Social supply: methods of data collection

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Social supply is of increasing importance in our understanding of drug markets and drug use. Studies on the retail-level of cannabis markets conclude that young people obtain their drugs primarily through friends or friends of friends. Additionally, research suggests that these users are otherwise law-abiding, and use this supply mechanism to protect themselves from 'dodgy, real dealers'. This is an important element in the social construction of the responsible and respectable recreational drug user. 'Social supply' is a relatively new concept, mainly studied in the UK, and can be defined as the non-commercial (or non-profitable) distribution of cannabis to non-strangers, although this definition remains under discussion.

There are gaps in the existing (and very limited) literature concerning how this separate arena of transactions functions, the factors that influence its shape, and the meaning(s) those involved give to it. Our research aims to analyse drug use patterns among young people focusing on the construction of supply networks and the extent to which one can talk of social supply. Although the study is based in the Flemish part of Belgium, it also forms a theoretical contribution to the development of the concept of social supply.

Methods

One of the key issues in researching this topic concerns methods of data collection. This paper discusses three possibilities of studying social supply networks: virtual ethnography, a web survey and a personal network study.

Internet use by drug users creates opportunities not only to recruit them to research studies but also to engage them in a dialogue. Virtual ethnography researches online communities and experiences through analysis of different kinds of computer-mediated communication (e.g. blogs, forums and social network sites) (Kozinets, 2010). The lack of physical presence and separate physical settings influences the relationship between the researcher and the participant, which can lead to a more balanced relationship, although respondents' identities can be easily altered. Therefore, a flexible definition of the target population is required. Virtual ethnography is a less

feasible option for studying young Flemish cannabis users because there is no clearly identifiable virtual community of young cannabis users in Belgium. Existing forums focus mainly on growing issues, and refrain from discussions about supply.

An important advantage of a web survey is the fact that a large number of people can be reached in a fast and inexpensive way. Respondents remain anonymous, and can 'hide' behind their computer, which reduces the feeling of fear or suspicion and reduces interviewer effects. They can also choose when and where they complete the survey, lowering response barriers and increasing the chance of honest answers. In comparison to a postal questionnaire, open questions result in more detailed answers online (Mann & Stewart, 2009). However, there is a chance that respondents complete the questionnaire more than once. Response rates are also lower than with other types of questionnaires. In our research, a survey would however not be sufficient to capture the nature of the relationship between user and supplier.

Taking these considerations into account, we decided not to use online methods. Instead, a network study was developed to study the structure and composition of social supply networks in depth. Social network research, among other topics, studies personal networks, placing the social world of the individual at the centre of attention (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). A respondent draws his network together with the interviewer during a semi-structured interview. Based on this participatory map, the interviewer discusses the network surrounding the individual and the meaning of particular relationships in detail. In case of our research, this allows studying social supply in depth. The main disadvantage concerns respondent recruitment. Respondents are typically recruited via a snowball sample. An important problem with this technique is the difficulty of obtaining referrals to new subjects. Our research uses respondent-driven sampling to counteract this. For example, the dual incentive system improves subject referral, providing information-rich initial 'seeds' are found.

Bibliography

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