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'I like money, I like many things'. The relationship between drugs and crime from the perspective of young people in contact with criminal justice systems

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ABSTRACT

Based on research undertaken as part of the EU funded EPPIC project, this paper aims to update and elaborate on the relationship between drug use and offending behaviours by exploring variations within a cross-national sample of drug-experienced young people in touch with criminal justice systems. Adopting a trajectory-based approach, interviews were undertaken with 198 young people aged 15–25 in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, and UK). Data were analysed by applying the Bennett and Holloway categorization of the drugs-crime link, with a focus on the concept of social exclusion as developed by Seddon. Three main types of mechanisms (economic, pharmaceutical, and lifestyles) are used to interpret the data, showing how the relationship between drugs and offending can vary according to type of substances and over time. Furthermore, it can be associated with very different degrees of social exclusion and needs. The results suggest that while economic inequalities still play key roles in explaining drug use and offending, both behaviours can originate from a state of relative deprivation, resulting from the contradictions inherent in 'bulimic societies' that raise aspirations and desires while providing young people scarce opportunities for self-realisation and social recognition.

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Introduction

The relationship between drugs and crime is at the centre of a longstanding debate within sociology and criminology since the beginning of the twentieth century, with many limitations due to both the nature of samples and to epistemological approaches, often influenced by political agendas (Allen, 2007). Within this debate, the attempt to establish a causal nexus became central and Goldstein's (1985) explanatory model gained a dominant position that remained an important reference for a long period of time (Bennett & Holloway, 2009). According to Goldstein (1985), the relationship between drugs and offending relates to three main explanations. The first, referred to as the 'economic compulsive model,' is where crime is a means to get money to buy drugs. The second, namely the 'psychopharmacological' model, assumes that offending is a consequence of impairment in cognitive function due to the properties of the drug. Finally, the 'systemic' explanation refers to crimes committed within drug markets as part of the business of drug supply and distribution.

The main limitation of this conceptual framework is that it does not consider that explanations are not mutually exclusive and does not account for interactions between the

individual and the social context (Parker & Auerhahn, 1998). Furthermore, the model is contested as to what kinds of explanations are the most important. For example, White and Gorman (2000) argue that Goldstein's model underestimates the role of economic factors, while MacCoun et al. (2003) emphasise that it overlooks variations between different types of drugs and types of offending. Indeed, empirical studies focusing on specific types of drugs identified potential specific mechanisms, such as the link between crack and crime that would be mainly due to sense of psychological craving for and dependency on crack and the need to buy it (Brain et al., 1998). Other studies identified variations in the drug-crime connections depending on the type of crime. For instance a study conducted in Sweden found a positive association between violent crime and binge drinking and use of sedatives, whereas it was negatively associated with heroin, amphetamine, cocaine, and injecting drug use (Håkansson & Jesionowska, 2018).

According to Bennett and Holloway (2009), the main problem with Goldstein's typology is the lack of explanations taking into account the cultural context. They emphasise that in order to understand the relationship between drugs and crime, we need to consider a broader level than individual

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factors and to provide a more informative framework to interpret all types of connections. As they argue, economic decisions, pharmacological effects and lifestyles originate from specific and cultural-bounded value systems, i.e. value reference systems embedded in a specific sociocultural context. This argument becomes clearer especially from studies focused on street cultures (Vigil, 2010). Relevant features highlighted by Bennett and Holloway (2009) are desire for hedonism (Wright et al., 2006), the need for fast cash (Brookman et al., 2007), the apparent indifference for the consequences related to action (Wright et al., 2006), a casual disregard for money or carefree spending attitude (Wright & Decker, 1996), and a limited approach to decision making, related to the main problem of obtaining a regular supply of money for buying drugs. As a consequence, Bennett and Holloway (2009) conclude that 'the causal connection between drug use and crime is likely to vary by cultural context and perhaps even location' (p. 529), in addition to variations by time and by types of drugs (Parker & Newcombe, 1987).

Based on these arguments and 41 interviews with detained 'drug-misusing offenders,' Bennett and Holloway (2009) provided a systematic analysis of mechanisms linking drug use and crime. Using both structured questionnaires and semi-structured qualitative interviews, their study provided a renewed list of detailed mechanisms summarized in Table 1. Here, Goldstein's economic and pharmacological explanations become more diversified, entailing both directions (drug use causing crime and vice versa), while the systemic explanations category is substituted with 'lifestyles mechanisms' to account for the fact that even 'crime lifestyles' might link to drug use. In addition, interactions between types of mechanisms and variations across crime types are described.

The present study has taken a point of departure from Bennett and Holloway (2009) typology. In order to understand the relationship between drugs and crime further, we add the concept of social exclusion to their framework (Buchanan, 2004; Pearson, 2001; Seddon, 2006). With reference to Levitas (2000) and Saunders (2003), Seddon (2006) defined it as a multidimensional process of 'exclusion from participation in ordinary social activities' (p. 682). In Seddon's perspective (2006), the concept of social exclusion differs from that of poverty in that it does not necessarily concern the lack of resources to meet basic needs, but interprets the perceived needs within 'a common set of social, economic and cultural processes' (Seddon, 2006, p. 687). For this reason, social exclusion can assume different meanings in different places and times. From an historical perspective, the contemporary 'relative deprivation is rooted in a disjunction

between the cultural emphasis on the consumption of pleasurable commodities' and the limited opportunities for participation in consumerism experienced by some people (Seddon, 2006, p. 695). Indeed, consumer capitalism and high levels of inequality generate a great sense of frustration that lead young people to be involved in illicit drug distribution (Irwin-Rogers, 2019).

If consumption might therefore be a key concept in understanding contemporary links between drugs and offending (Seddon, 2006; Hayward, 2016), we must remember that 'not all young people faced with socio-economic disadvantages made the same choices about drugs' (Seddon, 2006, p. 691). This is because processes of decision-making are not simply based on costs-benefits and because different individuals respond to stresses due to structural inequalities in different ways, related partly to personal biographies and partly to culture (Allen, 2007; Seddon, 2006). Indeed, social exclusion is not a static condition, but it is also an individual process where the social actor excluded from legal opportunities is actively engaged in looking for alternatives in the irregular economy. The connections between structure, culture and agency can therefore be read as a three-way relationship (Seddon, 2006, p. 692).

Even though close connections between use of drugs, offending behaviours and social exclusion can be traced to the 1990s and early twenty-first century in the UK (Foster, 2000; MacDonald & Marsh, 2002), Seddon (2006) emphasises that there is also a need to update our knowledge in view of new features which emerge on the drug scene. One of the main points here is that boundaries between recreational use and problematic drug scenes are blurred, making this dichotomy no longer adequate (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Simpson, 2003). Indeed, drugs like heroin and crack traditionally associated with 'vulnerable' groups can be also found in the friendship patterns of conventional recreational drug users (Brain et al., 1998; Egginton & Parker, 2000; Parker, 2005), increasing the risk of shifting from recreational to problematic drug use careers (Parker, 2005). As a consequence, patterns of drug-related offending patterns become more diversified, showing local variations in offending related to drugs (Allen, 2005; Brain et al., 1998; Hammersley et al., 2003). In addition, the rise of new psychoactive substances (NPS), created to mimic the effects of traditional drugs, has further complicated the drug consumption scene (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016).

Adopting a perspective that acknowledges that links between drug use and offending behaviours are historically and culturally situated, and also influenced by socioeconomic structures, the present study aims to explore variations within a cross-national sample of drug-experienced young people in

Table 1. Bennett and Holloway's typology of drugs-crime links.

| Economic mechanisms | Pharmacological mechanisms | Lifestyles mechanisms |
|--|--|---|
| Drug-use-causing-crime connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Obtaining money for drugs ● Obtaining drugs directly ● Saving legal money for drugs Crime-causing-drug-use connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Obtaining drugs directly ● Surplus proceeds of crime spent on drugs | Drug-use-causing-crime connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aggression ● Courage to offend ● Judgment impairment Crime-causing-drug-use connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Courage to offend | Drug-use-causing-crime connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Criminal contacts ● Offended for treatment ● Retaliation Crime-causing-drug-use connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dealing provided surplus drugs |

touch with criminal justice systems (CJS). In doing so, Bennett and Holloway's categorization will be applied as an analytical framework, while a particular emphasis will be put on processes of social exclusion and cultural responses related to them. The cross-national sample of young people provides an opportunity to get an updated and broader view on the phenomenon, both because of the age of the interviewees – lower compared to more studied targets – and because it includes European countries that have not been studied in the past, with the existing literature most focused on UK, US and Australia (Allen, 2007).

Methods and sample

A total of 198 young people between 14 and 25 years of age were conducted in six countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, UK) between September 2017 and November 2018. All interviewees were drug experienced and in contact with the CJS. Age and drug and offending experiences were the only inclusion criteria. Interviews were conducted by 1–3 researchers in each country and were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were based on common, semi-structured guidelines approved by the Middlesex University Ethics Committee, the Bioethical Committee at the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Warsaw, and the Danish Data Protection Agency.

The trajectory-based approach was chosen as the most suitable to capture the complexity of the relationship between drug use and offending (Simpson, 2003; Hser et al., 2007). Interviews aimed at reconstructing the young people's drug use trajectories from the onset of drug use to the time of interviews, when they were involved in different penal measures, either detention or alternative measures, such as probation and other community-based interventions (Table 3). The general aim of the interviews was to get information about contexts and motives of drug use, circumstances which increased or decreased patterns and the role of relatives and friends. Interviewees were also asked about the impact of the CJS on their consumption and their opinions about any prevention or treatment intervention they had experienced. Offending experiences were not always directly investigated, since in some cases researchers were not authorised to talk about ongoing criminal proceedings. However, contrary to what might be expected, most of the young interviewees were eager to tell their stories and not reluctant to talk about their illegal behaviours. Most of interviewees spoke freely about them to the researchers and even though it was not possible to systematically relate each interviewee with specific types of offending behaviours, it is important to acknowledge that the collected interviews referred to a broad variety of crimes, not exclusively related to drugs. In most cases, the young people were involved in theft, burglary, robbery, online fraud, drug dealing or assault, but there were also (a few) cases of possession of an offensive weapon, attempted murder, human trafficking, and violence resulting in death.

Getting permission for the interviews was difficult in most of the countries, and the researchers could not recruit

Table 2. Sample description – socio-demographic data.

| Gender | Age | | Partner | | Children | | Immigrant background | | | |
|-----------------|------|--------|---------|-------|----------|-----|----------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| | Male | Female | 14–18 | 19–25 | Yes | No | yes | no | yes | no |
| Austria | 22 | 4 | 8 | 18 | 1 | 25 | 1 | 25 | 20 | 6 |
| Denmark | 27 | 3 | | 30 | 13 | 17 | 3 | 27 | 12 | 8 |
| Germany | 11 | 1 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 12 | 10 | 2 |
| Italy | 39 | 2 | 3 | 38 | 14 | 27 | 4 | 37 | 19 | 22 |
| Poland | 31 | 20 | 20 | 31 | 12 | 39 | 8 | 43 | 0 | 51 |
| UK ^a | 27 | 11 | 31 | 6 | 10 | 27 | 3 | 34 | – | – |
| Total | 157 | 41 | 72 | 125 | 50 | 147 | 19 | 178 | 61 | 133 |

^aIn the UK sample, information about age, partner and children was missed for one interview. In addition, there were 9 young people who reported their ethnicity as Black British or Asian British or mixed race. That does not necessarily mean second generation immigrant, however this information was not directly asked.

interviewees directly. Professionals working in the CJS or service organizations acted as intermediaries. Consequently, in each country a different number of interviews were conducted, and country-samples are not equal in relation to the number of interviewees, type of penalty, age sub-groups, and gender (Tables 2 and 3). Although data set does not allow for a proper comparison between countries, the sample is highly diversified and provides rich information relevant to the theoretical framework. Indeed, it offers the opportunity to reflect on a broad variety of variables (i.e. drug patterns and markets). Most of the interviewees (78.9%) were male, divided fairly equally between adolescents (14–18) and young adults (19–25). Most of them had no partners or children and had low educational levels, which means they either had completed only compulsory level schooling or had abandoned it. About one third of the interviewees came from immigrant backgrounds, that is, they were either immigrants from foreign countries or second-generation immigrants, though this information was not asked in the UK.

As far as drug consumption styles are concerned, a significant part of the sample had only used cannabis at the time of the interview and considered using cannabis as a normalised activity, i.e. widely used and available and approved by most of people. In Denmark and Italy, the most commonly used drug after cannabis – and often in addition to it – was cocaine. The large majority of interviewees reported a pattern of combined use. The use of other drugs (other than cannabis and cocaine), was not reported as extensively or regularly, with the exception of Poland (NPS) and UK, where many interviewees reported the use of amphetamines and NPS (synthetic cannabinoids and hallucinogens) and party drugs (mostly MDMA). Different kinds of pleasurable effects were associated with the use of drugs, such as relaxation, disinhibition, and enhancing activities and performance). However, the pleasurable reasons for smoking cannabis were often strictly associated with two main underlying 'negative' motives, namely 1) the perceived stress related to various problems (with parents, school, partners; mental health

Table 3. Sample description - measures and number of penalty.

| Country | First penalty | | Measure |
|-----------------|---------------|----|---|
| | yes | no | |
| Austria | 8 | 18 | Prison (15) Alternative measures – Out-patient psychotherapy (4) Home arrest (0) Community – In-patient care facility (community-living) (7) |
| Denmark | 5 | 20 | Prison (20) Alternative measures (2) Home arrest (2) Community (1) |
| Germany | 7 | 5 | Prison (2) Alternative measures (10) |
| Italy | 20 | 21 | Prison (29) Alternative measures (9) Home arrest (2) Community (1) |
| Poland | 16 | 25 | Prison (22) Forensic psychiatry (9) Alternative measure (psycho-social interventions) (20) |
| UK ^a | 18 | 15 | Prison (3) Alternative measures (35) |

^aSome UK participants had not been charged with any offence at the time of interview and penalty status was not recorded.

problems (i.e. depression), but also aggressiveness and the need to cope with violence, loneliness and/or traumas); 2) boredom due to an unstructured daily life, related to not attending school nor having a job (Rolando & Beccaria, 2019).

Sometimes the interviewers asked the young people directly to comment on how they viewed the link between their drug use and their offending, while in other cases this topic arose spontaneously in their narratives. Conscious about the challenging epistemological issues related to interviewing this particular target group, we did not assume that young interviewees possessed 'reasoned reasons' for their behaviours, i.e. we did not take for granted that they were able, or eager, to provide meaningful and honest answers to typical 'why' questions (Allen, 2007). Therefore, we adopted a narrative approach, aimed at favouring the spontaneous young peoples' narrative flow without interrupting it and recognizing the explanatory value of 'primitive answers,' like, e.g. 'It just happened.'

The coding process was based on common guidelines, which, according to an abductive approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) included a list of topics, but we were also open to the addition of new codes throughout the process, based on topics emerging from the data. In addition, each interview was summarised to get a brief summary of the whole trajectory in order to be able to interpret single quotations in a more meaningful and broader context. The present study is based on the analysis of data gathered under one wide code focused on the link between drug and offending, interpreted in the context of the broader life story of the interviewee, taking into account social and cultural contexts. Each country research group analysed their national data based on common guidelines, and the results were the point of departure for the cross-national analysis used for this paper.

In all countries, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed according to European and national ethical guidelines and the interviewees – or their parents/guardians in the case

of minors – signed a consent form. In some countries (UK, Denmark, Germany, and Poland), some incentives were offered to the young people in order to foster their participation. For example, participants were offered a £10 voucher in the UK. In Denmark, participants interviewed in the community were offered movie theatre gifts, while those interviewed in prison or remand settings were not allowed the offer of incentives due to prison rules.

Results

Only some of our interviewees maintained that there was a link between their offending and their drug use, while many claimed the opposite that there was no relationship. However, throughout the course of their narratives, many types of interconnections emerged, entailing a great variety of nuances depending on socioeconomic and cultural contexts and type of drugs.

In the following sections, we discuss the results employing Bennett and Holloway (2009) typology (economic, pharmacological and lifestyles mechanisms) and add the concept of social exclusion to the framework. (Seddon, 2006).

Economic mechanisms

Heroin, together with crack and cocaine, are the types of drugs traditionally associated with the explanation that offending is caused by drug use because of their cost (Laidler, 2017). This also emerged in our interviewees' narratives.

I needed money for the drugs and became a criminal by assaulting people in order to obtain quick money. (AT_24_PRI_F_24)¹

Our interviewees, however, also reported the same explanation with reference to other, much cheaper kinds of substances. For instance, a young woman in Poland explained her offending caused by alcohol and new psychoactive

substance (NPS) use which are the cheapest drugs on the market in Poland.

Thefts, beatings to earn money for boosters [Polish slang name of NPS] or alcohol. I stole openly, I knew there was a camera, I stole in the bars, I stole from my neighbours. I did not show up for the probation officer, I did nothing with my life and addiction ... (PL_42_PRI_F_25)

Besides theft and robbery, dealing is another typical form of offending mentioned in relation to obtaining money for drugs. This explanation was reported by young people only using cannabis. Looking at the trajectories, this feature is often related to becoming a regular user, which emerged as a turning point in the young people's narratives, possibly occurring only after a few months from the onset of use (cf. Beccaria & Rolando, 2019). Some explained this passage with reference to tolerance mechanism (i.e. the need to increase doses in order to get the same effects).

If you smoke every day, you automatically need to smoke more and more cannabis to get high in the same way. (...) I liked it a lot! [smoking cannabis]. But I couldn't afford it. I worked for my step-dad and earned money, but not enough to allow me to smoke everyday. Therefore, I started to sell drugs. (DEN_19)

It is important to note that among those who had experience of dealing and justified it as the only way to sustain their use, we find both young people coming from socioeconomic disadvantaged circumstances, and those from more advantaged. The two following excerpts provide examples. The first comes from a young person from Austria who immigrated from Algeria who could not work as a hair-dresser, because he was not granted asylum or a work permit, so he started to sell drugs to support himself besides his drug habit. The second is a 17-year-old Italian male, with good school attainment, living with his parents and using marijuana recreationally

I started to smoke marijuana. I did not have any money, so I started to sell drugs, in order to buy marijuana with the money. [...] I did not see any other possibility, to obtain money. (AT_03_CO_M_24)

Marijuana is still an expensive drug, and this is a problem for many students, who often end up doing a group pot [buying as a group]. As soon as you become a very habitual user, you have a problem with money, since two joints cost 10 euros and often 10 euros are half of young people's weekly pocket money. (IT_40_ALT_M_17)

The fact that dealing marijuana also was reported by young people with no economic issues and not subject to social exclusion as traditionally defined (Levitas, 2000), suggests that smoking hashish or marijuana is a normalised social activity. Besides those who were uncertain about the legal position of cannabis, many interviewees were informed but disagreed with its illegality as they did not view cannabis as a 'real drug'. This seems to support the validity of the normalisation thesis (Measham & Shiner, 2009; Parker et al., 2002) in different European countries.

I do not think I'm doing something wrong. Smoking marijuana is not an offence that should be punished by imprisonment. (PL_7_ALT_M_24)

Moreover, as Coomber and colleagues (2016) argue, the normalisation of cannabis consumption has led to normalisation of supply of recreational drugs in close social networks. The following excerpt shows how – after starting to deal to maintain one's consumption – other reasons to continue to do so were added. Indeed, some of the interviewees described dealing cannabis as an active choice, as something that gives them respect and status, providing them with a recognisable role and boosting their self-esteem.

I really liked being able to work. Being able to do something that would make me feel more adult, that would make me be noticed, also because I had serious problems with bullying before (...). Then I realized that the dealer was just, almost a role in the school society, that is... there was the nerd, the bully, the normal guy and the drug dealer, who – as opposed to how he was seen years ago (as) a bad person – I mean, even the consumers were disgusted by the drug dealer, especially because the drugs were different. Now marijuana, let's say it's like alcohol for people. (IT_40_ALT_M_17)

As a consequence of the transformations in the drug market, our interviewees noticed that purchasing from the Dark Net is easier than approaching the street market, since they did not have to have any contact or previous experience with dealers. This might represent a further risk for young people's involvement in offending behaviours. Indeed, as an Italian student explained after the interview was finished and the recorder was off, he was the smartest with technologies in his group of friends, so that he easily accessed drugs on the Dark Net and sold them to his friends, although he was not in need of money.

It is also important to acknowledge that the relationship between drug use and offending can vary over time. In this sense, the discovery of how easy it is to make money through drug dealing can impact on the original motives to do it (i.e. to buy drugs) to embrace a broader desire for money and consumer goods.

After that, when I saw that to get money it was sufficient to do so [dealing to schoolmates], I became more obsessed – so to speak – by the money than by the drug itself. (IT_39_ALT_M_19)

I had no money but saw other people spending money. And when I had money, I thought that's pretty cool to have money. And I was shit when I had no more money. And with being aged 13 or 14, it is quite difficult to get a job. It's hard to earn a lot of money when you are young. So I guess that crime was the fastest and most logical way for me. (GER_08_ALT_M_17)

As previously noted (Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Seddon, 2006), dealing is not only about money, but also experiencing financial independence and self-affirmation in a situation of relative deprivation and frustration. The unfavourable conditions of the labour market experienced by young Europeans were also reported by some of our interviewees, dissatisfied with both their income and self-realisation, as a fertile ground to turn to dealing, which is more profitable and satisfying.

I never got anything extra from my day job. And then I met a guy who sold cannabis. I saw that it was quite fun, and I got a taste for it [selling]. ... It is about the money, but you also meet all kinds of people, and also, I am my own boss. (DE_09)

When people like me start working here in Berlin, everybody starts to work for security companies. Every Kanake [pejorative word for foreigners] works for security companies because you earn at least some money. In general, people like me earn about 50 € for working 6 hours. You stand there 6 hours and you pack bags. But when you work for security companies you earn 15 € per hour. Well, 15 € are better. But nevertheless many opt for the criminal way. It's easier, it's faster. And nobody plays the boss who treats you like a dog. (GER_06_ALT_M_18)

To sum up, our data provide insights how the most studied link between using drugs and offending, which suggests that people commit acquisitive crime to get the money to drugs (Goldstein, 1985, Jarvis & Parker, 1989), can also be applied to substances traditionally not related to this pattern, i.e. cannabis. In addition, our data show how this relationship can vary over time, after experiencing the relative ease of making money to get other things besides drugs. If consuming drugs was the first reason for offending, after a while this can easily turn into only one motive among many other perceived needs, associated with different degrees of social exclusion. Lastly, if the relationship between consumption and the attraction for money in the consumerist society are crucial to understanding young people's offending behaviours (Seddon, 2006), our data show how the choice of dealing also has to do with other reasons, linked to the need of self-realisation.

Pharmacological mechanisms

Several possible pharmacological mechanisms linking the use of drugs and offending emerged from the data. These included the substance's capacity to increase aggression, courage to offend and judgement impairment (Bennett & Holloway, 2009). Drugs that were more frequently quoted with reference to these effects were stimulants such as cocaine and crack cocaine. Accordingly, some of the interviewees drew clear boundaries between cannabis and other drugs.

Joints did not make me do crimes (...) when I smoked I was too frightened to do it (...) but when I took cocaine I was the one to say: "Let's go, we need money" (...) It made me feel powerful, very awake. (IT_41_CO_F_18)

For the same reason, as previously noticed by Beccaria and Rolando (2019) turning to use cocaine, heroin, or crack, emerged as turning points in life trajectories which negatively affected both drug use and offending. Besides the economic mechanism due to the higher cost of these drugs, the explanations provided by interviewees point to pharmacological effects, which on the one hand stimulate courage, aggression, or numbness/indifference, and on the other hand increase the need for drugs, thereby describing a vicious circle. References to the concept of tolerance were frequently reported about crack, but also to amphetamine in Poland.

I began to smoke from the bottle, the monkey took me since the bottle.² When I no longer had the substance nearby, I started to go out to buy ... When I snorted, 3–5 grams were enough, when I started with crack, I saw that 5 grams were not enough for me, I had to go and buy again, again, again. I was doing 35 grams a day. (IT_5_PRI_M_24)

I came to prison for theft with burglary. If you want to take so much [amphetamine], you have to steal every day, every night, unless something bigger is earned. [...] I spent so much that it would probably be enough to buy an apartment. (PL_39_PRI_M_23)

While drugs like cocaine were perceived by some interviewees to increase the level of aggressiveness and consequently of offending behaviours, the tranquillising properties of cannabis were considered as a way to reduce offending, as in the experience of an Austrian young interviewee.

I smoke marijuana to reduce stress in my brain, I used to get very aggressive and then I hit them until they bleed. When I smoke I keep calm. (AT_4_PRI_M_18)

However, by contrast, other interviewees mentioned intoxication by cannabis or by alcohol as drivers in offending, which underlines the opportunity to review the concept of 'judgment impairment' (Bennett & Holloway, 2009) traditionally linked to a condition of 'addiction' entailing the concept of physical dependence, as was emphasised in early studies and by the 'official view' (Allen, 2007) and more pertinent to adults. For instance, one male respondent aged 16 spoke about the paranoia he experienced when smoking cannabis and suggested that this caused him to want to fight.

I acted in a different way because if I wasn't high, I wouldn't have wanted to fight probably. But because I was high and he said something that pissed me off and I felt like he was going to try hitting me, so that made me even more paranoid... smoking weed make me even more paranoid. (UK_07_CO_M_16)

Similarly, a Polish female interviewee, came from a relatively affluent family, attributed her use of alcohol and NPS as the primary reason for using physical violence, and as a result claimed that her punishment was unfair and not commensurate.

Why did they lock me in a prison? Because under the influence of a very large amount of alcohol and boosters [NPS], I committed assault with the use of a knife (...) and now I sit here. I was very much under the influence, I do not remember the whole incident, I do not know what was going on. Nothing happened to him [the victim of the assault did not suffer serious injuries]. (PL_45_PRI_F_19)

In the case of interviewees living in most deprived situations, like homeless young people, drugs were mainly a way to cope with the deprivation and anguish of precarious lives. For them, the use of illegal drugs and non-prescription drugs was even more entangled with mental health issues, which can increase offending behaviour. This was the case of a 23-year-old young man who immigrated from Gambia to Italy who, while he was waiting for documents, ended up living on the streets and dramatically increased his consumption of drugs and was arrested while under the effects of a mix of alcohol and benzodiazepines.

When you use Rivotril³ you sleep well, you don't feel much pain, you know? I started for this reason. When I started to sleep on the street, I started to use Rivotril, to make me rest during the night. (IT_36_PRI_M_22)

The examples provided by our sample show that pharmacological mechanisms linking use of drugs and offending suggest that is not (only) a matter of substance, since the same substance can have opposite effects on different

individuals, and not only related to patterns of use such as dependence.

Lifestyles mechanisms

As shown by the examples provided as far, young people's narratives that can be referred as mechanisms connecting the use of drugs and offending are intertwined and are not fixed, but vary over an individual's life trajectory. Moreover, in most cases, they both originate, at an early stage in adolescence, in the same context or from the same need.

First, drug use and offending can be strictly related to social exclusion (Seddon, 2006) due to socioeconomic inequalities. This link clearly emerged from narratives of interviewees living in the most economically deprived contexts, showing that offending – usually thefts and robberies or drug dealing – often occurred before they had used any kind of illegal drugs, as in the case of this Italian young man.

I did not have money for shoes, I went to school with perforated shoes, and wet socks. So I started to sell hashish to buy a new pair of shoes, not for other reasons. (IT_37_PRI_M_23)

These kind of experiences, which question the use of the terms 'drug-related' or 'drug-driven' crime as self-evident concepts (Seddon, 2006), was also evident in the narratives of illegal immigrants in Italy, who – in the absence of work opportunities – reported that selling drugs was the only available opportunity to provide an income (cf. MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Beccaria & Rolando, 2019). Dealing in turn can easily lead to use of drugs or increase existing consumption, because it provides a steady supply for one's own use. The following reasoning was reported by a young man who – after leaving a community at the age of 18 and living on the streets – began to use cocaine, 3–4 grams a day, until he was arrested at the age of 22 years.

I was a barber in Tunis. I knew how to cut hair, but I did not have any documents for which [to work], no one took me on, so I started selling a bit of hashish. I started selling, and using it at the same time. Then after 3 years I started using cocaine because I was holding it, I was dealing it, and so it went on. (IT_03_PRI_M_23)

Obviously, similar explanations of patterns of use and offending also can be found among other non-immigrant interviewees subjected to any kind of social exclusion and/or deprivation, often including lack of parental care and mental health problems. In these cases, drugs are a way of coping with suffering and/or traumatic experiences, which can also be linked to offending. This is illustrated by a quotation from a young German woman growing up with severe family problems, living in neighbourhoods and networks of peers, in which, as she described, drugs, crime and violent acts are normal features of everyday life.

I saw so many things when I was younger – I think that young girls should never see such things. And I guess my way to come to terms with these things was drinking alcohol (...) I think I have seen more cruel things than many people aged 50 or 60. And this is not good. This makes an empty space inside me. (GER_05_PRI_F_18)

When referring to deprived neighbourhoods, almost all interviewees underlined the key influence of their peers and community in beginning to imitate these behaviours:

Everybody around me is involved in that [in crime]. So I always saw what is possible and started to do my own things [petty thefts]. (GER_09_ALT_M_16)

I was 12–13 years old when under the influence of alcohol I started throwing clay on buses with my friends, I already started to smash windows, steal shops with my friends, because we wanted to ride in a police car, we were fighting each other, because when we drank this alcohol, there were many fights as well. (PL_42_PRI_F_25)

If you sell cannabis, you need to get hold of someone who sells e.g. 100 g. When you get to know people like that, the problems also get bigger. If you get into a fight, then someone uses a knife ... Things get a bit more organized, you get to know more and more criminals, and the criminal stuff you commit becomes a bit more serious. Suddenly, when I was 19 years old, I only knew criminals! (DEN_12)

In this sense, the young peoples' narratives show how social networks play a key role as mediating factors between structure and agency (Seddon, 2006) and how both drug using and offending are not necessarily to be understood as the outcome of rational choices or decisions. The young peoples' narratives referred to them as the 'almost inevitable result of a street-oriented lifestyle' (Wright et al., 2006, p. 14). Furthermore, the examples above make clear how, in some cases, the link between drug use and offending behaviour cannot be understood without setting it in a context of socio-economic disadvantage (Carnwath & Smith, 2003; Parker & Newcombe, 1987; Pearson, 1987). However, the issue of deprivation emerged as more complex from our data. Using drugs and offending can become part of lifestyles among young people who are not experiencing economic disadvantage. Similarly to what was observed in the UK in relation to street robberies by Wright et al. (2006) and illicit drug distribution by Irwin-Rogers (2019), some offending was explained by our interviewees as related to specific cultural contexts and committed to maintain a sort of hedonistic lifestyle that can explain both offending and drug use.

By doing these crimes, I always had lots of money in my pockets, so I started to buy it [cocaine] often, and use it. (...) Then – this is obvious – having money in your pockets, you go to one place, to another, in night clubs, you know, among alcohol and women (UK_22_PRI_M_21)

There are people who carry out robberies to buy drugs. I don't. I do robberies to get money. I go to make money to spend. I like money, I like many things. (IT_17_PRI_M_19)

Both the desire for hedonism and the lack of concern for consequences of their actions (Wright et al., 2006), observed in previous studies as characterising street cultures, were evident in some of our interviewees' accounts.

I'm on a tag right now for something that happened last year when I was pissed, yeah, which was a very bad decision and I shouldn't have done it. I was 16, I should have thought twice about that. (UK_13_ALT_M_17)

The underworld is that, I mean, the underworld is built by lying people, naive, because they are people who do not grow up, who only know how to steal, make scams, drugs and drug dealing. These are the things, this is the context of the underworld. (IT_28_PRI_M_20)

In the literature, the lack of concern is usually related to the difficulties with self-control, i.e. impulsivity and sensation seeking which both drug use and offending can originate from (Bennett & Brookman, 2008; Crawford et al., 2003; Mann et al., 2017). Indeed, like an Italian interviewee, who immigrated to Italy from Colombia at the age of 7 and was serving his sixth prison sentence, stated, not only substances but also offending behaviours can be addictive. Similarly, one of the interviewees from Poland emphasized the importance of excitement and the sense of power associated with robbery, which itself was preceded by drug use.

I liked to do robberies. Not cocaine nor marijuana can give me the drug [sensation] that robbery gives to me. That is a thing ... How can I explain ... it's like it was a drug. (IT_17_PRI_M_19)

Robbery also brings adrenaline and you can become addicted to it, as from drugs. When I was counting money, I felt incredible euphoria. I stole under the influence of stimulants. I felt that nothing could happen to me. (PL_34_PRI_M_24)

In other cases, lack of concern was reported by interviewees as related to the perception of having nothing to lose. This feature emerged from the analysis of the trajectories which showed how life events or critical moments (cf. Beccaria & Rolando, 2019) – like abandonment, violence, abuse and traumas – can affect both consumption and offending behaviours. As noted by Allen (2007), the death of loved ones can easily increase both drug use and criminal activity because of a general perceived lack of sense of meaning and the feeling of having nothing more to lose.

After that month [i.e. a month spent staying at home after his best friend's death], I just went out in search of stories, I started to do things... I mean, I did not care about police, judges... This is what I did wrong. I did things [use and dealing drugs] without thinking about consequences. Since you came to a point that you do not care, and you say: anyway it can't get worse. (IT_02_PRI_M_19)

Likewise, another young interviewee from Denmark referred to 'bad periods' as factors that potentially increase not only his drug use, but also his offending.

I lost my job. Then I lost my girlfriend. Then my apartment, so I had to move back home to my parents. I felt very low. You are dependent on money to pay your bills, so I started to do all kinds of shit, burglary and so on, and got arrested. (...) when it goes wrong, it also goes down. Then cannabis goes hand in hand with times when things go wrong. (DEN_10)

To conclude, lifestyles mechanisms providing explanation for both drug use and offending are applicable not only in relation to economic and social disadvantage, characterised by a way of with lack of fundamental necessities and needs, but also to more general aspects of youth cultures, including the search for hedonism and excitement.

Conclusions

With a point of departure in Bennett and Holloway (2009) typology and Seddon's (2006) focus on social exclusion, we have shown how drug experienced young people in contact with criminal justice systems narrated the relationship between drug use and offending in complex and multifaceted ways. We argue that the present study contributes new insights to the existing field of scholarly research on the topic adding new possible connections and elaborating on interpretations about the role of different types drugs, economic factors, and cultural contexts.

While the economic mechanisms (Bennett & Holloway, 2009) play a crucial role in some of the young people's narratives, in others, the most traditional pattern – i.e. offending to obtain money for drugs (usually heroin/crack) – emerged as more differentiated based on patterns of use and socio-economic contexts. Dealing cannabis in order to support daily use was a recurrent pattern among young interviewees using this drug only, thereby calling into question the use of the 'addiction' concept as a main explanatory model. Moreover, this pattern was reported not only by young people subjected to social exclusion (Levitas, 2000) due to socio-economic inequalities – like immigrants or young people living in deprived neighbourhoods and facing other issues (e.g. lack of parental care and mental health problems) – but also by young people (e.g. students) who had not grown up in particularly difficult social contexts, but suffered from living in 'bulimic societies' that raise aspirations and desires while providing scarce opportunities for economic success and social recognition (Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Young, 2003). Furthermore, young people's narratives demonstrate that in contexts where the use of cannabis is normalised (Measham & Shiner, 2009; Parker et al., 2002), even selling cannabis is subjected to a certain degree of normalisation (Coomber et al., 2016). Indeed, many interviewees had not realised that they could experience serious legal problems and end up in the criminal justice system.

Therefore, if the concept of social exclusion is still useful in understanding the relationship between drugs and crime (Buchanan, 2004; Foster, 2000; MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Pearson, 2001), we must consider that it is not synonymous with poverty (Seddon, 2006). The concept of relative deprivation (Seddon, 2006) can better describe a broad range of situations narrated by young people, where the attraction of money fostered by the consumer society plays a crucial role. Indeed, some interviewees pointed out that they committed crime because they wanted to buy 'lots of things,' not only substances. Based on our data, we could also argue that the concept of deprivation is often entangled with other issues such as mental health problems and lack of parental care, not necessarily related to economic disadvantage, but often mentioned by young interviewees as reasons to use illegal drugs.

Despite some interviewees minimises the importance of drugs' pharmacological effects in causing offending behaviours, all the links observed by Bennett and Holloway (2009)

– aggression, courage to offend and judgement impairment – did emerge in the data, not only in reference to heroin or cocaine, but also to alcohol, cannabis and NPS. This suggests the need to reflect on the role of intoxication, which can partly explain offending behaviours even in the absence of a real condition of dependence’ traditionally linked to the concept of judgement impairment (Bennett & Holloway, 2009).

Both-direction-connections did emerge, and, in many cases, it was difficult for the interviewees to remember whether offending or use of drugs came first. Moreover, mechanisms are intertwined and vary over time. For this reason, the lifestyles mechanisms seem to be the best explanatory tool in understanding this relationship; however, we use this term in a much broader way compared to that proposed by Bennett and Holloway (2009). On the one hand, we recognise that the pursuit of hedonism and sensation seeking behaviours that are part of youth cultures – are important factors explaining both drug use and offending (Wright et al., 2006). In this sense, given the excitement it entails, committing crimes could also be considered addictive (Kellet & Gross, 2006). However, we claim that certain attitudes playing a role in explaining so called deviant behaviours reflect broader conditions and orientations that are not only the preserve of the youth, but are dominant in consumerist societies (Sulkunen, 2009). On the other hand, we want to underline the role of inequalities in shaping offending and drug patterns, pointing out that in certain cases, offending is perceived by young people as an obvious choice given the lack of legal income opportunities (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002, Beccaria & Rolando, 2019), and the use of drugs is seen as an alternative way to cope with pain, mental health problems (Smith et al., 2017), and suffering related to complicated life conditions due to social inequalities (Beccaria & Rolando, 2019).

In both the above mentioned examples relating to the broad lifestyle explanation (i.e. in cases of social disadvantage as well as relative advantage) using drugs and offending emerged not as the result of ‘real’ rational choices. Rather, they can be seen either as normalised behaviours or as active strategies to increase the quality of life, implying a certain degree of agency (Seddon, 2006).

Despite the limitations of the study – mainly due to the nature of the sample – the results of our study show, on the one hand, how inequalities are still powerful in explaining drug use and offending. On the other hand, they highlight how the risks of getting involved in drug use and offending behaviours also concern young people coming from relatively advantages families, because of the contradictions inherent in societies where the use of (certain) drugs is prohibited and punished, but also socially accepted and widespread (Sulkunen, 2009). Both issues would need to be addressed and prioritised at policy level, alongside health and prevention policies, and should be kept in mind by professionals engaged with this target group.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1. Quotations are accompanied by a code indicating the country, the interview number, the measure (home arrest – HO, therapeutic community – CO, prison – PRI, other alternative measures – ALT), gender (M/F) and the age (no. of years). Only quotations from Denmark are not accompanied by complete information because of anonymity issues.
2. The ‘bottle’ refers to the way for smoking crack, while the ‘monkey’ is a slang term to indicate the compulsion.
3. A benzodiazepine-derived prescription drug available in the illegal market.

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