Ethical implications of a quantitative study that analyzes the drug consumers from a Bucharest neighbourhood

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Abstract: The overall objective is to estimate some parameters that are characteristic to drug use in family, peer group, and also of the influence of such behaviour on the subjects participating to the study.

Materials and methods. The transversal descriptive study was conducted in Bucharest for a period of two months, with the participation of a batch of 44 drug users (70.5% males and 29.5% females). The age of the volunteering subjects ranged between 19 and 43 years (mean age, 31.27±5.81 years). An "omnibus" questionnaire was applied. The results were statistically analysed using SPSS version 21. The statistical instrument used is the non-parametric Chi-square test. The "snowball" type of sampling was used, the community were the study was conducted being more difficult to identify.

Results. Out of the participants to the study, 69.8% had family users, and 97.7% had friends that used drugs. 83.7% of the friends had troubles with the law. 68.2% thought of breaking the law and there is a statistically significant difference (p=0.042), in the sense that among male persons the intention to commit crimes is higher than among females. 61.4% of the respondents felt marginalized, with a statistically significant difference (p=0.003), meaning that more males felt marginalized than females.

Conclusions. As a result of this study, it was found that information campaigns among consumers are necessary to emphasize the risk of becoming a negative model for others, but also for the whole society in order to build a realistic image on the danger of drug use and to create a correct perception on consumers.

Key Words: drugs, family, friends, crime, marginalization.

Drugs leave behind disastrous effects which could only be avoided or controlled and mitigated if each of us would reflect more on the dark side of drugs. Drug abuse is considered a "victimless crime", but, in reality, not only the addicts suffer, the health of millions of people being affected; the socio-economic situation of the individual and his family is affected, and also the quality of his relationships with his family and friends is influenced. Drug use increases healthcare costs, the number of unemployed people and the number of the persons assisted, a deviant behaviour being observed, which affects the individual, relational, health and social contexts.

In Romania drugs have become an increasingly active presence after 1989, the phenomenon registering an explosive growth. The entire Romanian society was unprepared, from the public opinion to the state institutions and legislation. The open borders after 1989, the conflict with Yugoslavia, which made the East-West transit of drugs impossible in both ways on this territory, and also the social context in Romania (the process of social and economic transition, the lack of information about drugs, the legal vacuum, etc.) are among the causes of this development. Also, attempts of producing drugs

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in Romania were detected (small experimental crops of cannabis were detected and there is information on possible laboratories of synthesis and processing of narcotics) [1].

The National Report on drugs in 2015 in Romania New developments and trends [2] shows that, in terms of social indicators, such as occupation and level of education, 59% of those analysed are people without an occupation, 11.4% employees with a permanent contract, 8.1% work without a labour contract and 4.6% are medically retired, while most of the investigated people graduated from gymnasium and professional studies – 41.9%, 24.4% have high school studies, 15.7% completed a form of primary education and 9.4% did not follow any form of education. As noticed in most cases, there are people showing a major risk of exclusion from the labour market, which have unstable financial means and which do not meet the necessary conditions for employment in terms of education – a highly vulnerable population which needs urgent specialized care.

This worldwide context, which has medical and psychosocial severe consequences, imposed the approach, diversification and implementation of complex strategies of combating and reducing of trafficking, consumption, and the effects on individuals and society. In this respect, an effective prophylaxis campaign is necessary, the European officials stating that strategies to prevent drug use should focus primarily on young people, in order to “raise awareness” and make them understand the danger, but this must be done without blame or “stigma”.

The aim of the study is to present some date collected from drug users from a Bucharest district, in order to develop and implement prevention and social reintegration programs adapted to this community.

The overall objective is to estimate some parameters that are characteristic to drug use in family, peer group, and also of the influence of such behaviour on the subjects participating to the study.

The specific objectives of this research are:
1. Highlight the rate of drug users in the families of the participants to the study;
2. Present the rate of drug users in the circles of friends of the participants to the study;
3. Identify the rate of the drug users participating to the study who have felons among friends and the percentage of the subjects who would deliberately break the law;
4. Present the rate of the participants to the study who felt marginalized because of drug use.

Hypotheses

Based on the objectives listed, we have formulated the following hypotheses:
1. The higher the percentage of drug users in family and especially in the circle of friends, the higher the risk of drug users in a larger number of subjects is;
2. The higher the percentage of drug users in the circle of friends, the higher the risk of consuming drugs in a larger number of subject is;
3. The larger the number of offenders in the peer group, the larger the number of drug users who intend to break the law is;
4. The larger the number of drug users in the studied community is, the bigger the number of those who feel marginalized in society, at work, in the family, is.

The research premises. Conceptual perspectives

1. The issue of drug use.

Drug use and trafficking is a complex phenomenon, characterized by permanent mutations, requiring more and more diverse approaches, even in Romania, where the phenomenon has faced new forms of expression [3]. Every year since the 70’s legal and illegal drug use has increased worldwide, becoming one of the major health problems of today’s society. Drug abuse is a social problem caused by its “contagious” characteristics and the ability to affect mostly young people. Drugs can be classified in two major types, namely: illegal drugs (hallucinogens, cannabis/ marijuana/ hashish, cocaine, heroin, methadone, amphetamine, etc.) and accepted, legal drugs (caffeine, tobacco, ethanol/ alcohol, opioids – drugs used legally in medical treatments, etc.) [4]. The drugs context could be influenced by the emergence and spread of the polydrug use and the emergence of new psychoactive substances on the drug market, which are very accessible, but have effects that are still unknown [3].

According to estimates, more than 80 million adults in EU, accounting for nearly a quarter of the adult population, have used illegal drugs at some point in their lives, the use of cannabis being met in most cases (73.6 million). From a country to another, there is a considerable variation in the levels of consumption in a lifetime, from about a third of adults in Denmark, France and the UK to less than one in 10 people in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, Portugal, Romania and Turkey [5].

2. Drug use and the family

Family represents the primary fundamental group of society and has a major role in both the function, the dynamics of a society, and in the personal life of each member, the build of human personality. The nuclear family or the extended family, extended through the educational or socializing function, helps ensure the education of young people so that they integrate in the social life. Viewed from a global social system perspective, this function is, together with the demographic function, the most important of family functions. Through a proper performance of this function, the family brings an outstanding contribution to ensure a proper quality of young people entering the social life, the development of people with a well defined, multilaterally developed personality, a level of training, moral qualities, feelings, beliefs, attitudes of such a nature that it makes them able
to successfully cope with their tasks in the process of socio-economic development of society [6].

Drug use in a family has an impact on the family in general, but also on each member. Thus, according to the family-based and systematic approach theory (by Waldrom, 1998), the deviant behaviour of one of the parents, siblings, creates an adverse family environment, certain dysfunctions being present in the family, which can lead to misunderstandings and a rupture of relations between the members, that can be observed in the consumption behaviour of young people. Learning Theory by G. Homans (1958), A. Bandura (1967), J. Rotter (1977) may explain the fact that children generally imitate the behaviour of their parents, of the people in their entourage, which is why drug use of family member can lead a similar behaviour among the other family members.

3. Drug use and the entourage

Social norms are patterns of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours [7], and individuals are socializing over time spent with family, school, community and religious institutions, in accordance with the prevailing social norms [8]. The peer group becomes particularly important and influential during adolescence [9], when there are several similar interests (such as sports, music, drugs) and the group members tend to share attitudes and common behaviours [10]. In order to be accepted in a peer group, the teenager adopts attitudes and behaviours of the group [11].

Experts have noticed that “the friend” or “the neighbour” is one of the strongest factors of influence, especially among young people and the group often has a greater influence than family. The behaviour by which the member of a group of friends will act in accordance with the requirements of the group only to be accepted by the group (“if you don't smoke with us, you're not one of ours”) is called by sociologists a social normative influence [4].

4. Drug use and crimes

Criminal acts that are committed by drug users are generally represented by: drug trafficking, prostitution, abuse, exploitation, murder, begging, smuggling, robbery (theft, banditry).

According to statistics provided by the Superior Council of Magistracy in 2013, the number of persons convicted for committing drug law offences decreased by 16.7 % compared to 2012, when there was a peak value of this indicator. However, the number has maintained over the years 2001-2010. Therefore, the court decided the guilt of 913 persons (836 men and 77 women), out of which 891 adults (817 men and 74 women) and 22 minors (19 males and 3 females). The largest number of convicted persons was registered in Bucharest (132), which represents 14.46 % of sentenced persons [12].

5. Drug use and marginalization

In the context of marginalization, drug users are often referred as junkies, homeless, vagrants, criminals, beggars, and the attitude of society towards them is to reject, arrest, suspect (of various offenses).

In general, the company exhibits a high degree of intolerance towards what we call former drug users, be they young or adult, because there is mistrust when talking about the fact that such persons may discontinue drug use or that, once recovered, they will not relapse back into the addictive behaviour, but they will behave naturally, like any other individual [4].

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This quantitative study is descriptively transversal and was done in Bucharest for a period of two months, with the participation of a batch of 44 drug users (31 males - 70.5% and 13 females – 29.5%). The age of the volunteering subjects ranged between 19 and 43 years old (mean age, 31.27±5.81 years). Among drug users from the study, 48 % had graduated from middle school, 8% from 8 middle school and high school classes, 16% from a vocational school, 2% from a university and 6% had graduated from post-university studies. Only 22.7% of drug users that participated to the study had a job. An “omnibus” questionnaire was applied, with different topics, containing 46 items. The questions were both open and closed. For this paper we used the items that relate to drug use as part of a family, circle of friends, and to the criminality among friends, the intention to break the law and to whether the subjects feel marginalized.

The unit of analysis was the individual, each participant to the study that use drugs being questioned on age, gender, school level, family, friends aspects, work and self-perception. Finally, we gathered together all the data from this people and we tried to build generalizations on drug users groups from the neighbourhood studied.

The results were statistically analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 21. The statistical tool used is represented by the nonparametric Chi-square test.

The “snowball” type sampling was used, because the community of drug users studied is hardly accessible, more suspicious, but the members know each other and are willing to work with people they trust. For the research on addicts we often resort to this improbable methods, which is particular in the sense that it is not used to estimate the characteristics of the general population, but to estimate the characteristics of the “hidden” populations (rare, hard to find). The “hidden” or “rare” or “hard to find” term is used to generally refer to populations that we have no official information about or that represent less than 2% of the population. The working principle of this method of sampling requires the identification of a number of respondents who will be interviewed, based on specific reasoning; the respondents will identify (recommend) other respondents who will
become objects of the research. Among the advantages of the "snowball" survey is the economic means and the access to the hidden population, whose members are involved in drug use, behaviour that is considered deviant, and who can be vulnerable, being socially stigmatized and, therefore, difficult to engage in formal studies with traditional methods. The disadvantages of this method are the representativeness and sampling problems – because the units were not randomly extracted, being dependent on the subjective choice of the first respondents, with the possibility that the results of this study may be distorted, by the inclusion in the sample of individuals with interrelationships, over those who are "isolated" [13].

We used the self-administered survey technique on the field, which consisted in the distribution and subsequent collection of questionnaires, in order not to influence the quality of responses, leaving enough time for completion.

Limitations of the study: the group consists of a small number of subjects, as this type of population is difficult to identify and recruit to participate to the proposed research, because of social stigma and their legal status, in most cases. The results obtained by the participating of the small number of consumers do not allow a proper generalization for the entire population of drug users in our country. In order to track the influence of family and peer group on drug use, extensive studies on a larger number of subjects are necessary.

The participation in this study was voluntary, after a written, informed and freely expressed consent. The study complied with the ethical rules of the scientific research, always respecting the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, the subjects being able to withdraw at any time during the study.

**RESULTS**

**Frequencies**

Tables 1 and 2 show that most of the respondents of both genders come from families where drugs were consumed. Referring to drug use in the family, there was no statistically significant gender difference (Pearson Chi Square=2.543 (2), p=0.280).

Tables 3 and 4 show that almost all subjects, except for one, had friends that were drug users; there is no statistically significant difference between the two genders (Pearson Chi Square=0.429 (1), p=0.512).

Tables 5 and 6 show that most of the friends of the subjects participating in the study, both male and female, had problems with the law, with no statistically significant difference (Pearson Chi Square=3.623 (2), p=0.163).

From Tables 7 and 8 we may notice that most of the participants to the study have thought of breaking the law and there is a statistically significant difference (Pearson Chi Square=4.127 (1), p=0.042), meaning that among males, the crime intention is higher than among females.

Tables 9 and 10 show that most of the participants to the study have felt marginalized in their family, at work, in society. There is a statistically significant difference (Pearson Chi Square=11.399 (2), p=0.003), meaning that more male persons felt marginalized than females.

**Table 1. Batch distribution by gender and family drug use**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>I don't know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Batch distribution based on family drug use**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Batch distribution by gender and drug use in the circle of friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Batch distribution by drug use in the circle of friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Batch distribution by gender and crime in the circle of friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>No</th>
<th>I don't know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6. Batch distribution by crime in the circle of friends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study shows that among most drug users who participated in the study, there were family members who used drugs. In our current society, family remains the main source of attachment, education and socialization for people. Therefore, every family and each family member are uniquely affected by behavioural disorders influenced by drug use. For the children belonging to these families, there is an increased risk of developing a disorder caused by drug use [14]. Certain studies of families with disorders caused by drug use show that these models significantly influence the child’s development and the likelihood that such a child has emotional, behavioural and drug use problems [15]. The theory of attachment confirms that the parental attachment system, which has been developed during childhood, will affect their ability to form healthy attachments to their own children and other adults. Drug use is influenced by genetic and environmental factors and the impact will vary according to gender roles and family drug users [16].

Osborne and Berger have noticed that children living with a drug addicted parent will show a greater risk of developing behaviour and health issues. This risk is far greater when both parents have drug abuse problems. More than that, children with addicted fathers are exposed to a higher potential risk of developing behaviour and health problems when they inhabit the same space as their parents, but interestingly enough this risk persists also when they are not living together [17].

In Romania, public policy objectives in the field of drug prevention in the family, aim to increase the awareness and responsibility of families, in order to provide positive role models to children, by information, education and awareness programs on the effects of drugs and by developing the proactive role of families in children’s lives, in order to form or strengthen the skills for increasing the influence of protection factors [2]. The peer pressure is often visible in the peer group, a term that suggests that friends try to directly persuade others to imitate their behaviour [18], most consumers participating in the study being part of groups that encourage consumption.

The study conducted by Foo et al., suggests that there are more factors that determine drug use, including the fact that the participants were not mature enough when they were forced to work illegally and, thus, they were influenced by friends to start using drugs [19]. In the study conducted by Annabel Boys et al., it was found that among the reasons for using cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamines there is the reason of “continuing” a night out with friends and to enjoy the company of friends, female consumers having even more chances to use cocaine [20].

According to a study conducted by the Institute for Crime Research and Prevention within the General Inspectorate of Police, and extracted from the Journal of Assistance and Social Pedagogy “Childcare” nr 6/2000 for the period from 1990-1996 in our country, there were discovered 259 drug users aged 26-35 years for most of the users (137 cases). Also, the mentioned study showed that a percentage of 64.5% had no job, which raised a question mark about the way in which they paid for drugs [21].

Although there is no pharmacological reason for which heroin addicts would commit crimes, most of them do and often repeatedly and in large numbers. Following heroin use, they become unable to work, but the need to administrate the drugs is overwhelming, irresistible and they have to find ways to do it. They are trying to obtain drugs by committing various crimes [22].

Most of the drug users who participate in the study intended to break the law and most often committed crimes to procure drugs. Their friends had an important tole, since most of have committed at least one offense punishable by law. The rate of participants in the study who didn’t have a job is very high, slightly above the rate of those who intended to break the law, by committing actions condemned by the law, in order to procure drugs, in the absence of any other income.

Drug users are marginalized in many societies, as the research conducted and other studies present in the specific literature show. In the study conducted by
Krawczyk et al., the respondents expressed the feeling of being stigmatized by citizens, authorities, healthcare professionals, and they also expressed feelings of shame to their own misery; reducing stigma and moralizing speeches related to drugs, especially among health personnel and legal help, may encourage consumers to ask for help [23].

Vivas shows in his paper [24] that in the scenario ask for help [23].

Drug users are often labelled as “thieves”, “drug addicts”, “marginalized”, “poor”, “people that left school” or “unemployed” and they are subject to double discrimination, first of all because they are drug users, as secondly because they live in poverty. In Romania, in terms of social reintegration, when social and family conditions related or associated with drug use are most often characterized by marginalization, isolation, lack of material, social, professional or educational resources or by situations that interfere with the process of therapeutic recovery, the response will take into account the need to provide an adapted support to the needs of beneficiaries, by providing psycho-social intensive measures and, when appropriate, readily available measures [12].

CONCLUSIONS

Following this study, we noticed that most of the participants belong to families and peer groups where drugs were used, the assumptions made in the respect being confirmed. If the family and the peer group had negative influences on the onset of drug use among close ones, most of the drug users seeking treatment or contacting emergency services for problems caused by drug use did so because they were urged by family or friends, according to the National Report on Drugs 2015 in Romania, submitted by the National Antidrug Agency.

Crime offences (referring to people who had criminal records: custodial or suspended sentences, criminal investigations, criminal fines) among friends is great, as well as the intention of subjects to cause criminal acts, the related hypothesis being confirmed. In most cases the subjects have produced various crimes, but in order to avoid a sense of shame and even fear, we preferred this kind of formulation. Most drug users underrate themselves, they become weak and that is mainly because of the group they belong to, which makes them believe they are incapable and have no chance, the theory of learned powerlessness (helplessness) being applied. In the case of drug users there is also the complex of inferiority, due to negative experiences (such as convictions, childhood and teenage problems, socio-economic issues) that generated feelings of frustration, which negatively impacted them and their close ones. Also, there is the need of affirmation in the group, which explains the influence of the group and family that determine drug use and crimes.

Drug users are often labelled as “losers”, with no chance of integrating into society. The hypothesis is confirmed in the sense that they are often marginalized in both their family (especially of there are other consumers in the family), or in their workplace or society, mainly due to drug use and physical and mental disorders caused by drug abuse, but also due to the criminal background or illnesses (hepatitis C, hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS, all serious, transmissible diseases). If the job applicants are drug users, their chance of getting a stable or occasional job is lower, adding to that their educational level, which is low, for most of them.

This study attempted to present some concrete, measurable issues of drug use in a suburb of the capital and we wanted it to be a starting point in evaluating these communities and the level of awareness and perception of the people of this particular group.

The study shows that information campaigns are necessary among consumers, regarding the prevention of associated diseases, the risk of overdose and intervention, the risk of creating negative models for others. Also, it is required that information campaigns of the whole society are created, in order to form a realistic image of the danger posed by drug consumption and a correct perception of consumers, in the sense of granting opportunity of integration and social reinsertion. There is also the need to develop and implement training and labour market integration programs for drug users.

This study tries to follow the epistemological norms that respect the values of participants, an essential condition of any scientific research, not willing to abide by them just for the sake of obtaining some impressive results.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest concerning this article.

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References


