

Exploring the onto-politics of cannabis: Shifting drug policies and understandings in Norway

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All facets of cannabis use – that is, use rates, use contexts, use modes, and user groups – are influenced by multiple factors, reflecting in practice Duff’s argument that there is considerable diversity in how *cannabis* is constructed as an object of knowledge and practice (Duff, 2016). Furthermore, these conceptual shifts from understanding cannabis as *one* drug – a singular substance with a consistent identity regardless of how it may be consumed (Duff, 2016) – have been accompanied by recent substantive changes in the factors influencing its use. First and foremost, these include political frameworks concerning the legal status of cannabis around the globe. These

legal shifts have precipitated numerous other changes, both foreseen and unforeseen. For example, a range of novel cannabis products has entered the market and their availability has increased through the internet and social media (Bretteville-Jensen, 2019) and accessibility has increased through the internet and social media (Demant et al., 2019). These novel products, such as edibles, vape pens, body lotion, eye drops etc. both reflect and generate novel intake modes. Even the traditional herbal cannabis has changed, with significant increase in tetrahydrocannabinol content since 2010 (Bachs & Havig, 2019).

While many of these factors lie outside governmental control, drug control policy lies

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within. The current administration in Norway is considering a more liberal approach when it comes to use of all currently illegal drugs, including cannabis. A Drug Reform Committee was appointed, not to consider whether or not to decriminalise all drugs, but to propose models for implementation. The resulting white paper (NOU 2019: 26) currently forms the foundation of the proposed reform, *Drug Reform: From punishment to help*, which was sent to the Norwegian parliament for consideration in February 2021. The decriminalisation of use and possession of smaller amounts of drugs for personal use implies that drug use is still an offense and that the police will confiscate the drugs, but these will no longer be criminal offenses under the new law. Instead of going to court, those apprehended by the police would be sent to mandatory counselling with local health authorities. The proposal thus represents a substantial shift in Norwegian drug policy, which has so far been characterised as strict (e.g., Moeller, 2019).

The proposal from the Drug Reform Committee and the following public debate have highlighted contrasting and competing understandings of what drug use is and how it should be met. The proposed policy changes seem to build upon an understanding of cannabis use as primarily a health problem and users as in need of guidance and health treatment. Consequently, the critics argue, the proposed policy primarily focuses on the interests of (marginalised) individuals with drug use disorders, and less so on the younger, experimental users, the associated risk and protective factors, and putative transitions from recreational into problematic use.

The general concern remains that these proposed cannabis-related changes may ultimately lead to an increase in cannabis-related harms and problems due to increased use. After a decade of steady trends in cannabis use, there are signs of increasing rates among young people in Norway (Bye & Bretteville-Jensen, 2020; Sandøy, 2021). A related concern is that decriminalisation of cannabis use may result in its

further normalisation and a subsequent rise in cannabis consumption (Burdzovic Andreas, 2019; Burdzovic Andreas & Bretteville-Jensen, 2017). Given that drug criminalisation was the first, and for a long time the most important universal prevention strategy in Norway, the new situation calls for a renewed interest in the design and implementation of alternative preventive measures.

However, despite the youth-focused discussions of preventive measures, there is still insufficient knowledge when it comes to factors that may shape young people's perceptions, attitudes, and choices regarding cannabis use. That is, we need in-depth and up-to-date knowledge concerning young people's views of cannabis use and its potential consequences; their constructions of cannabis and cannabis users; and their motivations for use and for abstinence in Norway and the other Nordic countries. Furthermore, we know little of how prevention looks from the perspective of young people: what harms and risks do they see as relevant for them, and worth preventing, and how do they think prevention could be done? Unfolding youth perspectives on cannabis is thus imperative, especially in the context of policy changes which may significantly shape multiple aspects of *cannabis*, including use motives, identities, and practices, as well as the actual use rates and related consequences.


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