarding multiple substance use has increased over the past decades. Polydrug use is argued to be the dominant pattern of substance use in Europe (EMCDDA, 2011) and it has also become an issue of debate in scientific research. Polydrug use has been conceptualised in different ways, often defined as either simultaneous or concurrent use of two or more substances. The strictest definitions consider only illicit drugs, while most include alcohol and some include tobacco (e.g. Martin, 2008; Schensul *et al.*, 2005). This paper extends the discussion by contributing to the understanding of the concept of polydrug use from a common language perspective. Setting aside the definitions given to polydrug use by researchers, other professionals or even substance users themselves, how is polydrug use conceptualised in mainstream, everyday language?

The paper studies everyday language about polydrug use in Finland. In a country with more liberal attitudes towards drinking and drunkenness (Härkönen, 2013), the use of illicit drugs is regarded as moralised and stigmatised behaviour. In Finland, the term "narcophobia" has been used to describe the fearful attitudes of people towards the experimenting with and use of illicit drugs (Partanen, 2002). Polydrug use, specifically, is both nationally and internationally often seen as a very problematic form of substance use (Meacham *et al.*, 2015; Medina and Shear, 2007; Perälä *et al.*, 2012). Despite recent findings on the diversity of polydrug use (e.g. Kataja *et al.*, 2017), it has been treated as a rather homogenous subculture and polydrug users as a relatively uniform group of substance users (Perälä *et al.*, 2012).

The everyday language about polydrug use will be studied by focusing on its social representations. Social representations are culturally shared ways of talking about socially meaningful issues and shape the way these issues are perceived. In the case of polydrug use, its social representations have considerable ramifications at both individual and socio-political levels. The way we talk about multiple substance use affects the identities of the people involved and can further social exclusion and discriminatory policies. Social representations are strongly constructed and maintained by the media. For this reason, the paper looks at how the concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user are applied in Finland's largest newspaper. In order to capture the evolution of these social representations, articles from the year 1990 until the year 2016 will be studied.

Social representations

The social representations theory originates from Serge Moscovici's (1961) study on how the theory of psychoanalysis spread from the scientific community into the everyday conversation of French people. The role of the media was central as information was distributed through the liberal, catholic and communist press. Each medium reported on psychoanalysis from their particular points of view. According to Moscovici (1961), the liberal press favoured diffusion, which was a seemingly neutral way of disseminating information. The more conservative catholic press passed information through propagation: emphasised the content contingent with religious beliefs and defied other parts of psychoanalysis. The communist press used a propagandist approach by attacking against psychoanalysis, which was seen as highly bourgeois. The different ways of reporting resulted in readers having very different views on psychoanalysis. These views were named social representations.

Social representations are defined as groups of values, ideas, images and practices. Their two main purposes are first, to help people orient in their social and material worlds and second, to allow communication with others (Moscovici, 1973). Social representations are more than attitudes towards a certain issue or subject; they are lay theories or systems of beliefs (Moscovici, 1984).

According to the social representations theory, new and abstract information is adopted into everyday language through the processes of anchoring, objectification and naturalisation. Through anchoring, strange phenomena are compared to ordinary categories and placed in familiar contexts; abstract issues are named and classified. Objectification refers to finding the iconic nature of a strange concept and producing it as an image (Moscovici, 1984). Through naturalisation, the once new and abstract ideas are rooted as a part of our social and cultural reality: they become a part of common or everyday language (Sakki and Menard, 2014).

Recent texts on social representations have theorised their functional aspects and emphasised their connections to identities, interpersonal relationships and power. The close connection of social representations to political sciences, societal conflicts and institutions has been increasingly addressed (see Elcheroth et al., 2011). To focus on these functional aspects of social representations, this paper combines the social representations theory to a poststructural policy analysis "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). WPR-analysis is used to study problem representations in society, which are presumed to be reflected in social policies.

Although not policy analysis, this paper benefits from the emphasis of studying problem representations rather than pre-assumed problems, and specifically, the consequences of these representations. They carry implications for how a specific issue is thought about and how the people involved are treated (Bacchi, 2009). Problem representations are assumed to benefit the members of some groups at the expense of others and limit our awareness of the full range of troubling conditions (Bacchi, 2009).

Because problem representations are reflected in practices, the premises of policy actions and their underlying representations need critical interrogation. The aim of WPR-analysis is to challenge problem representations that have deleterious effects, and to suggest that issues can be thought about in ways that might avoid these effects (Bacchi, 2009). In combination,

the social representations theory and the WPR-analysis offer a conceptual framework to explore the meanings and, particularly, the individual and societal ramifications of the representations of polydrug use.

Social representations of substances in the media

Communication is a key factor in the creation of knowledge (Elcheroth *et al.*, 2011), which makes the role of the media significant in defining questions related to substance use (e.g. Montonen, 1996; Coomber *et al.*, 2000; Lancaster *et al.*, 2011). Representations of alcohol in the print media vary from focusing on alcohol-related harms such as alcoholism or drunk-driving to portraying alcohol use as a neutral or even positive social activity (e.g. Törrönen and Simonen, 2015). Reporting on illicit drugs, however, is often stereotypical and distorted, focusing more unilaterally on criminal behaviours associated with drug use (Coomber *et al.*, 2000; Ayres and Jewkes, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Accordingly, a study of Finnish print media showed that illicit drugs were portrayed as a problem or threat, moral panic being a distinctive feature of drug-related newspaper articles (Törrönen, 2004). However, it has also been suggested that media reporting on illicit drugs is not as sensationalised and biased as traditionally proposed, and that there are notable differences between the reporting of different illicit substances (Hughes *et al.*, 2011).

Studies of different substances and addictions under the social representations framework have also shown social representations of alcohol to include ambiguous messages on the social acceptability of alcohol use on one hand, and its potentially harmful effects on the other (Hirschovits-Gerz, 2014). A study comparing social representations of different addictive behaviours internationally found alcohol use to be regarded as less of a problem in Finland than in Sweden, Russia and Canada (Holma *et al.*, 2011). "Hard" drug use is seen as the most severe form of addiction and a cause of societal problems in most countries (Blomqvist, 2009; Holma *et al.*, 2011; Hirschovits-Gerz, 2014).

The misuse of medical drugs has not been studied as much as that of alcohol and illicit drugs. The social representations of prescription medication have traditionally been positive due to their health promoting effects (Hirschovits-Gerz, 2014). This view is currently challenged, for example, due to the opioid crisis in the USA, which has been declared a "national emergency" (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2017a). The misuse of medical drugs is also an increasing concern in Europe (Karjalainen *et al.*, 2017).

Although we have evidence on the social representations of alcohol, illicit drugs and medical drugs, the social representations of polydrug use remain an unexplored area. This paper aims to contribute to this question by asking: which substances are included in the definitions of polydrug use in newspaper articles? What kinds of social representations are the articles creating and maintaining? How have the social representations changed from the year 1990 to the year 2016?

Data and methods

The data for the study consist of 405 articles from the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the biggest circulation newspaper in all of the Nordic countries, with a total daily distribution of 324,997 in 2017 (Media Audit Finland, 2017). It is an important setter of public debate and standards for other media in Finland (Lounasmeri and Ylä-Anttila, 2014). The electronic archive includes all articles published in the newspaper from the year 1990 onwards. The year 1990 was chosen as a starting point for the present study due to the timing of the second wave of increased drug use in Finland in the 1990s. During that decade, the significant increase in drug use also resulted in increased reporting on drug and substance misuse issues (e.g. Törrönen, 2004).

A search was conducted in the archive to find all articles mentioning polydrug use or polydrug user during the study period. In Finnish, polydrug use has few synonyms, and the most common concepts *sekakäyttö* (polydrug use) and *sekakäyttäjä* (polydrug user) in all their inflected forms were used. The subject of the articles was not significant for this study, because the aim was to look at all the different contexts and ways the concepts had been used in newspaper articles over the years.

This paper applies both content analysis and thematic analysis to analyse data. Quantitative aspects of the data will be demonstrated through content analysis: how often and in what kinds of contexts the concepts of polydrug use or polydrug user were used in newspaper articles. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) provides a qualitative method that allows identifying, analysing and reporting patterns in data. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced six interconnected phases of the analysis, which have been applied in this study. First, the researchers read the articles thoroughly to familiarise themselves with the data. Second, an inductive approach was used to form initial codes on the data. These were coded with Atlas.ti. The subsequent three phases concerned searching for, reviewing and defining recurrent themes in the data. Themes are defined as patterned responses that capture something important in the data in relation to the research question. During these phases, the themes were compared to see if they reoccurred during the entire study period from 1990 to 2016 or only at certain points in time. Co-occurring themes were grouped together and will be introduced as the social representations of polydrug use.

Results

The concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user were not very commonly used in newspaper articles at the beginning of the study period in 1990–1992 (Figure 1). However, their use quickly increased and continued to do so until the turn of the century. After this, the use of the term polydrug use has somewhat decreased, but polydrug user seems to have appeared in the articles more steadily.

A longitudinal exploration of the data showed that the social representation of polydrug use had changed in the study period from 1990 to 2016. The social representations seemed to differ mainly according to the substances that were included in the definitions of polydrug use at specific times. At the beginning of the study period, polydrug use most often referred to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs. Later, illicit drugs were included in the definitions. Next, the evolution of the concept will be described by introducing three social representations that were identified in the data. All citations are from newspaper articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat*. The key processes of the social representations theory; anchoring, objectification and naturalisation will be used in the analysis.

Figure 1 Mentions of polydrug use and polydrug user
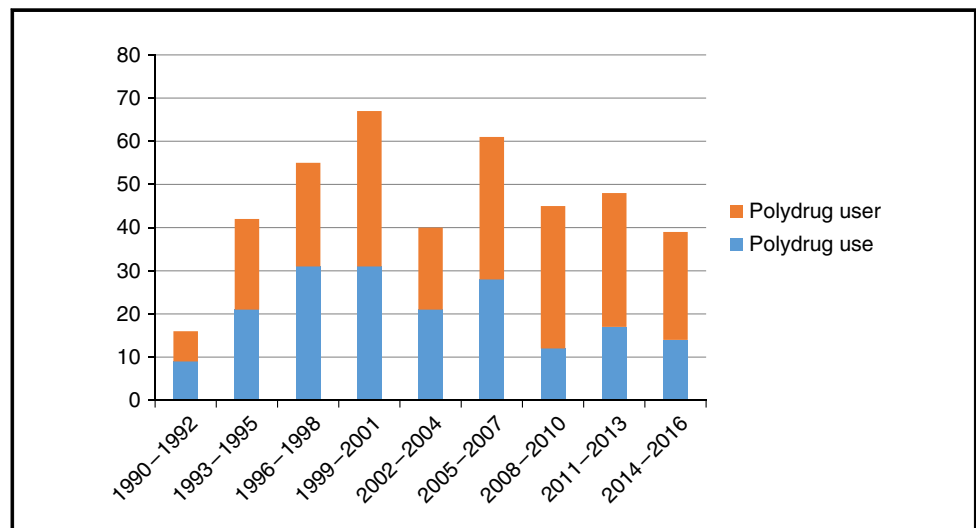
The polydrug use of alcohol and medical drugs

Figure 2 roughly shows the substances that were included in the definitions of polydrug use and polydrug user throughout the study period. In the beginning, writers clearly spelled out the substances they were referring to when using these still unfamiliar concepts. Polydrug use at this time most often referred to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs:

> After working with substance users for almost 20 years, I've noticed that there are less "pure" alcohol abusers; they've been substituted by polydrug users of alcohol and medical drugs (1992).

Polydrug use as referring to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs was strongly anchored to alcohol use. In other words, the new and abstract idea of polydrug use was contrasted to alcohol abuse, which was a well-acknowledged and familiar issue. Polydrug use was also discussed as a form of substance use distinct from illicit drug use:

> During this time, substances used by clients have moved from alcohol to drugs; it is rare to have a pure alcoholic at the facility. The usual distribution of clients is a couple of drug addicts, a couple of polydrug users and one alcoholic (1998).

> […] [N]ot forgetting the dangers of alcohol use, polydrug use and even heavier drug alternatives, the boy interviewed for the program thought drinking beer was just a phase in life which would pass, just like pimples (1997).

In the previous citations, substance use problems were organised into a sort of continuum, where alcohol use was positioned at the most harmless level, followed by polydrug use (as referring to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs) and finally illicit drug use as the most severe form of substance use. Polydrug use was often explicitly described as a pathway from alcohol use to illicit drug use:

> Finnish people's favorite substance is still booze, but the polydrug use of alcohol with medical drugs is now almost as common. It is also easier to slip into illicit drugs from alcohol and medical drugs (1997).

> Especially young people mix beer, wine, spirits, sleeping pills and pain killers, sedatives and cough medicine. The phenomenon is concerning because this polydrug use easily leads to illicit drug use (1996).

At the beginning of the study period, polydrug use was seen as a typical form of substance use, especially among teenagers: where they had previously become intoxicated by drinking beer, they would now mix in medical drugs as well. In the first social representation, polydrug use was therefore objectified as a young person experimenting with medical drugs alongside alcohol use. The articles often portrayed concern for this emerging trend.

Figure 2 Substances included in polydrug use
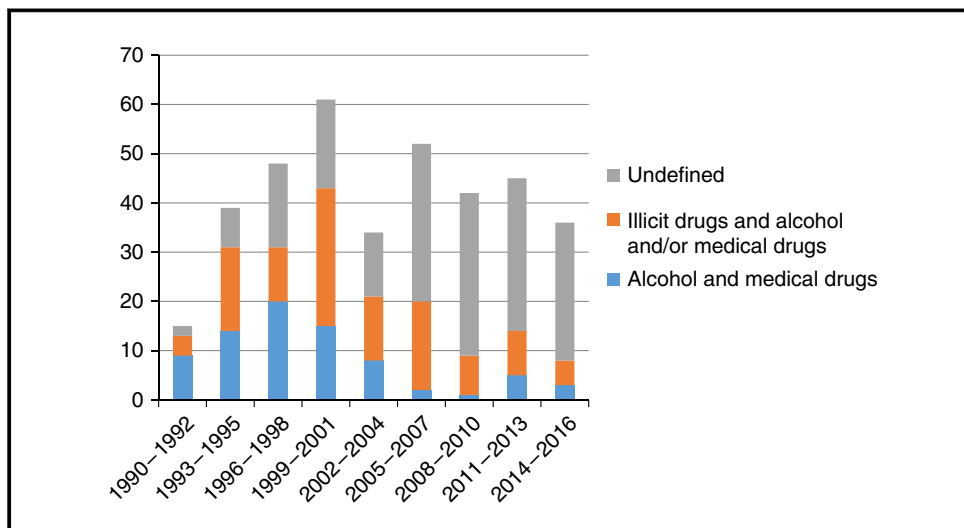
The polydrug use of illicit drugs, alcohol and medical drugs

During the 1990s, the concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user started to gain new meanings. Many writings still used the concepts to refer to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs, but by the turn of the century, illicit drugs were predominantly included in the definitions:

> Old school drunkards don't exist anymore. They've been replaced by people who substitute alcohol with windshield washing fluids and polydrug users. Polydrug users use medical drugs and illicit drugs in addition to alcohol (2000).

Now, the concept of polydrug use was often used to refer to the co-use of alcohol, medical drugs and illicit drugs. The addition of illicit drugs in the social representation made polydrug use a more serious form of substance use than before. When it had previously been considered as substance use that could lead from alcohol use to illicit drug use, it now connoted illicit drug use *per se*. Polydrug use was positioned as being something even more harmful than illicit drug use:

> People seeking help for drug abuse problems are mostly men, young adults and people living alone. The treatment periods have become longer, because the clients are more often polydrug users and in poorer shape than before (2007).

> The use of IV drugs has spread in such a short time, that Finland's treatment systems have not been able to keep up. In addition, the unexceptionally profuse polydrug use of different illicit drugs, meds and booze makes treatment more difficult than in other countries (2001).

Polydrug use was often anchored to emotions (emotional anchoring, see e.g. Höijer, 2010), which portrayed it as a threat or danger. These articles implied that polydrug use was something alarming and dangerous that needed to be feared. Mixing different drugs was pharmacologically dangerous, but so were the people who were referred to as polydrug users. They formed a group whose behaviour was often described as unpredictable:

> The traditional alcoholic bum has disappeared from Helsinki. Customers are younger and more international than before. The polydrug use of illicit drugs or of booze and illicit drugs is common, which makes people unpredictable (2004).

In this social representation, polydrug use was objectified in a different way than before. When previously the typical polydrug user had been a young person experimenting with substances, she/he was now portrayed as an older person and someone who was very likely addicted to substances. Polydrug users were presented as people who could not quite control their own behaviour and caused insecurity in public spaces.

Naturalised polydrug use

The final social representation shows polydrug use and polydrug user as naturalised concepts. The terms seemed to have become a part of everyday language and were no longer issues of debate in the same way as before. Naturalisation can be seen in the way the concepts were defined over the study period. At first, polydrug use was used to refer to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs, while later illicit drugs were included in the definition. Towards the end of the study period, the concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user were already familiar to the public and were often used as individual concepts as such, without defining or specifying which substances in particular were being co-used (Figure 2).

Although newspaper articles often left out the substances they were referring to by polydrug use towards the end of the study period, the inclusion of illicit drugs in the combination seemed to be implicitly implied:

> The majority of homeless substance users in Helsinki are still middle-aged men addicted to alcohol […] (H)owever, the amount of homeless young drug addicts and polydrug users is increasing (2006).

The Finnish term for polydrug does not have a straight reference to drugs, as it translates into mix-use, but the naturalisation of the concept has led to a strong implication of substance use (especially illicit drug use) when it is being used.

In this third social representation, the concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user were found to separate from each other more than before. Polydrug user was mentioned more often in articles by the end of the twenty-first century. This trend coincides with the finding that the concepts

were used independently of specific definitions, allowing more room for the reader's own interpretation. Interpretations will likely include elements from existing social representations and frame the concept of polydrug user in an especially negative way.

The concept of polydrug user was used in pejorative contexts, also in articles unrelated to substance use. The concept was not necessarily used to refer to people who were mixing certain substances, but as a categorisation of a person with certain assumed characteristics. Polydrug user was used as a prototype of a person who was addicted to substances and had low control of his/her use and potentially caused disturbances in public areas:

> A restless threesome get on the bus, two men and a woman. They take over the best seats in the front. They are quickly given room, because they have low voices, rundown faces and a shabby appearance acquired by a long history of substance use. The diagnosis is clear: druggies and unpredictable polydrug users; the kind you need to be very careful with (2014).

Polydrug use and polydrug users were even used as metaphors:

> Playing with your phone can't be a big sin if you consider children's toys nowadays. For example, our child has a plastic caterpillar, which speaks in a monotonous voice and repeats like a polydrug user "The dog and cat take the airplane to see the flower". It sure doesn't improve European small talk (2013).

> Talking vegetables end up time traveling as pirates. The cheap and disturbing animation feels like something invented in a polydrug use-hangover (2014).

These citations show that the concepts of polydrug use or polydrug user had naturalised and become so familiar, that they could be used figuratively in various contexts. When applied in this stereotypical way, the negative social representations are particularly strongly maintained.

Discussion

This paper has studied the social representations of polydrug use and polydrug users in Finland from 1990 to 2016. Three distinct representations were introduced. At the beginning of the study period in the 1990s, polydrug use often referred to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs. This was viewed as typical behaviour for young people. Closing to the turn of the millennium, the social representation of polydrug use entailed illicit drugs, which shifted the phenomenon in a more serious direction. The third social representation portrayed polydrug use as a naturalised concept, and it was often used as a prototype or a metaphor.

Social representations are an important object of study, because they are not just ways of talking about issues. They actually work to constitute or construct our social reality, which has significant implications for society and individuals (Elcheroth *et al.*, 2011; Bacchi, 2009; Taylor, 2008). Social reality is constructed through representations because "we react to the representation rather than the reality they represent" (Farr, 1995). According to the WPR-analysis, representations have discursive, subjectification and lived effects (Bacchi, 2009).

First, discursive effects have consequences on how we talk about issues and what we believe to be "true". For example, a study of how methamphetamine use was constructed in the South African print media found use to be associated with criminality, pathology and discourses of, e.g., race and HIV, which portrayed people who use methamphetamine as criminals, eliciting moral stigmatisation and oversimplifying a complex socio-cultural phenomenon (Howell, 2015). In a recent report, the Global Commission on Drug Policy (2017b) recommended that policy makers and opinion leaders such as the media should be more considerate of the way of talking and reporting on drug use and drug users. They advise against using stigmatising terms such as "junkie", "druggie" or "drug abuser" and recommend using the term "person with drug dependency". In the context of this study, the same recommendation can be applied to the stigmatising concept of "polydrug user". A change in language may generate a change in attitudes and reduce the negative effects of social representations.

Second, representations have subjectification effects, because people adopt positions that are made available in discourses. Representations produce different kinds of subjects: in the present study, polydrug users are seen as a "marked" minority group whereas alcohol abusers could be

seen as the "unmarked" majority group. People who abused alcohol were positioned as a familiar and unthreatening group of people while polydrug users were seen as dangerous and unpredictable. The meanings given to certain labels and positions can have effects on the identities of people involved, because people make sense of their worlds from their respective standpoints. Anchoring or naming someone in a certain way is not just stating facts but labelling that person (Moscovici, 1984).

Third, lived effects refer to the material consequences of problem representations in people's day-to-day lives (Bacchi, 2009). Representations are often supported by the creation of institutionalised backgrounds for routine practices. They can generate infrastructure that segments people in particular ways and result in the uneven distribution of resources. Again, changes in social representations may lead to changes in the institutional world (Elcheroth et al., 2011).

This study limits its exploration to one newspaper, and the social representations of polydrug use might have been different if studied in tabloid newspapers or in other media, such as online. The articles in the data have gone through an editing process and may thus reflect the ideologies and policies of the newspaper, although ideological differences between newspapers are not considered vast in Finland. It should also be noted that this paper has not aimed to explain the phenomenon of polydrug use, but has limited its exploration to the specific concepts of polydrug use and polydrug user. The critical position taken towards the application of the concept of polydrug use should be taken into account in future research and media reporting on alcohol and other substances.

Conclusions

The concept of polydrug use carries different implications in scientific research and in common language. The requirement of precise definitions in scientific articles leaves little room for interpretation based on predominant social representations. The opposite, however, applies to everyday talk and language. This study shows that polydrug use is portrayed as problematic substance use in the Finnish mainstream media. Although social representations are culture and language specific, we argue that similar negative representations could be found internationally, where polydrug use has also been viewed as problematic use (Quintero, 2009).

Recently, more studies have considered the diversity of the phenomenon (e.g. Connor et al., 2013; Askew, 2016; Kataja et al., 2017). According to the National Drug Survey in Finland (Karjalainen et al., 2016), the most common substances used in combination were alcohol and cannabis. Such use often occurs in recreational settings among all socioeconomic groups. This co-use, however, did not show in the data of the present study. The typical polydrug user was portrayed as an addicted person rather than someone occasionally mixing alcohol and cannabis. This shows that social representations always exclude other ways of talking about an issue, making it important to consider what is being left unsaid (Bacchi, 2009). Unilaterally negative social representations can reinforce the stigma directed at people using multiple substances and people using substances in general. Promisingly, the nature of social representations as social knowledge evolves and changes over time.

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