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**A SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS APPROACH
TO ILLICIT DRUG USE: THE CONTENTS AND
CONSEQUENCES OF REPRESENTATIONAL
ACTION**

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation study explores lay knowledge related to illicit drug use. It is a current social concern in Finland as well as in many other countries, as the variety of substances and the prevalence of use continue to increase, bringing about shifting and more diverse views related to the issue of illicit drug use overall. The study argues that lay understandings regarding social phenomena create what we believe to be true and are thus inherently bound to action. In this study context, lay knowledge related to illicit drug use is conceptualized as social representations, and a social representations approach is used as a critical social psychological framework to analyse shared meanings and their significance for behaviour.

Within the social representations approach, different actors in society are examined: the media, lay people and people who use illicit drugs. These viewpoints on different levels of social space contribute to a pattern of correlations comprising the process of social representation in regard to illicit drug use. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to study two broader research aims: 1) how illicit drug use is socially represented in the media and among lay people, and 2) the consequences of representational action for people in relation to views on drug policy and for the identity construction of people who use illicit drugs. Thematic analysis and latent class analysis are used as the main research methodologies.

The findings of the three sub-studies of this research show that illicit drug use is socially represented through notions of the self and other, morality, risk and self-control. From a social psychological – and specifically a social representational – viewpoint, the findings of the study show illicit drug use to be a normified phenomenon and a naturalized social representation. These claims suggest that although illicit drug use is a salient and in ways unremarkable part of our current society, it has not become normalized to the point of being insignificant or non-stigmatized. Although social representations of illicit drug use are often negative, alternative voices grounded in differences between substances and modes of use are salient and retain possibilities for social change.

In regard to the second research aim, this study shows that social representations are related to views on drug policy and to identity construction. The amount of risk that people perceive in regard to illicit drug use is associated with their views on control policy and harm reduction measures. People who use illicit drugs construct their identities by positioning themselves in relation to salient social representations. These findings illustrate possibilities for the material, discursive and social consequences of representational action. Overall, this dissertation study highlights the process of social representation as generative and functional in constructing social realities.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä väitöskirjatutkimuksessa tarkastellaan huumeiden käyttöön liittyvää arkitietoa. Huumeiden käyttö on ajankohtainen yhteiskunnallinen kysymys, ja käytön ja erilaisten aineiden lisääntyessä myös näkemykset ja asenteet ilmiötä kohtaan moninaistuvat. Tutkimuksen lähtökohtana on ajatus siitä, että sosiaalisiin ilmiöihin liittyvä arkitietomme luo sitä, mitä pidämme todellisena ja että se on myös vahvasti yhteydessä toimintaamme. Tässä tutkimuksessa arkitieto käsitteellistetään sosiaalisina representaatioina, ja sosiaalipsykologisena teoreettisena viitekehyksenä käytetään sosiaalisten representaatioiden lähestymistapaa. Tämän viitekehyksen kautta analysoidaan ryhmien kesken jaettuja ymmärryksiä ja niiden merkitystä käyttäytymiseen.

Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan erilaisia toimijoita yhteiskunnassa: mediaa, maallikoita ja ihmisiä, jotka käyttävät huumeita. Sosiaalisen tilan eri tasoilla olevien näkökulmien yhdistämisen avulla on mahdollista hahmottaa niitä yhteyksiä, joiden kautta huumeiden käyttöön liittyvät sosiaaliset representaatiot muodostuvat. Sosiaalinen representaatio on ennen kaikkea prosessi, jonka aikana asioita määritellään ja jolloin niistä muodostetaan yhteisesti jaettuja ymmärryksiä. Tutkimuksessa käytetään sekä kvalitatiivisia että kvantitatiivisia menetelmiä kahden laajemman tutkimustehtävän selvittämiseksi: 1) Millä tavalla huumeiden käyttöä sosiaalisesti representoidaan mediassa ja maallikkosten keskuudessa, ja 2) millaisia ovat representoinnin seuraukset erityisesti liittyen näkemyksiin huumausainepolitiikasta ja huumeita käyttävien ihmisten identiteetin rakentumiselle. Analyysimenetelminä tutkimuksissa käytetään temaattista analyysia ja latenttiluokka-analyysia.

Tutkimus koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta, jotka osoittavat, että huumeiden käyttöä representoidaan sosiaalisesti seuraavien käsitteiden kautta: minä ja muut, moraalisuus, riski ja itsehillintä. Sosiaalipsykologisesta näkökulmasta katsottuna huumeiden käyttö näyttää aineistojen valossa normifioituneena ja naturalisoituneena ilmiönä. Tämä havainto tukee tulkintaa siitä, että vaikka huumeiden käyttö on vakiintunut osa yhteiskuntaamme, se ei ole normalisoitunut niin, että se olisi merkityksetöntä tai ei-stigmatisoitua. Huumeiden käyttöön liittyvät sosiaaliset representaatiot ovat usein negatiivisia, mutta myös toisenlaisia näkemyksiä liittyen erilaisiin aineisiin ja käyttötapoihin esiintyy. Sosiaalisen muutoksen mahdollisuus kytkeytyy nimenomaan niihin näkemyksiin, jotka poikkeavat hegemonisista sosiaalisista representaatioista.

Toiseen tutkimustehtävään liittyen tulokset osoittavat, että sosiaaliset representaatiot ovat yhteydessä ihmisten näkemyksiin huumausainepolitiikasta ja identiteettien rakentumiseen. Huumeiden käyttöön liittyvän riskin määrä on yhteydessä siihen, millä tavoin ihmiset suhtautuvat huumausainepoliittisiin toimenpiteisiin kuten kontrollipolitiikkaan ja haittojen vähentämiseen.

Ihmiset, jotka itse käyttävät huumeita, rakentavat oman identiteettinsä asemoimalla itsensä suhteessa ympäröiviin sosiaalisiin representaatioihin. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat sosiaalisten representaatioiden mahdollisia materiaalisia, diskursiivisia ja sosiaalisia seurauksia. Kaiken kaikkiaan tutkimus korostaa, että sosiaaliset representaatiot ovat funktionaalinen prosessi, joilla on merkitystä sosiaalisten todellisuuksien rakentumisessa.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

I Savonen, J., Hakkarainen, P., Kataja, K., Sakki, I., & Tigerstedt, C. (2019). Social representations of polydrug use in a Finnish newspaper 1990–2016. *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, 19(2), 123–132.

II Savonen, J., Hakkarainen, P., & Karjalainen, K. (2021). The perceived risk of illicit drug use in the general population. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*.

III Savonen, J., Kataja, K., & Sakki, I. (2022). Distancing from the worst or facing the inescapable? Social representations and positioning of people in marginalized groups. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 32(5), 896–907.

The publications are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals and attached to this document.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1971, the Grand Committee of the Finnish Parliament had a decision to make: after hearing professionals present evidence and argue different sides of the matter, representatives were torn whether illicit drug use should be kept as a criminal offence, which prior to that it had been. They were in the process of legislating the first official drug law, and as the votes were even – pro and against criminalization – the decision was left up to chance. By drawing lots, the parliament proceeded to approve the recommendation and keep illicit drug use as a criminal offence. (Hakkarainen & Kainulainen, 2021.)

This event is one piece of the puzzle that constitutes the social reality of illicit drug use today. Occasions and interactions such as this one create what we believe to be true: the decision to criminalize the use of illicit drugs produced a reality in which a person who uses illicit drugs is seen more as a criminal than a patient or consumer. These legal definitions combined with media messages and discussions both face-to-face and online shape how society in general and people in particular understand and respond to the issue of illicit drug use. It constitutes the lay everyday knowledge that is shared within communities and groups of people, and which is the focus of this dissertation. Although shared meanings may simplify complex phenomena and result in prototypical views of illicit drug use and the people who use such drugs, the issue is not homogeneous. It is namely because of this that we need to explore and challenge taken-for-granted views that contribute to our understandings – and our actions.

To repeat views of illicit drug use as unilaterally rare and deviant behaviour would be misleading in the contemporary environment of a Western society. Overall, attitudes towards illicit drug use have changed and continue to do so. One example of an attitudinal shift can be described through the idea of normalization, which proposes that illicit drug use has become mainstream and unremarkable in modern societies, and as such is less stigmatized than before (Parker et al., 1999; 2002). This view, however, is also criticized by many, who suggest rather that even though a normalization trend can be witnessed in relation to some illicit drugs and ways of use, it does not apply to others which remain marginalized and stigmatized (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Shildrick, 2002; Williams, 2016). In line with the latter idea of *differentiated normalization*, in this thesis I argue that lay knowledge on illicit drug use is heterogeneous and that it is anything but insignificant to the society and its people.

Whether we see illicit drug use as mainstream or marginalized, it is nevertheless a prominent and current social concern in many countries. According to the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2021), the variety of substances is increasing and patterns of use are becoming more varied. In Finland, 80 percent of the population view the drug problem in the

country as moderate or large. This is the case even though according to a survey conducted in 2018, the proportion of people who used illicit drugs (mainly cannabis) in the past year was only eight percent. The prevalence of cannabis use, as well as other illicit drugs, has, however, increased in the past decades (Karjalainen et al., 2020), which is also reflected in increasing harm, such as drug-related deaths (The drug situation in Finland, 2020). In addition to changes in the manifestation of illicit drug use, policy responses are being re-evaluated in several countries. Drug policy discussions in Finland reflect these changes, and they have been recently active especially in regard to the decriminalization of cannabis use and initiating new harm reduction measures (Hakkarainen & Kainulainen, 2021). For these reasons, illicit drug use offers a much debated topic and opportunity for a social psychological exploration of its shared and contested meanings.

Following a report titled 'The World Drug Perception Problem' by the Global Commission on Drug Policy in 2017, this dissertation focuses not on what drug use is but rather what it is perceived to be. The report title could be a pun on the common concept of the drug problem, but it also gives centre stage to the significance of lay knowledge in dealing with a complex social concern. Interrogating the construction of the concept of illicit drug use is necessary in order to disrupt marginalizing ways of talking and doing policy (Lancaster & Ritter, 2014). We need to ask, first, what we talk about when we talk about illicit drug use and, second, what the significance of these meanings is for the society and its people. In this study, the perceptions, understandings, attitudes, reactions or images of illicit drug use are conceptualized as social representations, which are sets of meanings that are 'practically real and make sense because people act accordingly' (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008, p. 345). This short quotation highlights the relevance of representations (as practically real) and their association to behaviour and action, eloquently echoing the aims of this dissertation.

As stated above, the aims of this dissertation are twofold: first, to explore sets of meanings attributed to illicit drug use and, second, to analyse their significance in relation to views on drug policy and the identity construction of people who use illicit drugs. The summary is structured as follows: I start by defining the phenomenon under study as a social concern and briefly describe the historical development of illicit drug use as a societally and politically relevant issue in Finnish society. Next, in Chapter Three, I explain the theoretical framework: the social representations approach utilized in this dissertation study includes tenets of social representations theory, the social identity approach, positioning and a policy analysis strategy 'What's the problem represented to be?'. Drawing from the theoretical approach, the general aims and specific research questions are formulated in Chapter Four. In the fifth chapter, I describe the data and methods that have been used in the analyses of the three sub-studies of this dissertation. In Chapter Six, the results of the sub-studies are presented, which I then discuss in Chapter Seven in relation to the research aims; I also address the limitations of the study and suggest some

future directions for research. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I draw conclusions on the study and its contributions.

2 PERCEIVING ILLICIT DRUG USE

In order to understand the lay meanings associated with the issue of illicit drug use, in this chapter I first highlight the significance of the research topic as a social concern rather than a pharmacological issue. Secondly, I describe the specific cultural and political contexts in which illicit drug use in Finland has developed and is maintained as a socially – and societally – relevant issue. These contexts set the stage for the interactions through which knowledge is constructed, shared and continuously transformed. Lastly, I review some previous literature on the lay knowledge of illicit drug use.

2.1 A SOCIAL CONCERN

This thesis study focuses on lay knowledge related to the societally relevant issue of illicit drug use. An important point of departure is that in addition to their chemical qualities, illicit drugs are social objects with shared meanings within and far beyond the people who use them. They are part of and construct a common social reality. (Negura & Plante, 2021.) Understanding the issue within this frame is especially significant for a study on socially shared knowledge, on *natural* or *daily* thinking (Moscovici, 1961/2008; Marková, 2017), which aims to explore the meanings people associate with illicit drug use and employ to communicate with each other. Everyday language and metaphors have strong symbolic power and are crucial in how illicit drug use is perceived on an interpersonal as well as a societal level (Tupper, 2012). Different labels convey different sets of meanings (Britten, 1996; Room et al., 2015). In the Finnish language, particularly, there is a clear conceptual distinction between licit drugs, which are called *medicines (lääkkeet)*, and illicit drugs, which are called *narcotic drugs (huumeet)*; these are concepts that include strong implications of what is acceptable and what is not.

Defining drugs and drug use is a difficult task, which includes both objective facts and subjective value judgements (Kalant, 2010; Nutt et al., 2007). Addiction and drug dependency are attributed to habitual, heavy and problematic consumption (Room et al., 2015) and can be viewed separately from recreational use or several other motives of use, as, for example, using illicit drugs for self-enhancement or self-medication (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2019). Substances themselves can be classified on the basis of their effects (e.g. stimulants, sedatives), modes of use (e.g. smoking, intravenous use) or the harms they cause, either physically or socially (Nutt et al., 2007). Because this study is about social representations, any definitions or meanings that people attach to *illicit drug use* are relevant; the focus is on analysing the social construction of incoherent patterns of ideas related to this issue rather than clearly specified

entities. Next I will briefly introduce the main concepts that the reader will encounter within the context of this study.

By utilizing the concept of illicit drugs as a general category, I refer to a wide range of substances and drug use behaviours encompassing drugs that are listed as illegal (illicit drugs by definition) as well as the non-medical use of medical drugs. An inclusion of licit drugs in the definition portrays a core difficulty in understanding the category of *narcotic drugs*: although licit drugs are often associated with safety and illicit drugs with danger (e.g. Whyte et al., 2002), this distinction is hardly clear, as pharmaceuticals can also be used to intoxicate rather than heal. This has been sadly evident with the opioid crisis in the United States (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2017b), and it leads to wavering distinctions between categories of substances (Tupper, 2012; Tammi et al., 2011; Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2017b).

In terms of illicit drugs, this dissertation study mainly focuses on *hard drug* use, which is defined as the use of amphetamines, heroin (or synthetic opioids), the intravenous (IV) use of drugs and polydrug use. In literature related to the different modes of illicit drug use and attitudes towards the use of illicit drugs, the aforementioned substances and patterns of use are mainly portrayed in negative ways (O’Gorman, 2016; Room, 2005; Tammi et al., 2011). A focus on especially stigmatized ways of illicit drug use (in comparison to recreational use, for example) allows better analysis regarding the possible adverse consequences that specific ways of representing can have. However, the study will also provide findings related to the less stigmatized use of cannabis, which show that the meanings related to illicit drug use are not unilateral or stagnant.

One particular pattern that will be explored is polydrug use, which in 2017 was described as the dominant pattern of illicit drug use by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Researchers aiming to define polydrug use have been met with constant challenges, regarding, for example, the substances involved in polydrug use, the timing of use and the effects of substance use (Schensul et al., 2005). Some consensus lies in distinguishing between simultaneous polydrug use (using different substances during the same drug-use episode) and concurrent polydrug use (using different drugs within a specific period). Because concurrent polydrug use varies considerably, based on the different measurements used and substances included, scholars suggest focusing on simultaneous drug use when exploring the phenomenon of polydrug use (Hakkarainen et al., 2019; Karjalainen et al., 2017).

The topics under analysis in this study – hard drug use, polydrug use and cannabis use – all contribute to the phenomenon of *illicit drug use* as a social concern at the general level. As the analysis will show, for example, a person does not need to mix drugs in order to be called a ‘polydrug user’, or a person might not be called a ‘drug user’ if they occasionally use cannabis at parties. Yet, the everyday knowledge attached to these concepts is relevant in shaping our understandings of illicit drug use and the people who use them, which also

leads to discursive and material outcomes. This is a key point which I will return to in the results and discussion of this summary.

2.2 THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

To introduce the cultural context of this study, I will briefly describe illicit drug use in Finland and provide a historical overview of its development in the past decades. According to the latest prevalence studies in 2018, cannabis is by far the most used illicit drug in Finland (as in other European countries). About a quarter of people aged 15–69 have tried cannabis during their lifetime and three percent of them have used it in the last 30 days. Use is most prevalent among people who are from 25 to 34 years of age, out of whom seven percent had used cannabis in the last 30 days. Other drugs are much less frequently tried or used. (Karjalainen et al., 2020.) Finland has traditionally had a high prevalence of amphetamine use compared to other European countries, in which cocaine is the second-most used illicit drug overall (EMCDDA, 2021). About four percent of Finnish people have tried amphetamine, which is more or less the same amount of people as have tried heroin or any other opiate (such as the buprenorphine Subutex). (Karjalainen et al., 2020.) The problematic use of illicit drugs is defined through the significant social or health issues caused by amphetamine or opiate use, which in 2017 applied to an estimated 0.9–1.3 percent of the population aged 15 to 64. Both hard drug use and problematic use were more prevalent in the 2010s than during the previous decades (The Drug Situation in Finland, 2020.)

For an overview of the historical context and development of the drug issue in Finland, we only need to journey back some 50 years to the 1960s and 1970s, when illicit drug use was first conceptualized as a societal concern. This was a time of notable increases in trying and using illicit drugs, accompanied by drug-related harms. The increase in use was a reflection of youth and popular cultures in other Western societies, which focused on cannabis; the people trying it were young, and most of them did not continue use after a period of experimentation. (Hakkarainen, 1992, p. 60.) Because of increased societal intervention, the first official drug law was put into action in 1972, criminalizing all drug-related activity. Although the initial enthusiasm in cannabis subsided around the 1980s, other drugs entered the Finnish drug scene and smuggling as a new phenomenon made harder drugs more available than before (Kainulainen et al., 2017).

Finnish illicit drug use history has long been described through the metaphors of two drug waves: after a relatively stable period, illicit drug use increased again in the beginning of the 1990s. This conceptualization of waves can be misleading, however, because although these two decades witnessed an emphasized focus on illicit drug use issues following increases in use, illicit drugs gradually became a staple part of Finnish society rather than coming and going like wave-like fads. A significant difference in the increase of use in

the 1990s as compared to that of the 1960s was that the range of substances was much wider and the setting of use was often at parties and clubs. (Seppälä & Salasuo, 2001.) After the turn of the millennium, the drug scene was changed by the decreasing role of heroin, which was replaced by pharmaceuticals and new psychoactive substances; with amphetamine, these led to the development of various polydrug use practices (Tammi et al., 2011).

Changes starting in the 1990s led to a re-evaluation of the proper measures of dealing with illicit drug use as a societal issue. A drug-free society – as had earlier been the dominant government response – was no longer a policy aim; however, a punitive turn in criminal policy was also reflected in stricter drug-control policies (Kainulainen & Hakkarainen, 2021). In parallel to the tightening control, harm reduction measures were proposed and the first needle and syringe exchange facility opened in 1997. Finland’s drug laws have not witnessed any major changes since the initiation of the first legislation, and only small adjustments have been made. Drug policy measures have, however, expanded and developed in regard to harm reduction, which has had a strong foothold in the landscape of Finnish drug policy since the 1990s. Due to this strong emphasis on harm reduction alongside strict criminal justice control measures, Finnish drug policy is best described as a dual-track policy (Hakkarainen et al., 2007; Tammi, 2007).

Despite the slowness of the change in the drug policy scene, critical voices have repeatedly argued for reforms, albeit more so in previous years. In 2020, a citizens initiative for decriminalizing cannabis proceeded to parliamentary hearings (KAA 5/2020 vp) and is still in process. Drug issues have also been more explicitly out in the open with discussions of new harm reduction measures, such as drug-consumption rooms and drug-checking services. The initiative of opening a drug-consumption facility in Helsinki has thus far been mainly supported by individual politicians, experts, and practitioners rather than by institutions and organizations (Unlu et al., 2021). This process shows that although attitudes towards drug policy measures that value equality and personal integrity are increasingly sought after by various groups, national legislation needs more flexibility in order for them to be implemented (Hakkarainen & Kainulainen, 2021).

2.3 LAY KNOWLEDGE ON ILLICIT DRUG USE

Introducing illicit drug use as a social concern that has developed in a specific cultural context is important to set the stage for an exploration of how illicit drugs and the people who use them are perceived in the present. The idea of *lay knowledge* in this study is used as comparable to folk knowledge and to socially shared knowledge more generally. Socially shared knowledge comes in various forms; it includes, for example, collective routines, common sense knowledge and *specialized* knowledges (e.g. philosophical, scientific) (Mar-

ková, in press.). Although *lay* knowledge is often distinguished from *specialized* or *expert* knowledge, such a separation may be questioned, especially in an era when the majority of the people in Western countries have access to various forms of knowledge on the internet and social media. These types of knowledges blend as specialized discourses, and terms are incorporated into daily language. The specific focus of this dissertation, *social representations*, are seen to be formed through and transformed by the multiple ways of socially shared knowledge (see also Marková, in press.) Following this idea, *lay* and *common sense* are not used synonymously, as the latter is only one form of knowledge within the range of different kinds of socially shared knowledges and, accordingly, of social representations. In this chapter, I introduce previous findings on lay knowledge, such as attitudes (one of the dimensions of social representations; see Moscovici, 2000, p. 235) towards illicit drug use in Finland as well as other countries that concentrate on its associations with policy and identity.

A classic conceptualization from the 1980s describes illicit drug use as the *good enemy* (Christie & Bruun, 1986), or an ideal societal problem because it has few supporters and it can be seen as the source of many other concerns, such as social exclusion. The good enemy embodies the rhetoric of oppositions and war, which for a long time was the main response of governments that declared zero tolerance on drugs and pursued a drug-free society (Tammi, 2007). The attitudes of people in the environment of the drug war was described as *narcophobic*, that is, fearing illicit drugs and their use (Partanen, 2002). Although such rhetoric is losing its position in contemporary discussions and policy-making in Western contexts, attitudes towards illicit drug use continue to be described in terms of threats: the fear related to illicit drug use can apply to substances, their harms, or the people who use illicit drugs. Based on frequent surveys within the general population in Finland, however, there is decreasing fear of being a target of violence due to other peoples' illicit drug use. While 40 percent of respondents in 2002 stated that they were afraid of drug-related violence, only 19 percent did so in 2018. In a similar vein, a larger proportion (26 percent) of respondents in 2018 estimated that illicit drugs can be used in a way that does not cause problems, compared to 2002 (9 percent). (Karjalainen et al., 2020.) These results could be indicators of a shift in attitudes towards illicit drug use, which can be related to an increasing trend in experimenting with illicit drugs (mainly cannabis) or to changes in drug policy changes in other countries. In the Finnish context, however, the observed attitude change has primarily been related to the use of cannabis, not to other illicit drugs (Karjalainen et al., 2020).

One important driver of public opinion is the media, whose messages frame issues in specific ways and define questions related to substance use (e.g. Hughes et al., 2011; Montonen, 1996; Coomber et al., 2000; Lancaster et al., 2011). By generating lay knowledge concerning outgroups (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007), media messages contribute to attitudes and perceptions of drug-related issues such as risk (Gelders et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2011). Unlike alcohol,

whose representations 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 & Simonen, 2015), illicit drugs are rarely presented in a positive frame. Looking at media representations, reporting on illicit drugs is seen to often be stereotypical and distorted, concentrating on criminal behaviours associated with drug use (Coomber et al., 2000; Ayres & Jewkes, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Accordingly, studies on Finnish print media showed that moral panic was a distinctive feature of drug-related newspaper articles (Törrönen, 2004), where drugs were portrayed as a problem or threat, with their gloomy messages also reflected in citizens' attitudes towards illicit drugs (Piispa, 2001). Although positive moral evaluations are rare in drug-related articles, there is also evidence that media reporting on illicit drugs is not as sensationalized or biased as traditionally proposed. Messages can be neutral, and there are notable differences between the reporting of different illicit substances. (Hughes et al., 2011.) This diversity will also be shown through the results of the present study: not all drug use is found to be equally threatening or deviant.

In their study on lay knowledge regarding illicit drug use from a social representations perspective, Negura and Plante (2021) contended that illicit drug use is typically portrayed as a *bad habit*. Although attitudes have shifted over the decades, as shown in the general population studies above, the authors argue that rather little has changed in the sets of meanings attributed to illicit drug use since the 19th century. Studies addressing the *image* of addiction through a social representations approach report that hard drugs are viewed as the *worst thing to get hooked on* (Blomqvist, 2009) and that their use is the most severe form of addiction (Hirschovits-Gerz, 2013). The use of illicit drugs was seen as the greatest societal problem and concern, alongside criminality and environmental issues (Holma et al., 2011). These kinds of results reproduce the idea of drugs being something deviant, as will be shown in this thesis by an analysis of the process of the genesis of the concept of polydrug use.

Most of the previous studies cited above have concentrated on what illicit drug use *seems to be* or how different substances or patterns of use relate to each other. What they are missing is a discussion of and view towards what these shared meanings *do*. The images of illicit drug use are one thing, but going a step further, I seek to expand understanding of what they mean for social life. In the next section, I briefly introduce some avenues through which the connection between representations of lay knowledge and behaviour has previously been contemplated, and which are also relevant for the aims of this study.

2.3.1 LAY KNOWLEDGE AND POLICY

First, lay knowledge has a significant place in policy-making. This is most simply because it is the representation – how an issue is defined, in which context, and by whom – through which social concerns are addressed. Responses

and solutions are relative to how the questions are understood in the first place (Bacchi, 2009). A study on drug policy documents in Australia showed shifts in drug policy orientation that were driven by how the drug use issue was constructed and represented in the policy documents. When the problems were viewed in terms of drug *use*, policy measures were designed for the individuals and groups who were using drugs. When the problematization concerned drug-related *harm*, on the other hand, the policy measures were targeted at structures beyond the individual. (Lancaster & Ritter, 2014.)

Representations are also connected to political orientation and to the support of specific policies. Support for right-wing populism is, for example, grounded in specific representations of the nation (Staerklé & Green, 2018). So is the role of the government: when people were, based on their own feelings of material vulnerability, made aware of social inequalities, they supported redistributive government intervention, whereas when they perceived the social order not as unequal but disorderly, they supported a conformist society and disciplinary government intervention (Staerklé, 2013; Staerklé et al., 2007). Public opinion not only reflects attitudes but is also significant in informing political practices; although its effect on policy is not straightforward, public opinion certainly sets important parameters for it (Manza & Cook, 2002).

In regard to drug policy, lay views and opinions on it have been studied, for example, in relation to drug testing at work (e.g. Fendrich & Kim, 2002), in sports (e.g. Dunn et al., 2010), at school (e.g. Garland et al., 2012) or to initiate new harm reduction measures, such as consumption rooms (e.g. Hayle, 2015; Jauffret-Roustide & Cailbault, 2018; Small et al., 2006). Studies on consumption rooms have suggested, for example, that how the public felt about this issue, the ‘public mood’, affected policy change when it was aligned with the detection of the drug problem and an open policy window (Hayle, 2015). Support for initiating consumption rooms has also been attributed to the relevance of multiple actors – including residents of an area and people who use illicit drugs (Jauffret-Roustide & Cailbault, 2018) – and a wider cultural change among the people of a society (Small et al., 2006).

2.3.2 LAY KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY

While shared meanings are relevant in large-scale policy-making, they are naturally also significant in intra- and inter-individual processes, such as identity construction. Lay knowledge is used in making sense of and categorizing others and in defining the self in relation to them. The idea of identities as positional and dynamic constructions that are built-in-interaction traces back to symbolic interactionist approaches, such as the ones elaborated by Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934). The social context and its structures are inherently linked to people through particular social positions (Stryker, 1980). From the outside, people who use illicit drugs are often categorized as belonging to neg-

actively regarded groups. Both perceived and internalized stigmas can have adverse consequences for identity construction and mental and physical well-being (Ahern et al., 2007; Birtel et al., 2017).

Stigmatization leads to the need to manage identity threat (Breakwell, 1986; Goffman, 1963; Joffe, 1995). People who use illicit drugs often aspire to construct identities that allow them to positively stand out from preconceptions related to stereotypical 'drug use/users' (e.g. Tupper, 2012), such as viewing drug use as a *bad habit*. An analysis of *socially integrated drug users* in Sweden found just that: interviewees aimed to maintain a positive self-image and identity through describing what they were not. They emphasized their own good qualities in comparison to others whom they called 'drug abusers' (Rødner, 2005). To avoid being stigmatized for their recreational drug use, young people in another study negotiated an identity of a *responsible drug user*, which was constructed around the dimensions of being old enough and having knowledge about drugs, their quality, drug practice and use context (Ravn, 2012). In several studies on recovery from drug use (Beckwith et al., 2019; Kay & Monaghan, 2019; McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000; Virokannas, 2004), the construction of a non-user identity has been found to be key in the process of giving up substance use.

Within a social representations approach that is the guiding framework of this dissertation, identities are seen as constructed in relation to social representations; this has been explored in such contexts as people living in a stigmatized residential area (Howarth, 2002), refugees (Joffe, 2007) and immigrants (Andreouli, 2010; Deaux & Wiley, 2007). In a similar way as the participants in the previously mentioned studies on illicit drug use, Howarth (2002) found in her study that adolescents living in a stigmatized residential area drew strongly on their social representations of the area and constructed positive identities though elaborating and rejecting them. In this dissertation, a similar framework will be applied to the use of illicit drugs, and *positioning* will be suggested as a significant process to understand how identities are constructed and maintained in relation to social representations. I next move on to describing the theoretical framework in more detail.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore lay knowledge related to illicit drug use, I use a social representations approach as my main theoretical framework. This approach allows the researcher to go beyond specifically defined and operationalized concepts, such as attitudes, and to more comprehensively describe social knowledge and patterns of social life. I aim to offer one description of the shared knowledge of illicit drug use that is present in our everyday language. The opinions, images and attitudes that people have towards the socially relevant issue of illicit drug use all contribute to how it is understood, talked about and reflected in policy, namely, its social representation. In this chapter, I first introduce the social representations approach and then discuss the critical potential of the chosen framework for social change.

3.1 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS APPROACH

A social representations *approach* (SRA) is naturally grounded in social representations theory (Moscovici 1961/2008), but its ideas can be flexibly integrated with other theories and approaches (Wagner, 1996; 2015). Applying the tenets of social representations theory together with other approaches makes it most helpful in explaining social inequalities and exclusion (Phoenix et al., 2017) and allows it to reach the complex *reality* of the research topic better than faithfulness to rigid categories or paradigms (Batel & Castro, 2018; Elcheroth et al., 2011). For this reason, I combine social representations theory together with the social identity approach (Tajfel et al., 1979) and the concept of positioning (e.g. Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Andreouli, 2010; Duveen, 2001). As a corollary from policy studies, I also introduce the ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ approach (Bacchi, 2009; 2018). All of these work together to emphasize the functionality and consequentiality of social representations.

3.1.1 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

Social representations theory (SRT) is a theory of social knowledge that holds it to be situated and specific to a certain context and time (Moscovici, 1961/2008; Wagner, 2007). Having recently celebrated 60 years since it was first introduced by Serge Moscovici in 1961, the theory has been much discussed over the years, with core debates circling around epistemological and conceptual ambiguities (e.g. Potter & Edwards, 1999; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). The theory has developed and been used under the labels of structural (Abric, 2001), dialogical (Marková, 2003) or critical (Howarth, 2006a; Phoenix et al., 2017) SRT. My understanding of the theory is best described through

a dialogical and critical approach that pertains to a constructionist epistemology (see also, e.g., Batel & Castro, 2018; Sakki & Hakoköngäs, 2022; Negura & Plante, 2021; Wagner, 1996).

I explain SRT through a constructionist epistemology because its basic processes imply that the social constitutes the psychological (Batel & Castro, 2018; Gibson, 2015): shared knowledge is produced, contested and transformed within different groups of people in interaction (Howarth, 2006a). Social representations are systems of knowledge that become parts of social worlds and enable communication between people (Wagner, 2020). From a specifically dialogical – and critical – viewpoint, social representations are defined as knowledge-making practices (Batel et al., 2016), as processes and as action (Howarth, 2006a; Batel & Castro, 2019; Wagner, 2015), rather than stable collections of ideas that affect our behaviour in predetermined ways. They are dynamic structures, which have power in changing the social order (Howarth, 2006a).

In early depictions of the theory, Moscovici (1984) already visualized dialogical knowledge and meanings as being generated in the communicative relations of the self, other and object; social representations exist exclusively in relational encounters (Marková, 2003; 2017; Howarth, 2006a; Batel & Castro, 2018). The components of an ego-alter-object triad communicate in simultaneous relations, causing tension and, further, social stability and change (Marková, 2003, p. 168). The triangle has later been developed into a model accommodating the context of time, taking into account futures-to-be (the *Toblerone model*; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) and the context of intergroup relations, taking into account the power dynamics between different groups (the *wind rose model*; Bauer & Gaskell, 2008). These later presentations accentuate that social representations (and social groups) are dynamic and change over time. They are functional and ‘building blocks for discourse’ (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020).

The relational encounters through which social representations come into being occur in the developmental processes of sociogenesis, microgenesis and ontogenesis (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). These processes can be viewed as the settings in which social representations are constructed and transformed. *Sociogenesis* refers to the generation of new social representations and affects the realm of positions available in the social world (Psaltis, 2015). *Microgenesis* is the process of constructing and evoking social representations in interaction. Lastly, *ontogenesis* refers to how social representations become psychologically active for individuals as they re-construct them and their identities (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). Social representations are generated in these settings through the processes of objectification and anchoring. Through objectification, socially represented knowledge takes a specific form, making it intelligible as, for example, an object, image or metaphor (Wagner et al., 1999). Anchoring involves giving social objects a name, integrating them into existing categories and social relations as instruments to use when communicating with others (Moscovici, 1961/2008). As concepts and objects become parts of

a social reality, they are *naturalized* (Moscovici, 1961/2008; Hakökongäs & Sakki, 2016). This can be seen as a significant third process in the formation of social representations (Hakökongäs & Sakki, 2016), during which objects become ordinary parts of everyday language (Philogène, 1999).

To grasp and conceptualize the structure of social representations, the theory sustains that knowledge is dialogically constructed through dualist principles and antinomies. This is a tendency of human thinking in general, and within SRT these antinomies are called *themata*. (Moscovici, 2000; Staerklé et al., 2011; Marková, 2003, p. 184.) Oppositions such as us/them or freedom/oppression lie at the heart of social representations as deep-structures and prototypes of common-sense knowledge (Marková, 2017). They are implicit and only become *themata* when they are problematized within specific social and political conditions (Marková, 2003, p. 184). Everyday knowledge is fragmented and incoherent, and people rarely approach socially relevant topics through just one way of thinking; instead, they have representations that carry different or contradictory meanings (Wagner, 2007). This diversity of knowledge within SRT is termed *cognitive polyphasia* and refers to individuals simultaneously using different forms of thought to make sense of their social surroundings. Employing diverse and even opposite ways of thinking is, according to Moscovici (2000, p. 242), ‘the rule, not the exception’. Even though the reference to cognition could hint towards individual thought-processing, *cognitive polyphasia* rests on the notion that no one thinks alone and that thinking is always shared with others in communication (Provencher, 2011). To stress this point, Wagner (2007) has also suggested the concept of *discursive polyphasia*.

My overall theoretical line is to approach illicit drug use from several viewpoints in a search for a *pattern of correlations* (Wagner, 2015), a structure across actors and situations that constitutes the shared knowledge we have of this societally relevant issue. Social representations are not easily grasped through clearly marked entities, which is why gathering and analysing research evidence from the media, lay people and people who use illicit drugs can help us understand what may otherwise be seen as random and individual series of events and actions.

3.1.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH

In addition to SRT, I utilize ideas and tenets of the social identity approach (SIA) (Tajfel et al., 1979) in my interpretative framework. A similar integrative approach combining the two grand theories of European social psychology has been taken by multiple other scholars, and the benefits of combining the two paradigms have been described as mutually rewarding (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013; Breakwell, 1993; Elcheroth et al., 2011; Howarth, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2017). The SIA distinguishes between a personal and social identity, which are seen as two ends of a continuum or two different levels of self-categorization. Within this dichotomy, personal identity refers to self-categories that define

the individual as a unique person in terms of their individual differences from other persons, whereas social identity refers to social categorizations that define the individual in terms of their shared similarities with members of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories. (Turner et al., 1987.) Later developments have, however, pointed to the disadvantages of constructing personal and social identity entirely independently, as they are constrained and informed by each other in important ways (e.g. Deaux, 1993; Postmes et al., 2006).

SRT and the SIA support each other in their respective foci on different aspects of meaning-making and identity construction. According to Howarth (2007), social representations and (social) identities should be seen as two sides of a coin. Identity construction takes place within the representational structures of the social world, always being context-specific in relation to social, cultural and political surroundings. Looking at this from the other direction, a person also reveals their social representations when constructing identities. Identities can help us understand which social representations people orient to and why they accept or reject them (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Phoenix et al., 2017), and they allow taking social representations from collectively shared understandings to a more individual level, to what a person *does* with the representation (Elcheroth et al., 2011). People who use illicit drugs are viewed in light of shared and salient understandings, and they also define themselves in relation to these social representations. Salient social representations are used as resources within which individuals position themselves and construct their identities (Andreouli, 2010; Duveen & Lloyd, 1986; 1990).

Social representations theory complements the social identity approach by giving emphasis to context (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013) and by helping to explain the contents of identity and why individuals categorize themselves in a particular way (Duveen, 2001, p. 268). The social identity approach, on the other hand, complements SRT by providing an explanation for the reasons why certain social representations are adopted over others (Breakwell, 1993), and how people use them to justify different positions when social identities are debated and transformed (Liu, 2004). By looking at both the contents and process of social identities, we can see them to include both self-knowledge and the process of positioning, which is a core concept in the chosen framework and will be explored next.

3.1.3 POSITIONING

To link the two constructs of social representations and identity, I utilize the idea of positioning that originates from positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and has been applied to a social representations framework by scholars such as Andreouli (2010), Clémence (2001), Deaux and Wiley (2007), Duveen (2001), Howarth (2007) and Martikainen and Sakki (2021). In this context, positioning means relating oneself to social representations; it

is the act of taking a role within the representational fields of social representations that are salient in a society (Duveen, 2001). Positioning is an active process of *doing identity* (Howarth, 2007) in context. Through positioning, a person learns social categories, chooses between the multiple identities offered by social representations, and identifies with some groups over others (Deaux & Wiley, 2007; Duveen, 1993; 2001).

For this reason, I define positioning as a bridging process between the two constructs of social representations and identities, and having a twofold meaning: it allows people to accept or reject certain positions and it serves as a resource for identity strategies in coping with an identity threat (Breakwell, 1986). The first meaning encompasses the idea of identity *work* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Howard, 2000), as identities are actively constructed in talk and in interaction (Howard, 2000) within salient representational fields; positioning can be deliberate and strategic (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Identities are imposed by social representations (Howarth, 2002), but through positioning, individuals can reject them and, in other terms, *talk back* to stigmatized identities (Juhila, 2004). Duveen (2001, p. 193) defines rejecting identities as resistance, which is the point at which an individual ‘refuses to accept an attempt at influence’ and does not endorse what is proposed through social representations. Resisting identities emphasizes agency and offers new possibilities for identity in pointing to other ways of being seen (Joffe, 1995; Howarth, 2007). This leads to the second important function of positioning as a resource for identity (coping) strategies to maintain positive identities. Being grounded in the SIA and later in identity process theory, Breakwell (1986; 2010) suggests that when faced with negative representations of one’s own group, people engage in various coping strategies at the intrapsychic, interpersonal and intergroup levels, which allows them to move to less threatening social positions.

The process of positioning as situational identity construction requires that people have an idea of alternative social representations and their social distribution (Raudsepp, 2005). Through metaknowledge or *metarepresentations*, they have an idea of what other people think of them (Elcherth et al., 2011; Sakki & Hakoköngäs, 2022). Positioning allows the articulation of variation between intergroup and inter-individual beliefs and knowledge (Clémence, 2001).

3.1.4 ‘WHAT’S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE?’ APPROACH

To emphasize the functionality of social representations and to extend the social representations approach to a more hands-on policy analysis, I introduce the ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ approach (WPR-approach), which offers an example of the significance of representations in governance and public policy (Bacchi, 2009; 2018). Although the approach does not have its origins in social representations theory, it encompasses the idea of representation as core to all social concerns. Rather than trying to fix taken-for-granted

‘social problems’, the approach aims to critically look into how social issues are problematized, that is, put forward and framed as ‘problems’ (Bacchi, 2009, xii). These problematizations are reflected in responses designed to address specific social issues. As Bacchi (2009; 2018) reminds, the WPR-approach does not imply that problematizing is in any way manipulative: it is a way of thinking about and doing policy, looking into the specific representations on which knowledge practices build on.

The WPR-approach examines problem representations through six analytical questions, which delve into different aspects and functions. First, it asks: What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy? This question sets the basis for the analysis by aiming to identify the propositions of common sense attributed with a specific problem representation. The second question – What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’? – calls to interrogate the background knowledge and conceptual premises that may be thought of as self-evident. Thirdly, analysis focuses on how and why problem representations have developed in specific ways by asking: How does this problem come about? The fourth question moves onto critically scrutinizing problematizations: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? This demand is based on the premise that problematizations simplify complex issues and always leave out some ways of thinking, which is why it is essential to look at the silences in representations. The fifth question is especially central for the dissertation study at hand: What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’? This question evolves from the assumption that problem representations create difficulties for some social groups while perhaps benefitting others. The final question calls for identifying practices and processes which allow some representations to dominate: How has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? (Bacchi, 2009; 2018.)

Precisely as sought after by a critical understanding of social representations, the WPR-approach also emphasizes the centrality of how issues are problematized and represented, because these ways have implications for action. The approach categorizes effects of representations under discursive, lived and subjectification effects (Bacchi, 2009; 2018), which I will return to later in this summary.

3.2 A CRITICAL THEORY: CONSEQUENCES OF REPRESENTATIONAL ACTION

A main articulation of why the theoretical influences of social representations theory, the social identity approach, positioning and the WPR-approach work together to provide a descriptive framework of lay knowledge related to illicit drug use is in the supposition of performativity and functionality – of action, representation and discourse. In this section, I focus on a central issue in re-

gard to the theoretical claims I seek to advance in this thesis: social representations are action and representational action has consequences. These arguments highlight the usability of a social representations approach as a critical social psychological theory focusing on social change.

3.2.1 ACTION

Emphasis on action builds on criticisms of social representations theory as overly descriptive and general, as being a theory that does not offer tools to understand resistance and social change because of its lack of focus on interactive situations (Potter & Edwards, 1999). Similarly, Voelklein and Howarth (2005, p. 447) argue that the primary focus of SRT has been ‘on the content and structure of a social representation as opposed to its function and broader societal implications’. These criticisms have since been addressed by several scholars, giving action centre stage in research that focuses not only on what social representations are or what they do in social and political relations but also on how we should be looking at the act of representing rather than representations themselves (Gibson, 2015; Wagner, 2015; Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020).

A social representations approach offers tools to analyse the established patterns of social relations as well as the possibilities for challenging them and to understand social change (Batel et al., 2016; Elcheroth et al., 2011; Howarth et al., 2014). Buhagiar and Sammut (2020) conceptualize these two aims as object-oriented and action-oriented research: object-oriented research analyses the *social representations* of a socially relevant issue, whereas action-oriented research explores the *social re-presentation* for phenomena. The three sub-studies of this thesis exemplify object-oriented research by describing the basic process of sociogenesis and offering a diachronic perspective on the genealogy of illicit drug use as well as action-oriented research, which focuses on social representations as a *political project* (Howarth, 2006b; Howarth et al., 2014). Studying if and why illicit drug use is stigmatized and people who use illicit drugs are marginalized in society gives us valuable information of the state of affairs, but it should also inevitably lead to the question of whether this situation is acceptable and, if not, what could be done in order for it to change.

For this reason, I titled this main chapter as *the consequences of representational action*, and not as *consequences of social representations*, for example, which would instead carry the implication that social representations are fixed at a certain point in time and have impact as such entities. On the contrary, representations come into being in beliefs, discourse and behaviour, and there is no point when one could discover a social representation as *finished* or describe it through a fixed set of attributes and meanings (as emphasized, for example, by the Toblerone model; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). My aim in this thesis is to find a pattern that constitutes an understanding of social representations at a certain time and to venture possible effects that a set of meanings

(or any another one) could have in the future. In the sub-studies, I have, however, used the wording *effects/implications of social representations* for clarity, although causation is not assumed. Social representations and behaviour are not two separate constructs because representation and the effects of representational action exist within the same relational process (e.g. Wagner, 2015).

3.2.2 POWER

Very relevant to a critical take on social representations, as well as the social representations approach overall, is the question of power (Negura et al., 2020). The SRA aims to explore discursive, institutional, instrumental and material power (Batel & Adams, 2016) and the politics that influence the construction of social representations (Kessi & Howarth, 2014; Howarth, 2006b). People or groups with more material or symbolic power have the resources to define what is true and assert their versions of reality, that is, their social representations (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Howarth, 2001; Sakki et al., 2017). The extent to which certain social representations are believed to be true, shared or contested has been conceptualized through the ideas of hegemonic, emancipated and polemical social representations (Moscovici, 1988), dominant and resistant social representations (Joffe, 1995) or hegemonic and alternative representations (Glăveanu, 2009). From a dialogical point of view, however, a social representation can include all of these forms of sharing and competing value systems simultaneously in a complementary rather than excluding manner. Liu (2004) argues that this is symptomatic of a modern society, where hegemonic representations are engendered through participating in social, economic, political and ideological change and conflicts.

Power and the consequences of representational action are reflected, for example, in institutions (Elcheroth et al., 2011), identity (Deaux & Wiley, 2007) and policy (Bacchi, 2009; 2018). Social change has been at the core of the SRA from the early descriptions of Moscovici (1961/2008; 2000). Social change – and social stability – is a communicative process of social influence between minorities and majorities; change can occur when minority groups confront the majority and propose alternative viewpoints (Duveen, 2001; Joffe, 1995). Majorities, however, strive to maintain their dominant position by delegitimizing these views and resisting the minority influence; when successful, representations can become normalized, and existing social arrangements maintained (Staerklé et al., 2011). Internalization of these social representations by the minority groups strengthens the status quo. Researchers argue that a critical analysis of social representations needs to study the ideological power of representations that maintain systems of inequality (Negura & Plante, 2021). In the discussion of this thesis, the elements of social representations related to illicit drug use will be described by bringing out their under-

lying themata (Marková, 2003; 2017) and the consequences of representational action will be analysed by using the classification of effects suggested by the WPR-approach (Bacchi, 2009; 2018).

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The social representations approach that was introduced in the previous chapter provides the framework in which to formulate and study the research questions of this dissertation. A general aim is to explore lay knowledge related to illicit drug use and to add to the understanding of representation as a process that has significance for action. I view illicit drug use from three different angles and social actors: the media, the general population and people who use illicit drugs. First, I aim to analyse how social representations come into being and are constructed and maintained in the media and in the general population. Second, I aim to show the significance of these processes for how people view policy issues and how individuals who use illicit drugs make sense of themselves and construct their identities. To study shared knowledge and its relevance, I ask the following questions:

- 1) How is illicit drug use socially represented:
 - a) in the media?
 - b) in the general population?

- 2) What are the consequences of representational action:
 - a) in relation to views on drug policy?
 - b) in relation to identity construction among people who use hard drugs?

These questions are explored in three sub-studies, whose findings are discussed in relation to the general aims of this dissertation. Sub-study I focuses on the genealogy of social representations, namely, how they are formed through the media. Sub-study II analyses representational profiles related to the risks associated with illicit drug use in the general population, and it also provides results to analyse the association of these social representations with views on drug policy. Sub-study III focuses on identity construction on the interpersonal level of people who use hard drugs.

This dissertation contributes to the present literature in two ways. For the literature on illicit drug use, it applies the viewpoint of lay understandings, emphasizing the necessity to explore how social representations are generated and maintained in everyday communication. Unlike many previous studies, it focuses on the inevitable effects of representational action, which have psychological and practical meaning. For dialogical and critical social representational research, the dissertation expands on the conceptualization of a social representations approach as a flexible framework to capture the complexity of enduring social concerns through utilizing various theoretical influences and methodologies.

5 DATA AND METHODS

With a social representations approach, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore the aims of this study. Using different data and methods acknowledges the complexity of social representations as dynamic units (Wagner, 2015) and addresses the demands of studying them by integrating different perspectives, such as statistical analyses and qualitative measures (Liu & Sibley, 2013; Walsh & Foster, 2022). The research design is a form of methodological triangulation, which emphasizes the situational construction of social representations on a societal as well as an individual level, and allows exploration of different spheres of knowledge among different social actors (as suggested by Caillaud et al., 2019; Walsh & Foster, 2022). The study design for this thesis is illustrated in Table 1 below, and the data and methods are described in more detail in this chapter.

Table 1. A summary of the three sub-studies.

	Sub-study I	Sub-study II	Sub-study III
Social actor	Media	General population	People who use hard drugs
Data	Newspaper articles N=405	Population-based drug survey N=3,229	Interviews with hard drug users N=48
Research questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What kinds of social representations are created and maintained in newspaper articles? 2. How have the social representations changed from the year 1990 to the year 2016? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can people be classified based on their views on the riskiness of illicit drug use? 2. How are representational profiles of risk related to opinions on drug policy? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do people who use hard drugs position themselves in relation to salient social representations?
Method	Thematic analysis inductive reasoning	Latent class analysis, multinomial regression analysis	Qualitative inquiry abductive reasoning

5.1 DATA

5.1.1 NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

To study social representations of polydrug use in the media in Sub-study I, I collected newspaper articles as research data. The data set consists of articles mentioning polydrug use from the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, which has the largest circulation of newspapers 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 & Ylä-Anttila, 2014). The electronic archive includes all articles published in the newspaper from the year 1990 onwards, which was also the starting point for the analysis 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).

I conducted a search in the archive to find all articles mentioning ‘polydrug use’ or ‘polydrug user’ during the study period from 1990 until 2016 (as the study started in 2017). 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 in the search. The subject of the articles was not significant for the 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 search resulted in a total of 405 articles from different sections of the newspaper, including editorials and opinion pieces.

5.1.2 POPULATION-BASED SURVEY

For Sub-study II, we used data from the Finnish population-based Drug Survey administered by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The survey has been collected every four years since 1992 and gathers information on illicit drug use and on the views and attitudes of Finnish people about illicit drug use more generally. The questionnaire uses a representative random sample of Finnish people, excluding people living in the Åland islands, people without a permanent address and institutionalized members of the population. The questionnaire has been available online since 2010.

The data used for Sub-study II was collected in 2018 by Statistics Finland and is available for research purposes, subject to license. The survey sample (N=7000) of Finnish people aged 15 to 69 was drawn from the Finnish Population Information System. Younger age groups (15–39) were oversampled to increase analytical power in the age group that uses drugs most actively. Respondents were first approached through a letter in which they were introduced to the questionnaire and asked to fill it out online. Several reminders and hard copies of the questionnaire were sent to people, resulting to 3,229 respondents with a response rate of 46 percent. A nonresponse analysis was

also carried out, which showed that the profile of illicit drug use of people who had not answered the questionnaire matched those who had. In order to restore the population representation in terms of age, gender, education and the level of urbanization, weighting coefficients were calculated by Statistics Finland and used in all analyses. To analyse the research questions for the sub-study, we used questions on the risk associated with illicit drug use, opinions on different drug policy measures and some background variables, which will be explained in the methods section. Many of the questions in the questionnaire have been adopted and applied for the Drug Survey from the European Model Questionnaire (EMCDDA, 2002).

5.1.3 INTERVIEWS

In Sub-study III, two sets of interviews were used as data. These interviews were initially collected for two different research projects but provided fruitful data on how two different groups of people who used hard drugs constructed their social identities and positioned themselves in relation to social representations in interview settings.

The first set of interviews was collected for a project on the *old school*, or those people who had started their illicit drug use when drugs were first defined as a societal problem in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s (Kainulainen et al., 2017). Interviewees were recruited on the basis of sharing this generational experience and at the time of the interviews in 2009–2010 had a long history of using illicit substances. The interviewees were found through a needle exchange facility and by using the snowball technique. They were interviewed by a familiar harm reduction worker in Helsinki. For the third sub-study, out of these interviews we chose to include the ones with people who still continued to use illicit drugs (some had stopped using over the years), or were in drug substitution treatment at the time of the interview. This totalled altogether 22 interviews (18 men, 4 women), who on average were 55 years of age.

The second set of interviews was initially collected for a study on polydrug use at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and comprised of interviews with people who had experiences with using multiple substances, including illicit drugs. The interviewees were recruited via user associations, internet websites, day centres, needle exchange centres and a snowball technique. The interviews were conducted in the aforementioned centres, shopping malls and cafes in five different cities in Finland during 2013–2014. For the third sub-study of this thesis, we chose to include the interviews with people who had experiences with iv-drug use or who were in substitution treatment, leaving 26 interviewees (17 men, 9 women) whose average age was 36 years old. Due to their younger age, this group of people was named the *contemporary* group for the analysis.

We thus narrowed the two interview data sets to include people who only used hard drugs, which meant amphetamines or opioids for the old school group and iv-use for the contemporary group or to people in either group who

were in substitution treatment. The justification for using interviews with people in substitution treatment was in their previous experiences with hard drug use. The data for the third sub-study was altogether 48 interviews.

5.2 METHODS

5.2.1 THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

The qualitative methods used in this research were thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; *Doing reflexive TA*) and qualitative inquiry through abductive reasoning (e.g. Brinkman, 2012; 2014). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the newspaper articles in Sub-study I as well as to thematize interview accounts in Sub-study III. It provided a qualitative method that allowed to identify, analyse and report patterns in the data. The aim of thematic analysis is to find a common way a topic is talked or written about across a data set, allowing the researcher to study shared meanings in a data-driven way. These shared meanings, or discourses, are conceptualized as themes, as patterned responses that capture something important in the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Because we used the SRA as our interpretative framework, we also conceptualized these patterns of meanings as social representations.

Braun and Clarke (2012) introduce six interconnected phases of thematic analysis, which were applied in the analyses. First, the articles and interview accounts were thoroughly read to get familiar with the data. Second, an inductive approach was used to form initial codes for the data. These were coded with Atlas.ti. The subsequent three phases concerned generating, developing and refining and naming recurrent themes in the data. In the first sub-study, the themes were compared with each other to see if they reoccurred during the entire study period from 1990 to 2016 or only at certain points in time. Finally, the last phase included writing up the results and the research report.

In addition to discovering themes through thematic analysis in Sub-study III, we employed qualitative inquiry through abductive reasoning to further analyse interview accounts. According to Brinkmann (2012), this kind of qualitative inquiry approaches human beings as acting agents who choose to give accounts of what they do in order to justify their actions, and it helps the researcher understand how the interviewees experience and make sense of their social worlds. In this particular study, we used the results from the thematic analysis to go back to the interview accounts and analyse how themes were used by interview participants to construct their identities in talk. More specifically, we sought to find how the themes were used as justifications for positioning in relation to the social representations salient in the interview situations.

5.2.2 LATENT CLASS ANALYSIS

Statistical analyses were used in the second sub-study as a way of operationalizing the extent of social representations of illicit drug use shared across society (as suggested also by Liu & Sibley, 2013). First, we used latent class analysis (LCA), which is a non-parametric finite mixture model that allows identifying different categories of people with distinct representational profiles underlying the variation in item responses (Porcu & Giambona, 2017). Unlike in cluster analysis, for example, the researcher using LCA does not need to assume groups a priori, as they only emerge from the data determined by a latent variable (Liu & Sibley, 2013). We had the opportunity to conduct inductive analysis on a representative sample of respondents to find out how they organically grouped together in responses to questions on illicit drug use.

We chose to look for representational profiles based on the perceived risk related to illicit drug use by using the questions: ‘How high is the (health or other) risk of doing the following?’: a) trying cannabis once or twice, b) using cannabis regularly, c) trying ecstasy once or twice, d) using ecstasy regularly, e) trying amphetamines once or twice, f) using amphetamines regularly, g) trying heroin once or twice and h) using heroin regularly (1 = no risk, 2 = low risk, 3 = moderate risk, 4 = high risk). We included the questions on cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamines and heroin because they are the most widely used and/or recognized illicit drugs in Finland (Karjalainen et al., 2020). The variables were recoded as dichotomous (1 = no or low risk, 2 = moderate or high risk). Latent Gold 5.0 software (Vermunt & Magidson, 2013) was used to conduct a latent class analysis and produce models with varying amounts of classes.

The most appropriate model in LCA is chosen based on the parsimony and interpretability of the results (Porcu & Giambona, 2017). The analysis yields several fit indices to help determine the model with the most appropriate amount of classes: the most commonly used indices are information criteria, such as the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), sample-size adjusted Bayesian information criterion (SABIC), consistent Akaike information criterion (CAIC) (Nylund et al., 2007; Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018) and Approximate Weight of Evidence (AWE) (Masyn, 2013; Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018). Lower values indicate better model fit. Out of these information criteria, the BIC has been found to outperform the others in data sets of different sizes (Nylund et al., 2007). We analysed models ranging from one to five latent classes and chose a four-class model, which had the lowest BIC value and in which the groups could reasonably be interpreted. These four representational profiles will be described in the results.

5.2.3 MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION

In a subsequent phase of the second sub-study, multivariable multinomial regression analyses were used to analyse associations between the representational profiles found through LCA and views on drug policy. We explored opinions towards both restrictive control and towards harm reduction measures.

Multinomial logistic regression was chosen as the method of analysis because the dependent variables regarding views on drug policy were nominal on more than two levels. SPSS 25 was used to analyse the data.

First, views on control measures were considered through questions on punishment and drug testing at work. Those who supported punishment by fines, prison or otherwise were compared with those who did not support punishment. The questions used as the measure was: ‘Should a person be punished for illicit drug use?’ (1 = should not be punished, 2 = yes, with a fine, 3 = yes, with a prison sentence, 4 = yes, in another way). Drug testing at work as the other control measure was explored through the question: ‘What is your opinion on drug testing at work?’ (1 = I find it completely acceptable, 2 = I find it somewhat acceptable, 3 = I do not accept it, 4 = I absolutely object to it, 5 = I cannot say). The responses were recoded into three categories (1 = accept, 2 = do not accept or object, 3 = cannot say), and those who did not accept testing and those who could not say were compared with those who did accept testing.

For harm reduction measures, we analysed opinions on needle and syringe exchange services and on drug consumption rooms. These specific questions were chosen to represent an established harm reduction service (needle and syringe exchange) and a new harm reduction service currently under discussion (consumption rooms). We used the questions: ‘What is your opinion on the following measures or services: a) a needle and syringe exchange?, b) consumption rooms?’ (1 = I find it completely acceptable, 2 = I find it somewhat acceptable, 3 = I do not accept it, 4 = I absolutely object to it, 5 = I cannot say). The responses were recoded into three categories (1 = accept, 2 = do not accept or object, 3 = cannot say). In the regression models, those who did not accept these services and those who could not say were compared with those who accepted the services.

All regression models were adjusted for the background variables of gender (male, female), age (15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–69), level of education (primary, secondary, tertiary), residential area (urban, semi-urban, rural) and personal history of illicit drug use (whether the respondent had tried or used an illicit drug during their lifetime, yes/no). The results for these analyses were presented as odds ratios (OR) and their 95 percent confidence intervals (CI). Weighting coefficients were used in all the analyses.

5.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The issue of illicit drug use is moralized and raises several questions on research ethics. People who use illicit drugs can be considered a vulnerable group who need special protection from possible harmful effects of research (e.g. Anderson & DuBois, 2007; Lee, 1999). This view, however, has also been challenged by arguments stating that special protection can lead to *too much*

protection of people who actually have the full capacity to give informed consent and evaluate the implications of research participation (e.g. Bell & Salmon, 2012). Any research including human subjects needs to follow the general principles of voluntary participation, respect for the self-determination of the people involved and the avoidance of causing them any harm (TENK, 2019).

Ethical protocols have been carefully met when gathering the data used in this dissertation. The newspaper articles used in the first sub-study were openly available in the newspaper archives. In regard to the general population Drug Survey used in the second sub-study, the study protocol was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. Respondents were chosen by using a randomized sample and answered the survey anonymously. The data is shared only under a license and is kept within the network of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

The interviews used for the third sub-study were initially gathered for two separate research projects. In both projects, participation in the interviews was voluntary and participants were openly told about the aims of the interviews. All interviewees had the opportunity to remain anonymous by using a pseudonym and any personal information mentioned during the interviews was eliminated during transcription and/or data analysis. The quotations used in the publications have been selected and slightly edited in such a manner that any direct or indirect personal information cannot be identified. The 'old school' interviewees were paid 20 euros for their participation. Both sets of data are kept with the researchers included in the projects and are available by demand for further analysis.

In addition to the following ethical guidelines in collecting and handling data, it is important to reflect on the way that the results are reported. Because of the nature of the research topic, readers can have strong (negative) preconceptions on the issue. While I have tried to conduct analyses and discuss results in an evidence-based and neutral way, providing value-free accounts or being fully objective is impossible. I do not wish to reproduce a way of talking about illicit drug use that strengthens stigma that are already very prominent. For example, following the best practices of the Global Commission on Drug Policy (2017a) on how to talk and write about illicit drug use, I use the term 'people, who use illicit drugs' to emphasize that illicit use is only one defining characteristic of the people under study. One reason for studying this issue in the first place is to give a voice to people who might not have theirs heard, and to challenge – not reinforce – ways of speech that are taken for granted.

6 FINDINGS

In order to find patterns within the processes of social representation related to illicit drug use, analyses in different data sets and populations were conducted. In three sub-studies, representation and its consequences were explored in the context of the media, the general population and people who use illicit drugs themselves. I start off with exploring my first research aim of how illicit drug use is represented in the media and among the general population. The analysis of newspaper articles gives an example of the process of socio-genesis, that is, how social representations are formed and acquire certain meanings (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). Exploration among the general population provides a look at how lay people perceive the risk associated with illicit drug use. I then move on to my second research aim and explore the consequences that representation can have on views on drug policy and identity construction among people who use hard drugs. The analysis on identity construction shows the process of microgenesis as social representations are (re)produced and negotiated in interaction (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990).

6.1 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF POLYDRUG USE IN THE MEDIA

One of the main aims of a social representations approach is to explain how new and unfamiliar concepts become familiar by making their way from the reified universe into the consensual universe. In the first sub-study of this dissertation, we studied how social representations of polydrug use were constructed, transformed and maintained in newspaper articles over a period of 26 years (1990–2016). The study focused on polydrug use as a specific way of illicit drug use that could be operationalized and followed diachronically to explore how a ‘new’ way of illicit drug use made its way into everyday language and was maintained over time. The analysis focused on mass media, which plays an important role in the formation and communication of representations (Norton et al., 2021; Rouquette, 1996).

The analysis started with newspaper articles from the year 1990, which aligned with a period of increased drug use in Finland. It proved to fit well with the emergence of polydrug use in media reporting, as the concept was very little mentioned in newspaper articles at the beginning of the study period in 1990–1992. Both the terms ‘polydrug use’ and ‘polydrug user’ were mentioned 16 times in the first three-year period, whereas in all the subsequent three-year periods until 2016 there was an average of 50 mentions of one or the other term. These numbers indicate that the ‘polydrug use’ was not yet a familiar part of language at the beginning of the 1990s and only began to make its way into the vocabulary of both journalists and the public in the years to come.

Alongside the increase in frequency, the meanings assigned to the concepts of ‘polydrug use’ and ‘polydrug user’ changed over the study period. They gained new content and significance throughout the years, which highlights the ever-changing nature of social representations. In the results, we explained the changes through three social representations that were identified in the data, and which mainly differed from each other according to the substances that were included in the definition of polydrug use at different times. The changes were also depicted by analysing how the concepts were anchored and objectified over the years.

First, at the beginning of the study period, ‘polydrug use’ in the articles most often referred to the co-use of alcohol and medical drugs. Because the conceptualization of polydrug use was mixing alcohol with pharmaceuticals, it was often anchored to alcohol use, which is a familiar and permanent part of modern lives in Western societies. A ‘polydrug user’ at the beginning of the 1990s was objectified as a young person mixing alcohol and pharmaceuticals at parties, for example.

Second, closer to the turn of the new millennium, the definitions of polydrug use started to increasingly include illicit drugs, which shifted the phenomenon in a more serious direction. ‘This is like alcohol addiction but worse’ had been the message at first. Now, the message was ‘this is like illicit drug use but worse’. This time, anchoring polydrug use to illicit drug use made it a bigger social problem, rousing images of addiction and other social problems. Polydrug use was also often anchored to emotions (on emotional anchoring, see, e.g., Højjer, 2010), which portrayed it as a threat or danger: mixing different drugs was pharmacologically dangerous, and so were the people who were referred to as ‘polydrug users’. Polydrug use was also objectified in a different way as before. The prototypical ‘polydrug user’ was a person very likely addicted to substances who was older than the early objectifications of problematically behaving youth. ‘Polydrug users’ formed a group whose behaviour was often described as unpredictable; they were presented as people who could not quite control their own behaviour and caused insecurity in public spaces.

Third, social representations portrayed ‘polydrug use’ as a naturalized concept, and it was often used as a prototype or a metaphor. I interpret Figure 1 below as a demonstration of the dynamic nature of social representations and the process of naturalization. Until the end of 2004, the majority of articles that mentioned polydrug use gave an explanation of what was meant by the term, whether it was used to refer to the mixed use of alcohol and medical drugs or, alternatively, alcohol, medical drugs and illicit drugs. After this, the references to polydrug use as the mixed use of alcohol and medical drugs almost disappeared, and the proportion of ‘polydrug use’ that explicitly referred to the use of illicit drugs and alcohol and/or medical drugs decreased as well. What happened instead was that in the majority of articles, ‘polydrug use’ was used as a stand-alone concept, without explicitly defining what it meant. This illustrates that the concept had become a naturalized part of everyday lan-

guage and a concept that did not need to be explained. This was also demonstrated by the articles in which ‘polydrug user’ was mentioned in contexts that were not related to substance use, where it was used rather as a negative metaphor, such as saying that monotonously speaking childrens’ toys sound like ‘polydrug users’.

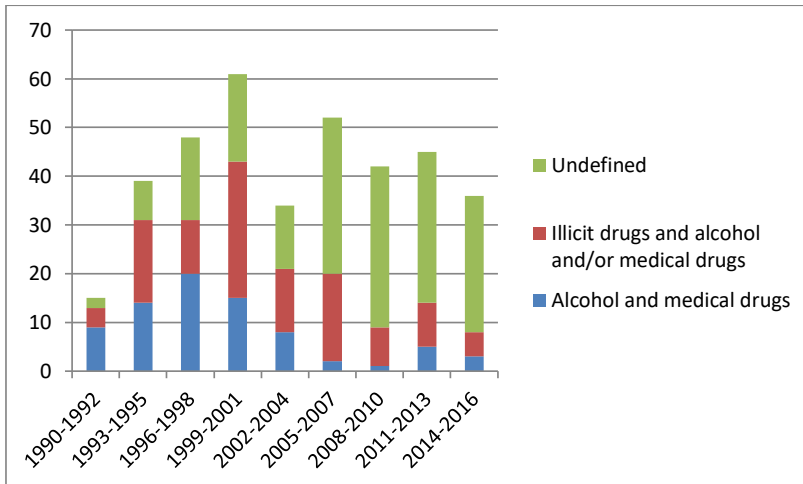


Figure 1. Naturalization of polydrug use in newspaper articles in 1990–2016.

This analysis on the sociogenesis of polydrug use provides one lens on how illicit drug use, specifically ‘polydrug use’, is portrayed in the media, and how sets of shared meanings are constructed in newspaper articles. Although the most prevalent way of co-using illicit drugs is mixing alcohol and cannabis (Karjalainen et al., 2020), the typical ‘polydrug user’ in the media in the 2010s was portrayed as an addicted person with a difficult substance use problem as well as other social problems.

6.2 SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF RISK RELATED TO ILLICIT DRUG USE IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

When they approach social problems, lay people can draw on social representations such as those introduced in the analysis of newspaper articles (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). Media messages shape the views of the general population and this relationship is dialogical, as those views also inform both the media and policies. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of Sub-study II related to the social representations that lay people share of the riskiness associated with illicit drug use.

A social representations approach assumes that different groups of people have different views and social representations of socially relevant issues (Joffe, 1995; Liu & Sibley, 2013). The second study showed that views on the

riskiness of illicit drug use are indeed heterogeneous. Respondents to the Drug Survey distinguished between substances and ways of use when asked about the riskiness related to illicit drug use. Through latent class analysis, we found four categorically distinct representational profiles: high-risk, cannabis OK, experimenting OK and low-risk. Figure 2 below shows the item-response probabilities for these profiles.

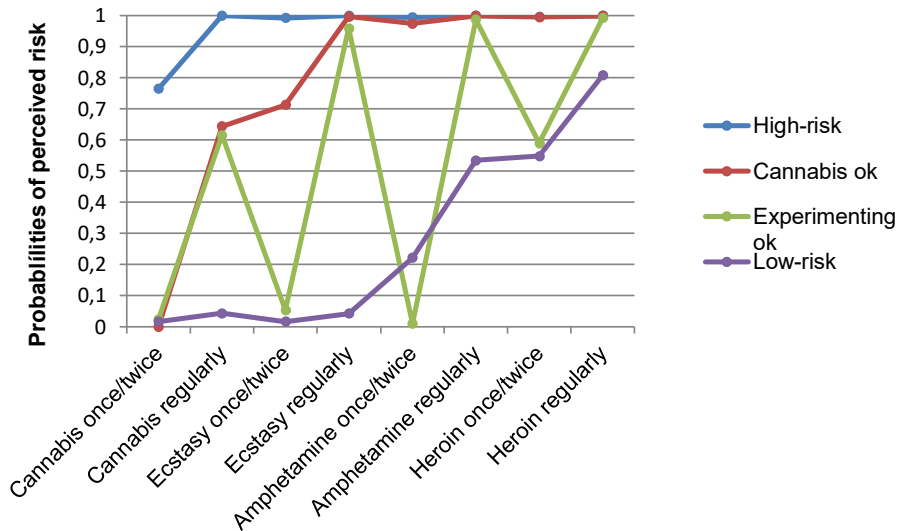


Figure 2. Item-response probabilities for four representational profiles.

First, people in the *high-risk* profile (approximately 70 percent of respondents) had a high probability of viewing all illicit drug use (cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamine and heroin) as a moderate or high risk. This view applied to all substances as well as to both trying the substances once or twice and using it regularly. Secondly, although respondents in the profile *cannabis OK* (15 percent of the respondents) were also likely to view most illicit drug use as risky, they saw cannabis as an exception. The probability of regarding trying cannabis once or twice as a moderate or high risk was near zero. The regular use of cannabis was also less likely to be viewed as a moderate or high risk than in the first profile. Thirdly, the profile *experimenting OK* comprised 10 percent of the respondents and followed a response pattern according to which trying an illicit drug once or twice was unlikely to be viewed as risky, but regular use of the drug was likely to be viewed as a moderate or high risk. Fourth, about two percent of the respondents belonged to the *low-risk* profile and had a low probability of viewing any illicit drug use as a moderate or high risk. This applied especially to the use of cannabis and ecstasy, as the probabilities of perceiving risk were higher with harder substances.

The latent class method used to determine the representational profiles exempted us from having to a priori assume characteristics which might be connected to people's views on illicit drug use, such as age, gender or residential area. Looking into the four inductively generated profiles, we can discover that the proportion of older age groups was higher in the representational profile of high risk while there were proportionally more young people in the other profiles. Females were predominant in the high risk profile whereas males were so in the other profiles. In the high risk profile, 15 percent of respondents had personal experiences with drug use in their lifetime, whereas in the other profiles, the proportion was over half of the respondents. These findings provided a quantitative look into how clusters of views can be conceptualized as representational profiles that are differently shared within people in society.

6.3 REPRESENTATIONAL PROFILES AND VIEWS ON DRUG POLICY

To shed light on my second research aim, I next explore findings related to possible consequences of representation for drug policy and identity construction. In a following phase of Sub-study II, the four representational profiles related to the riskiness of illicit drug use introduced above were used as independent variables in multinomial logistic regression analyses to study views on drug policy. Through this design, we were able to look at the associations of the representational profiles with views on concrete measures in drug policy: restrictive control (punishment and drug testing) and harm reduction measures (needle exchange and consumption rooms).

In regard to opinions on restrictive control, people in the high-risk and cannabis OK profiles were more likely than people in the low-risk profile to support all kind of punishments for illicit drug use. In particular, support for punishment by prison time divided the profiles from each other, as this measure was supported more in the high-risk profile (aOR 21.8) and among those in the cannabis OK profile (aOR 3.6), compared to those in the low-risk profile. Male respondents and people living in an urban area were less likely to support punishment for illicit drug use than females and people living in rural areas. Drug testing at work as a second restrictive control measure was more likely to be accepted by those in the high-risk and cannabis OK profiles, and people in the experimenting OK profile were more likely to be undecided on the issue than people in the low-risk profile. People who had personal experience with illicit drug use tended not to accept drug testing at work.

The acceptance of harm reduction measures varied. Needle and syringe exchanges were established in Finland in 1997, and as a long-term service the practice is rather well established, having found its place and support in society. There were no statistically significant differences in the acceptance of nee-

dle and syringe exchange between those in the high-risk, cannabis OK and experimenting OK profiles compared to those in the low-risk profile. However, the second harm-reduction measure – consumption rooms – is still under debate and in its infancy in Finland (Unlu et al., 2021) and those in the high-risk profile were less likely to accept their establishment. Male respondents were less likely to accept harm-reduction services than females, as were people with primary or secondary education when compared to people with higher education. Similarly, people who lived in rural areas were less likely to accept harm reduction measures than people living in urban areas. As well as with drug control measures, personal experiences with drug use were significant: people who did not have personal experiences with illicit drug use were less likely to accept harm reduction measures. The results on harm reduction resemble findings from previous research, which found consumption rooms, for example, more likely to be supported by people who did not think that illicit drug users should be treated as criminals but rather by means of social and health assistance (e.g. Cruz et al., 2007).

6.4 IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF PEOPLE WHO USE HARD DRUGS

In addition to being politically relevant, social representations are also significant for identity construction. The third sub-study provides an example and a theoretical account of positioning as a process of constructing social identities in interaction and within the representational fields of knowledge structures. The analysis was based on interview data of two groups of people who use hard drugs: the old school group, who had a long history of using amphetamines or opiates and the contemporary group, who had experiences with polydrug use. People in both of these groups are targets of stigmatization because the meanings associated with hard drug use and polydrug use are mostly negative (e.g. O’Gorman, 2016; Room, 2005; Tammi et al., 2011). In light of these views, we analysed how people who are the targets of stigmatized social representations handle the positions offered through them and construct their identities.

The social representations of ‘addict’, ‘junkie’ and ‘polydrug user’ were salient in the interview situations and the interviewees acknowledged the meanings attached to them. They used these social representations and the resources that were made available through them when positioning themselves. Identities were constructed through describing other people who used illicit drugs and through relating themselves to these *others*. We introduced two ways of positioning: first, *distancing from the worst* refers to rejecting the positions offered through negative social representations. Second, some partici-

pants positioned themselves as prototypes of social representations and accepted the positions offered through them. We called this *facing the inescapable*.

Starting with rejecting the positions, interviewees often distanced themselves from the prototypical ‘addict’, ‘junkie’ and ‘polydrug user’: they positioned themselves as the *other* in relation to these stigmatized social representations. The self was actively positioned as not belonging to these groups; justifications for this were anchored to self-control, morality and normality in their talk. These justifications make sense, as self-control is a core value in Western societies (e.g. Joffe, 2015) and the lack of it is often ascribed to derogated groups, especially people who use illicit drugs (e.g. Pennay & Moore, 2010). Emphasizing that they had control of their drug use and life more generally was a way of saying ‘I am not like your usual *addict*’. Similar distancing was done by drawing on morality: the old school and contemporary groups described other users as less moral, but rejected the assumption that it was a necessary consequence of illicit drug use. Finally, people who used hard drugs drew on notions of normality, expressing that they instead positioned themselves as ‘normal people’. However, they felt that they did not have access to this group, because the metarepresentations (what others think of a person using illicit drugs) strongly positioned them as ‘not normal’.

Stigmatizing social representations were not always rejected: some participants also accepted the positions and identities that were offered through them. We analysed this to be the result of life situations in which the person could not find reasons to justify why they were different from these positions and had to *face the inescapable*. Inescapability in this conceptualization does not mean that their life situations could never be changed, but rather refers to a feeling at a specific point in time of not being able to reject negative positions. When participants accepted the positions, they also referred to notions of self-control, although conversely describing drug use that was out of control and characterized by physical addiction. They also referred to morality through descriptions of their *criminal lifestyle*, for example, showing how social categories and positions are entangled with moral boundaries (Tileagă, 2007). In some cases, interviewees partially accepted positions as something they had once been, maintaining a positive identity in the present moment.

The process of positioning thus allowed participants to reject, accept and renegotiate taken-for-granted identities offered through social representations and provided a resource to utilize creative identity strategies (e.g. Breakwell, 1986; Tajfel et al., 1979; Mummendey et al., 1999). *Distancing from the worst* provided a resource for downward social comparisons with in-group others who were doing even more poorly, which has been shown in previous research to generate positive feelings and to contribute to one’s well-being (Taylor et al., 1990; Taylor et al., 1990). This was done in part through re-evaluating the contents of identities and refocusing attention from negative characteristics to specifically valued elements (Breakwell, 1986, 101). Identity strategies that participants used to *face the inescapable* can be described as

compartmentalization of identity dimensions, compromising identity changes or intrapersonal comparison with past identity structures (Breakwell, 1986, 94–100).

7 DISCUSSION

This research set out to explore how illicit drug use is socially represented and to analyse consequences of representational action. Looking back at the result of the gamble on drug policy in the Finnish Parliament 50 years ago, and in light of the framework and findings of this thesis, I argue that events, interactions and portrayals – such as the decision to criminalize drug use in 1972, media messages and public opinion – related to illicit drug use are part of a process of social representation. By finding patterns in these data, we can find ways to understand the socially shared knowledge held by different groups of people in society.

The findings of this study show that the patterns that contribute to the social representations of illicit drug use have common elements in different data and groups of people, but that the meanings attributed to them are also challenged and contested. It can thus be argued that social representations of illicit drug use are not homogenous or hegemonic, but include alternative voices and meanings. I start this discussion by focusing on the first research aim, how illicit drug use is socially represented, by exploring these shared and contested elements and by introducing illicit drug use as a normified and naturalized phenomenon.

I then move on to exploring the second research aim, consequences of representational action, by first highlighting the significance of studying lay knowledge in general. Secondly, I discuss the effects that specific ways of representing can have, which have been indicated by the findings of this study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this dissertation as well as some directions for future research.

7.1 STRUCTURES UNDERLYING SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THEMATA

Social representations are shared but not necessarily consensual (Deaux & Wiley, 2007), and this study shows that dominant social representations are indeed contested and challenged. In this discussion of the results, I first explore the hegemonic and alternative voices related to illicit drug use through the notion of themata (Marková, 2003; 2017). To grasp what social representations of illicit drug use are *made of* and to explore their underlying deep structure, I explore the meanings attributed to them through their dialogical base (Liu, 2004; Smith et al., 2015). Analysing these dyads will shed light on the themes underlying social representations and their sharedness and ten-

sions in relation to this issue. Themata are generative, as they give social representations structure and form (Moloney et al., 2019) as well as initiate emotional responses (Norton et al., 2021).

7.1.1 SELF AND OTHER

The dyad of self/other is argued to be a central thema that underlies the range of meanings people relate to threatening phenomena and diverse risk. The *self* gains positive meaning in relation to the negative *other*; through distinguishing these two groups from each other, the in-group is protected from associations with risk. (Marková, 2017; Smith et al., 2015.) The representations of illicit drug use in the data of this study extensively include notions of the self and other, which are constructed either explicitly or implicitly.

First, a division of self/other can be seen between those people who use illicit drugs and those who do not. On the one hand, this division was most clear in interpreting the results from the latent class analysis based on survey responses. Views that respondents had on drug policy were related to how much risk was associated with the use of different drugs. Here, a relevant confounding variable was personal drug use, as people who did not have experiences with illicit drug use more often supported control measures and more severe punishments. This suggests that the risk of illicit substances and their use was an attribute of the *other*, of people who engaged in criminal behaviour. In comparison to the law-breaking other, the self can be seen as the *good* or *true* citizen (Staerklé, 2009; 2013). Constructing the self/other dyad in such a way is a question of power, of maintaining and legitimizing hierarchies of inequalities in societies (Negura et al., 2020). Supporting punishments for illicit drug use by defining the person who uses them as the criminal other thus has a system-justifying function (Joffe, 1995). Moreover, people who used hard drugs also made a distinction between themselves and people who did not use illicit drugs. They compared themselves with the idea of a 'normal person' when constructing their own identities. They saw this category as the other which they did not have access to because of their illicit drug use. This might be an indication of metarepresentations, or knowing what others think of *us* (using illicit drugs is not 'normal'); this could happen even though they might not have categorized themselves as 'not normal'. These examples of distinctions between people who use illicit drugs and people who do not showcase the social function of social representations in defining the boundaries between normality and deviance (Joffe, 1995).

Second, the themata of self/other was also explicit when people who used hard drugs positioned themselves in relation to other people who used illicit drugs. The self was often constructed in relation to the positions of 'addict', 'junkie' or 'polydrug user', which were salient in the interview situations. The self was often distanced from these positions: other people who used drugs were described as 'druggies', whose behaviour was judged as being out of con-

trol or immoral. People in marginalized and stigmatized groups are often motivated to resist stigmatized or spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963). By defining the other as somehow threatening, the interviewees had the opportunity to construct a more positive identity for themselves.

7.1.2 RISKY AND SAFE

The elements of risk and danger are often present in social representations of illicit drug use, and for this reason these concepts and their counterpart *safe* can be seen as themata underlying common-sense knowledge on the issue. Although risk and danger are not synonymous, in this context I group them together as pointing to more or less the same idea of illicit drugs and their use as something potentially hazardous and threatening. These meanings can be applied to the substances used (especially hard drugs), the well-being of the person using them (using illicit drugs is not healthy) or the consequences to other people and society (through the behaviour of a person who uses illicit drugs).

The first sub-study showed how the social representations of ‘polydrug user’ included notions of danger. A ‘polydrug user’ was often compared to a person who used alcohol, and although the latter might also be thought of as a public nuisance, they were not described as dangerous. What makes people who have used multiple substances, or illicit drugs more generally, dangerous or threatening is often described as *unpredictability*. While many societies and their inhabitants have a long history with alcohol use and its effects, the pharmacology of different drugs may not be known to most people, it can be difficult to understand, and it keeps changing with the continuous appearance of new substances. There is an enduring haziness surrounding illicit substances, which leaves room for the imagination and for the fear of unexpected and unwanted physical or social effects. This tendency shows, as Joffe (2003) suggests, that groups construct risk by drawing on their cultural environment and its history.

Risk and danger are applied differently to various illicit drugs: the findings of this study show that cannabis is (by some people) seen as less risky than other drugs, such as ecstasy or amphetamines. Findings in other studies have been more pronounced in showing that using cannabis is more accepted than other drugs (e.g. Parker et al., 2002). Different ways of use are also evaluated differently regarding notions of riskiness: mixing drugs was seen as the most dangerous pattern of use, while trying different drugs once or twice was not seen as causing such a risk. Occasional and recreational use is viewed as a more accepted form of illicit drug use, as already suggested by the normalization thesis (see also, e.g., Duff, 2005). This is not only an outsider’s view: people who use illicit drugs acknowledge risks and pursue responsible and conscious modes of use through various risk management techniques (Sznitman, 2008).

7.1.3 MORAL AND IMMORAL

Illicit drug use is often framed as an ethical question, and evaluations of morality are included in the social representations associated with it. Immorality could be attributed to illicit drug use because it is criminalized and therefore inherently includes breaking the law. Criminality is, however, associated to illicit drug use more widely, although it has been shown that most people who use drugs do not engage in other criminal behaviours (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2017a). Furthermore, as Shiner and Winstock (2015) observe, evaluations of morality go beyond judging criminal activity, and illicit drug use remains viewed as morally dubious behaviour more generally (also Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2017a). Research on reporting on illicit drugs in the media found amphetamines to receive 'bad' moral evaluations, whereas cannabis and cocaine received more neutral ones (Hughes et al., 2011).

The results of this study echo previous findings: newspaper articles that mentioned the concepts of 'polydrug use/user' often included value-laden descriptions of immorality, showing that polydrug use was a way of using drugs that is perceived as particularly immoral; this matches perceptions of using amphetamines found in the research of Hughes and his colleagues (2011). When exploring the identity constructions of people who used hard drugs, we found that participants often used notions of morality by attributing immorality to *others* and by distancing themselves from them. This was done by emphasizing their personal characteristics that had positive moral value, such as being honest or being responsible parents. In their analysis of cannabis normalization and moral regulation, Hathaway and her colleagues (2011, p. 454) suggest that 'risk avoidance has become the new moral requirement', which leads to also comprehending the previous theme of risky and safe as a question strongly entangled with morality.

7.1.4 SELF-CONTROL AND LACK OF SELF-CONTROL

Lastly, the results of this study confirm the idea of control as a dominant notion in social representations regarding illicit drug use. On a general level, social psychological research has introduced self-control as a key value in the ideology of individualism, which is characteristic of Western societies (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007; Joffe, 2015) and the lack of which is often ascribed to derogated and marginalized groups. In particular, several scholars have examined this question in illicit drugs research and found that people who use illicit drugs are often described as not having self-control (Fraser et al., 2013; Penney & Moore, 2010). This might pertain to a lack of control over one's body, which is also a strong demand of a modern civility valuing health (Joffe, 2015) and compromised by physical dependence on substances.

The themata of self-control was most evident in the third sub-study, where people who used hard drugs positioned themselves in relation to other people who used illicit drugs: they described themselves as different from assumed

prototypes because, unlike those, they had their own use and life under control. This resembles previous findings in which people who use illicit drugs placed control as one of the most important notions when describing their use: they were aware of the assumptions of non-users that *controlled use* is a misnomer (Decorte, 2001) by emphasizing it as a core element in their behaviour (Sznitman, 2008) and identities (Pennay & Moore, 2010). Decorte (2001) explored the meanings of *controlled* and *uncontrolled* use with people who used cocaine: seldom using the drug, having periods of abstinence and using small doses were attributed to controlled use while the opposite, using large amounts, inability to stop use and spending a lot of money on use were associated with *uncontrolled* use (Decorte, 2001). People who use drugs often describe the rules of their use to emphasize being in control (Decorte, 2001; Duff & Erickson, 2014). Again, the thema of self-control/lack of self-control is closely tied with the idea of risk and danger and especially with the notion of unpredictability. Dangerousness might not be associated with the person who uses illicit drugs per se, but rather to the lack of self-control that might lead to unpredictable behaviour that the person would not have chosen if their ability to do so had not been compromised by substance use.

7.2 NORMALIZED ILLICIT DRUG USE?

The *normalization* discussion was mentioned at the beginning of this summary as an example of the contemporary attitudinal atmosphere surrounding illicit drug use. A proposition that has elicited both criticism and support has suggested that following an increase in use of illicit drugs and social and cultural shifts in attitudes, recreational drug use had become commonplace and accepted by the mainstream in Western societies (Duff, 2005; Parker et al., 2013). The idea of *differentiated normalization* escapes the idea of drawing too far-reaching conclusions of the normalization of drugs by arguing that some drugs and ways of drug use have indeed become more accepted in society, while others remain stigmatized. I fully agree with some of the premises of the claims that are rooted in the increased prevalence of illicit drug use and a cultural shift in reactions to them; however, in this chapter I analyse the generalization of illicit drug use by drawing on specifically social psychological and social representational notions, which provide a critical alternative to the idea of normalization.

7.2.1 NORMIFICATION

First, I interpret the generalization of illicit drug use as a phenomenon of *normification*, introduced by Erving Goffmann (1963) and applied to the substance use field also by Hathaway, Comeau and Erickson (2011). Normification

implies that drug use has indeed become a salient and permanent part of modern societies, but it does not go as far as to say that this shift has resulted in its becoming unremarkable and permissible. Normalization, for Goffman, would mean that an individual is treated as if there was no stigma, which in the context of illicit drug use would not only signify that the illicit nature of the used substances be overlooked, but also that there would be no social disapproval surrounding the use of drugs. In a study with young people who used drugs recreationally in Sweden (Sznitman, 2008), although participants defined their own use as mainstream and wanted to be seen as 'regular' people, they still felt that they were stigmatized and thought of as immoral from the outside. Similarly, Australian young people who recreationally used 'party drugs' struggled to reconcile stigmatization by their families or non-using friends (Pennay & Moore, 2010), suggesting that illicit drug use is not normalized to the extent of being insignificant. Viewing drug use as normified, then, allows acknowledgement of the undisputed cultural shifts and the increase in the use and visibility of drugs, yet maintaining that it remains – at least to some degree – deviant behaviour. Similar drugs and similar drug-using behaviours among different social groups (class, race and gender) are differently accommodated and accepted by the mainstream (O'Gorman, 2016), which leaves room for the stigmatization of people who deviate from whatever one regards as acceptable.

The idea of normification is strongly supported by the findings of this thesis. Social representations of illicit drug use are visible parts of lay discourse and continuously reproduced by the media, lay people and people who use illicit drugs themselves. They are such familiar constructs that they are used, for example, as metaphors to refer to common sets of meanings. This salience, however, does not mean that the social representations of illicit drug use are necessarily changing to be more accommodating or permissible, as all the sub-studies here show that there continue to be ways of illicit drug use that are viewed in negative ways. Among all the social actors studied in this dissertation, polydrug use and hard drug use are associated with stereotypical notions of uncontrolled use and risk. Illicit drug use is criminal behaviour that most people view should be punishable by law, and people who use hard drugs do not think of themselves as belonging to the group of 'normal' people because of their drug use, which continues to define them as something different.

7.2.2 NATURALIZATION

Furthermore, viewing the findings through the concepts offered within the social representations approach, I suggest that illicit drug use can be understood through the notion of a naturalized social representation. This suggestion helps to understand the taken-for-granted status of illicit drug use as a part of social reality. It is the *background*, that is, knowledge that has become ordinary (Philogène, 1999). Although mundane, the idea of illicit drug use as a naturalized phenomenon (just as a normified one) does not mean it does not continue to be stigmatized. As Negura and Plante (2021, p.138) have convincingly

shown, illicit drug use has since the 1960s been conceptualized as a *bad habit*, and ‘people refer to the idea of drugs without asking themselves whether a drug problem actually exists’. Hence, the issue is no longer actively processed and becomes almost invisible (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016). This line of thought is also at the very core of the WPR-approach: people assume a ‘problem’ without stopping to think about how it is represented or problematized. For this reason, Bacchi (2009) invites people to step back and challenge what is given, and Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2016) suggest denaturalizing concepts to uncover the social practices within. This might not be a simple task, because naturalized social representations can be difficult to perceive due to their deep-rootedness in discourse (Negura & Plante, 2021).

Naturalization was explicitly shown in the context of ‘polydrug use’ and ‘polydrug user’ in Sub-study I of this thesis, which in the course of time have become stand-alone concepts that carry meanings even unrelated to the mixed use of illicit drugs, exemplifying how naturalization decontextualizes and autonomizes concepts (Negura & Plante, 2021). The findings of Sub-study II suggest that people do not necessarily stop to think about the topic of illicit drug use and how it manifests in society when answering a survey question, but rather resort to the social representations most accessible. In this case, such resorting might have led the vast majority of respondents to view illicit drug use as behaviour that needs to be punished (because it is, by law, a criminal offence). Finally, Sub-study III found that the self was positioned in relation to the realm of salient social representations, which highlights that naturalized representations are inseparable from group identities and intergroup relations (as also argued by Negura & Plante, 2021). They are the resources that people have to deal with as something they are or as something they are not, to respond to being positioned from the outside. Viewing illicit drug use as a normified phenomenon and a naturalized social representation simplifies a diverse issue and can lead us to think that we know the ‘problem’, when in fact we only see part of it and remain blind to the phenomenon as a whole.

7.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF LAY KNOWLEDGE

The discussion has thus far explored how illicit drug use is socially represented and has only hinted at how ways of representing are significant for society and its people. The functionality and performativity of social representations have been core to the theory since Moscovici’s writings in the 1980s, and this assumption remains very relevant to a critical SRA: social representations are not only shared mental states but have power and provide possibilities for action (Moscovici, 1988; Negura et al., 2020). I next attend to the second re-

search aim of exploring the consequences of representational action by discussing the relevance of studying lay knowledge overall and social representations in particular.

The main aim of this dissertation has been to explore how illicit drug use is represented in everyday folk language, rather than in expert discourse or academic research. Here, I make a distinction between lay knowledge and expert knowledge, even though as it was noted at the beginning of this summary, such a separation does not best represent the diversity of knowledge in the current milieu of rapidly spreading and blending information online. I do this to highlight the significance of lay understandings as widely shared social knowledge; as argued by Batel and Castro (2009), experts and lay people do pertain to different communicative formats. A focus on lay knowledge is relevant because in sustaining a constructionist epistemology in our understanding of social representations, ‘reality’ is what we (anyone within a specific social environment) believe to be real: representation constitutes the material and symbolic reality of groups (Negura & Plante, 2021).

This thesis focused on lay knowledge through the social actors whose representations were studied: namely, lay people (who either use illicit drugs or not) and the media. Sub-study I indicated the pejorative connotations of ‘polydrug use’ and ‘polydrug user’ in the everyday print media, showing that the concepts have meanings outside of, and even apart from, psychopharmacological or other expert definitions. People who write in newspapers (be they journalists or people writing opinion pieces) do not necessarily have information on whether the people referred to as ‘polydrug users’ have *actually* been mixing different drugs, nor is this necessary for the purpose of conveying a (metaphorical) message. Academic research has also noted the vagueness of the concept of polydrug use, and clearer definitions are sought after (Hakkarainen et al., 2019) to allow for operationalization of the phenomenon. Some scholars see ‘polydrug use’ as a redundant term that brings no added value to scientific research (e.g. Klein, 2013). Whether one agrees with this statement or not, it has no (swift) impact on the meanings attributed to this concept in the everyday lay knowledge of people, where specific meanings continue to be attributed to this socially relevant concept.

In addition to dealing with lay knowledge on illicit drug use, Sub-study II was concerned with lay knowledge of *risk*. The variable used in the study, ‘What health or other risks are there in using a drug?’, relied heavily on respondents’ views on risk. Did respondents think of the risks that illicit drug use poses for the user or themselves personally as a public nuisance or crime? Again, for a study on lay knowledge and representation, the answers to the aforementioned question are not the most relevant ones to answer. One cannot know what risks people think of when answering the questions; however, whatever they are, they constitute to understandings about negative consequences of illicit drug use. The relevance is in the common-sense knowledge that perceptions of (any kind) of risk generate (as also suggested by Joffe, 2003). In a similar vein, Seddon (2011) argues that illicit drug use has long

been framed as a *matter of risk factors*, a view in which risk is broadly conceptualized as including social anxieties and cultural preoccupations.

Sub-study III focused on how people who are targets of stigmatizing social representations such as ‘drug user’, ‘polydrug user’, ‘junkie’ and ‘addict’ deal with the positions and identities inherent in these sets of meanings. The analysis showed that they did not often agree with the labels that they were offered from the outside, even though they might have been addicted to illicit drugs or mixed different substances. In everyday language, negative social representations are circulated and maintained irrespective of official definitions of who counts as being *addicted* to illicit drugs. Because of their value-laden meanings, people who use illicit drugs instead position themselves as outsiders vis-à-vis these social representations and labels.

The relevancy of the idea of *expert* knowledge for the topic of illicit drug use and the present discussion is in helping to understand the interplay between different types of knowledge and how they contribute to the dynamics of policy-making, health care and treatment, for example. According to Howarth and her colleagues’ (2004) studies in health care, expert knowledge is often given priority and professionals’ definitions are likely seen as ‘correct’. As a result, the help-seeking individuals’ own representations are disregarded or rejected, damaging effective communication and trust. This power structure privileges one way of knowing and representing over the other, which has negative consequences on the professional-client relationship. (Howarth et al., 2004.) A similar hierarchy is found in the policy field: evidence-based policy is regarded as neutral and is assumed to rest on expert knowledge, while patient/client/consumer voices are regarded as less important for decision-making. Although this has recently received more attention and led to practices of consumer participation, consumers are nevertheless made to be different from the experts and their input is seen to precede the policy process rather than being part of it. Consequently, privileging ‘truths’ and ‘objective’ information and evidence limit the participation of groups of people whom the policies are designed to serve (Lancaster et al., 2017).

Social representations theory builds on the process of knowledge as it transforms from the scientific, reified universe to lay, everyday language in the consensual universe (Moscovici, 1988). When individuals who are conceptualized as being ‘at risk’ are positioned as passive recipients of expert knowledge (Howarth et al., 2004), these two universes are viewed as hierarchical, although according to Moscovici (1988), different ways of knowledge are equally important and one should not be privileged over the other. Analysing expert and lay knowledge in relation to drug policy does, however, lead to questions on how much policy-making can – or should – take each one into account. The findings of this study show that people with personal experiences with illicit drug use support restrictive control measures less than people with no personal experiences with illicit drug use. The first group is also more likely than the latter group to support harm reduction measures. A Western society must

hold on to its mainstay of rational, evidence-based policy but also aim to incorporate lay views in order to design appropriate measures that make sense to people who use illicit drugs (as suggested by Lancaster et al., 2017). Without this, integration policies are in danger of remaining partial and disconnected (Renedo & Jovchelovitch, 2007).

7.4 EFFECTS OF REPRESENTATIONAL ACTION

The previous discussion has implied that lay knowledge has significance for behaviour. In this chapter, I introduce some consequences of behavioural action that have been visible in the findings of this research. Both beliefs and behaviour are expressions of social representations (Wagner, 1994), which is why these consequences are not the *result* of social representations (as sets of meanings) but rather parts of specific ways of representing. I use the classification of the WPR-approach according to which representations have discursive, subjectification and lived effects (Bacchi, 2009; 2018). This discussion can be seen as one example of possibly adverse consequences that can transpire from social representations that have become invisible and unquestioned through naturalization (Negura & Plante, 2021).

First, representations have discursive effects: framing issues in a particular way inevitably closes off other ways of constructing and understanding them (Bacchi, 2009). The role of the media is crucial here, as it shapes discursive spaces (Gelders et al., 2009); social representations generated and maintained in the media become parts of our understanding of what is believed to be *true* in relation to illicit drug use. This was illustrated through the findings from the media analysis in Sub-study I, where we diachronically followed the meanings that polydrug use gained over time. First, the issue was constructed as a youth problem and later as a severe form of problematic drug use; these meanings undoubtedly also spread to everyday communication and interactions among people in society, altering the face of the phenomenon at different points in time. When illicit drug use is viewed as criminal behaviour that people need to be punished for (as in sub-study II), such taken-for-granted (or taken ‘because they are easily available’) understandings lead to not questioning issues and thus to discursive effects of representations, as was also discussed above in relation to naturalized representations. Language and words such as ‘criminal’ or ‘polydrug user’ are not neutral but have strong symbolic meanings (Bacchi, 2009; 2018), which vary according to how the issues are constructed and maintained through their social representation.

Second, representations have subjectification effects. The basic process of anchoring as categorizing issues within an SRA is not just stating facts but *labelling* (Moscovici, 1984); social representations make certain subject positions available (Bacchi 2009; 2018). In regard to illicit drug use, the majority (people who do not use illicit drugs) are positioned differently vis-à-vis the marked minority, which is relevant because people make sense of their worlds

from these positions. The subjectification effects of representations can best be viewed through the findings in Sub-study III. People who used hard drugs were positioned from the outside and they also utilized these positions as resources to construct their identities. However, and very importantly, the analysis highlighted the role of positioning within these social representations as an active process that has a twofold function: it allows individuals to accept or reject social representations and works as a resource for applying identity (coping) strategies. People faced with specific (negative) social representations and positions often resisted them, which emphasizes that people in marginalized groups have agency over their own self-definitions and identities. Representations do not, then, determine subject positions, but rather make them available to be negotiated. When people actively choose between positions and construct new ones, they reduce the power of stigmatizing representations. Social representations can thus affect identities in both constructive and destructive ways (Howarth et al., 2004).

Third, representations have lived effects. These refer to the material consequences of problematic representations in people's day-to-day lives. The way a *problem* is represented and understood has concrete effects regarding how we respond to it, as problem representations become part of how governing takes place. (Bacchi, 2009; 2018.) Conversely, social representations are confirmed and maintained through governing and institutional practices (Negura & Plante, 2021). In this research, lived effects are seen first of all in the analysis of drug policy views: people whose social representations of illicit drugs were associated with high levels of risk, supported strict punishments for people who use them. Representing illicit drug use as a question of criminal policy naturally leads to choosing punishment and other control measures as appropriate responses to it. Were it represented differently – for example, as primarily a question for health policy – the appropriate responses would also be framed differently. Secondly, lived effects are also obvious to people who use illicit drugs as they may be denied housing or treatment services because of their substance use. The responses and practices that are chosen segment people in particular ways and can thus result in the uneven distribution of resources (Bacchi, 2009) and concrete material divergence.

A discussion of the possible adverse consequences of representational action allows a return to the question of power that is so inherent in the theoretical framework of the SRA. It is power dynamics between groups that determine which ways of representation are thought of as most valid or real. Marginal groups in society might not have equal opportunities for self-definition, but individuals have agency and can actively choose to resist majority influence and embrace or distance themselves from negative positions (e.g., Joffe, 1995). This, in turn, leads to renegotiating social representations and suggests that social change is possible as they are dynamic processes that continuously transform (e.g. Sakki et al., 2017).

7.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Before making final conclusions and summarizing the contributions of the findings discussed above, I will briefly acknowledge the limitations of this dissertation study and suggest some future directions for research.

This study used several different data sets and methodologies in an attempt at methodological triangulation, which has been suggested by Walsh and Foster (2022) as a research orientation suited to acknowledge the complexity of the phenomenon of social representations. This allowed a study of the phenomenon of illicit drug use at different levels of social life. However, some shortcomings of the research design should be addressed. Each of the sub-studies focused on different ways of illicit drug use: polydrug use, illicit drug use and hard drug use, respectively. The result of combining the findings could be considered a somewhat scattered sample of social representations regarding the issue of illicit drug use more generally. Focusing on just one of the aforementioned topics would have given a more in-depth look at a specific way of illicit drug use and offered the opportunity to compare social representations on different levels and between the different social actors.

The data used in the three sub-studies also have limitations, which might be most prominent in regard to the population-based survey. The representational profiles that were derived from this data were based on notions of risk, which might be only one element in people's social representations of illicit drug use more generally. Furthermore, the measurements of perceived risk and policy measures were coarse. For these reasons, the conclusions made on the basis of the questions were limited to providing a look into the views concerning current drug policy measures rather than larger sets of values behind the support for specific kinds of drug policy. The newspaper articles in Sub-study I were limited to one daily paper, and while they provided a good look at the diachronic aspect of social representations, they did not capture a broad synchronic sample of social representations regarding polydrug use. The study designs presented limitations for the representativeness of the study samples. The sampling protocol of the population-based survey excluded members of the institutionalized population and those without a permanent address. Furthermore, although the interview data in Sub-study III was relatively large, naturally only people who were willing to talk about their illicit drug use and capable of doing so took part in interviews. These reasons may have led to an underrepresentation of people who use drugs problematically.

Within the frame of methodological triangulation within the SRA, there is always reason to ask to what extent the used data and methodologies are actually indicators of social representations. It is the interpretations made within the specific theoretical framework of the SRA that are the link between data and social representation. (Flick et al., 2015.) Looking back at the study design of this dissertation, I find the newspaper data and interviews as the most appropriate data to capture social representations. The population-based survey provided a more specifically focused example of how people might be grouped

according to their views on illicit drug use. Despite the limitations of the aims of each sub-study and the data, the materials and methodologies that were used provided a sample of possible data that can be employed in the analysis of social representations related to any socially relevant issues.

As a reflection on reporting of the research findings, the underlying structures of social representations of illicit drug use showed typical notions of risk and danger; according to Walsh and Foster (2021/2022), these may be harmful when reported, as they can affirm existing understandings and prevent people from wanting to reveal being part of stigmatized groups. This could be seen as a shortcoming of this research. Even though I have tried not to reinforce stigma, the work contributes to renewing stereotypical associations with people who use illicit drugs. Hopefully, a focus on social representation as a process will allow for a more flexible understanding of illicit drugs and the people who use them, rather than rigidly categorizing people based on given characteristics.

Some future directions for research can be ventured, building on both the findings and shortcomings of this dissertation study. Several possibilities lie, for example, in expanding the array of contexts and social actors in regard to which the construction of social representations could be studied. This study is inextricable from its geographical location and showcases the dominant and contested ways of talking about illicit drug use in the Finnish context. Although here the rhetoric of a *war on drugs* is nearly buried, it is not so in other countries where governments continue to construct illicit drug use (and the people who use them) as their enemies. In such environments, social representations of illicit drug use can be assumed to be very different, as also in other more liberal cultural contexts. Similarly, the materials that were used in this study localize the study in its specific cultural setting: for example, the media analysis was limited to traditional media, which has cultural (and linguistic) borders. Studying other forms of media such as internet fora or social media platforms could overcome this constraint and yield a diverse range of social representations in regard to illicit drug use. These platforms could give more room for alternative voices on the issue, both among people who do not use illicit drugs and among those people who do. This study only included people who use hard drugs, and positioning in relation to less stigmatized social representations such as ‘cannabis user’ might be different than towards the ones studied within this study. Social actors whose social representations could be explored might include, for example, politicians, teachers or health care personnel.

In addition to the contents of representational action studied in this dissertation, the findings suggest that it has consequences which go far beyond policy and identity. Social representations manifest power, which is realized in institutions such as schools and various working environments, and in their practices. The effects that are produced in the process of representation may be especially relevant for marginalized groups, which is why studying them needs to be continued by means of critical approaches.

8 CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation study explored lay knowledge on illicit drug use and its significance for individuals and society. A focus on social representation as a process highlighted its generative and functional nature as action that encompasses both beliefs and behaviours. Shared meanings associated with illicit drug use were studied in relation to different social actors, and their significance as discursive, subjectification and lived effects were explored.

The findings of the study showed illicit drug use as a polemical issue whose social representations are often negative. Constructing understandings of illicit drug use vis-à-vis the underlying thema of the self-other constantly recreates a difference between groups and thus has a strong system-justifying function (Joffe, 1995). Simultaneously, however, these meanings are being negotiated and challenged by a differentiation between substances and ways of use and through active positioning of the self. Alternative ways of representation sustain a possibility for social change.

In this thesis, I emphasized the utility of a social representations approach in comparison to a strictly defined theory. It has worked as what Kalampalikis and Haas (2008) call a *map of social thought*, a framework to analyse illicit drug use which acknowledges the complexity of social knowledge. The study design allowed analysis of social representation at different levels of social space, in different contexts and groups, because although people construct their social representations in relation to macro-representations, they do not necessarily mirror each other (Walsh & Foster, 2022). In addition to acknowledging this diversity, the approach allowed incorporation of an SIA and the process of positioning as interpretative frames regarding identity construction within social representations, as well as the WPR-approach, which also places particular importance on representation in analyses of policy (Bacchi, 2009; 2018).

In 1988, Serge Moscovici wrote a paper in defence of social representations after receiving criticism for his theory from a fellow scholar in social psychology. In this text, he mentions drug use as an example of an enduring social issue that is extremely malleable in terms of its definition. In unison with several other social representations approach scholars and substance use researchers, I continue to agree with him. These malleable definitions – and, on a more comprehensive level, social representations – are ways of understanding and communicating that transform and, in doing this, constitute social and material realities.

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