Cannabis discourses in contemporary Sweden
Continuity and change

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Abstract
The aim of this thesis is to study how cannabis is constructed in contemporary Sweden, which policy responses are promoted as rational, and how international cannabis trends are received in this context. The four papers are the result of analyzing empirical material from three different sub-studies: 1) a qualitative study of online discussions about cannabis and drug policy, 2) a qualitative and comparative study of print media articles from 2002 and 2012, and 3) a qualitative study of oral presentations from cannabis information symposia. All papers are based on a social constructionist approach.

A point of departure is that attitudes and regulations on cannabis have changed in large parts of the Western world. In Sweden, however, strict prohibition of cannabis is still central in the national drug laws. Some of the main findings can thus be gathered in discussions on continuity and change. In Swedish online discussions, there seems to be a strong desire to change the national cannabis policy in line with international developments. This discussion propagates alternative views on cannabis, in which comparisons to alcohol become vital and more liberal cannabis policies become logical. These discussions are also characterized by continuity, as many arguments for liberal cannabis policies seem to be based on traditional social democratic values and prohibitionist “scaremongering” arguments. Continuity is also what seems to characterize traditional print media, where cannabis is generally portrayed as a potent and illegal drug producing social problems. However, this arena also shows signs of change, as the material from 2012 includes stories on cannabis as an economic asset as well as a recreational substance. Both traditional print media and cannabis information symposia focus on youth consumers, who are seen as particularly vulnerable to cannabis effects. Such constructions seem important for protecting prohibition from international influences and for a continuous discourse centered on the dangers of cannabis.

It is concluded that cannabis appears to be able to represent almost anything. As such it can be “used” for any purpose to promote a whole set of ideas related to policy often based on what is considered as scientific evidence. Depending on the context, it thus seems possible that cannabis is medicinal, recreational, harmful, and addictive. If so, and if all of these constructions are in some way “real,” then it is suggested that cannabis necessitates a much more tailored and nuanced response than that which prohibition can offer.

Keywords: cannabis, Sweden, discourse, social construction, prohibition, legalization, de-criminalization, internet, online, media, professional, symposia.

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CANNABIS DISCOURSES IN CONTEMPORARY SWEDEN

Josefin Månsson
Cannabis discourses in contemporary Sweden
Continuity and change
Josefin Månsson
Till Jacob och Hillevi

Flygplan utan vingar
Kinder utan rodnad
Jag utan dig
Piff utan Puff
Pajas utan cirkus
Skeppsburen utan land i sikte
Vad vore jag utan dig?

(Text H. Hellström)
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Stockholm, April 2017
Josefin Månsson
List of papers

The present doctoral thesis rests on the four papers listed below:


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Illegal drugs are a highly complex, sensitive, and contentious issue. Also, how we relate to and handle them has changed throughout history (Courtwright, 2001; MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969); what was acceptable 100 years ago might not be today and vice versa. Recently, this has been illustrated by a change in attitudes toward and regulations of cannabis in large parts of the Western world. For example, the substance that used to be prohibited in almost every country in the world is now legalized in several US states and decriminalized in large parts of Europe. In Sweden, however, strict prohibition of cannabis is still central in the national drug laws, and consequently how Sweden tackles cannabis is defined by continuity in an international environment characterized by change.

Drugs can obviously be assigned with various meanings between different geographical contexts. This is also the theoretical backdrop of this thesis; how we talk about drugs influences how we relate to and handle them. Looking at the history of what today is considered “bad” and illicit drugs shows that how we relate to these substances is based on more than just scientific evidence on the effects of use. It has been and is a process of defining the substance, its users, and its potential pros and cons. Therefore, this is not a study about the effects of a certain drug, if it is good or bad, dangerous or harmless. Instead, I am interested in how a certain drug, in this case cannabis, is constructed through discussion and conflict, and how this might influence how the substance is regulated and managed in Swedish society.

This thesis is thus based on a social constructionist and discourse analytical approach, where I consider language as a constituent of the social world, social identities, and social relations, as well as a promoter of social change. In a broad sense I am concerned with power; it is in the construction of boundaries between normality and deviance and how we can speak about a certain issue in a certain context that we find this power. More specifically, the topic of this thesis is the constructions of cannabis in contemporary Sweden. Here, “contemporary” refers mainly to the years after the turn of the millennium up until now. It is within this time frame that we see a dynamic international development of cannabis-related policy and debate.

Growing up in a popular university town in Sweden, I found from my early teens that cannabis was all around. Close friends were using the substance regularly, cannabis plants could be found in more than one closet along the student corridors where I frequently hung out, and it was not uncommon for a
“joint” to be passed around at a party. Long-term adverse effects of the drug were rarely discussed, but as some of my friends got caught by the police and sometimes experienced being harassed by them, the effects of prohibition were occasionally up for debate. After secondary school I lived abroad for longer and shorter periods (e.g., in Spain, Argentina, and Colombia). It dawned on me then that in these environments the legal status of cannabis was never an issue for the everyday user; this was also emphasized in my Bachelor’s thesis, which I completed in Bogotá, Colombia (Hedén & Månsson, 2010). That there were different approaches to this substance was fascinating, and it was in light of this inconsistency that this project started to take form.

This thesis was initiated in 2011, and the idea for the project emanated from a notion that perspectives on and handling of cannabis were changing internationally. At the time, no country or state had yet legalized cannabis, but it had been decriminalized by several countries (e.g., Portugal and Italy). The international debate seemed to shift its focus away from control toward harm reduction by, for example, discussing drug use as a matter of public health rather than as an issue of crime and punishment (e.g., Latin American Commission on Drug and Democracy). Also, the referendum in California in 2010 was a signal that public opinion (at least in the US) was changing: about 47% voted “yes” to legalizing cannabis in the US state. Given my initial fascination for the inconsistent handling of the substance, this international change spurred my interest in looking closer at the phenomenon of cannabis in Sweden.

Traditionally, there has been massive support in Sweden for strict laws against cannabis use due to its potential dangers. The substance has certainly been an “ideal enemy” that all political parties, and a lion’s share of the general public, have agreed to fight (Christie & Bruun, 1985). However, as became clear when comparing Sweden to other international contexts, not everyone agrees with the contention that cannabis is specifically dangerous. Around the world, scholars, lobbyists, politicians, and lay persons are convinced that it is not as dangerous as some legal drugs (such as alcohol and tobacco), and that its use might even be beneficiary and medicinal. As it turned out, the changes one could see in 2011 were only the beginning. During the years of this project, cannabis has become a “hot potato” in international policy and debate. Both recreational and medical use of cannabis has been legalized in several countries and US states, which violates both international as well as national drug laws. Also, the way Sweden handles cannabis has become increasingly criticized as counterproductive; criminalization of the drug is said to do more harm than good (see, for example, Goldberg, 2011; Inciardi, 1991; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995).

In light of such changing global perspectives on cannabis and cannabis policy, it seems vital to study how the change has been received in Sweden. How these inconsistencies in cannabis policy worldwide are handled is a core
issue for drug policy as well as public health. From international perspectives, Sweden is often considered a liberal country (e.g., in relation to gender issues), which is usually (and wrongly) thought to also apply to cannabis policy. This contrast, combined with fading international support for cannabis prohibition, makes Sweden a unique context of particular interest in relation to cannabis. Despite this, knowledge on how cannabis is discussed in Sweden today, and how different local actors relate to international changes, is very limited. The contribution of this thesis is thus to study how cannabis is constructed in Sweden today. As such, this study falls within a long tradition of social work research on societal responses to drug problems (see, for example, Bergmark & Oscarsson, 1988; Ekendahl, 2001; Samuelsson, 2015). Drug use and misuse can be seen as one of the most persistent social problems to be addressed by social work practice and research (e.g., Goldberg, 2005; Hübner, 2001).

As one might suspect, drug-liberal voices have previously not been especially loud among Swedish politicians or in the traditional Swedish print media (Gould, 1996). However, with these new international trends it is important to ask how pro-cannabis voices might impact debate and policy in a traditionally prohibitionist country like Sweden, and how this is dealt with by actors who react on and influence cannabis policy issues. Also, in new media outlets, such as online forums, previous research concludes that drug-liberal voices can make themselves heard and impact both public opinion and policy. Online, people can be anonymous, avoiding the stigma that comes from saying controversial things. This, among other things, makes internet a place where “new” and provocative opinions and arguments can grow: could it be a nexus for drug liberals in Sweden?

Following these considerations, I chose to approach the topic of my thesis by listening to and analyzing discussions, “talk”, texts, and presentations by three different kind of actors from different social arenas; online discussions, traditional print media, and policy dissemination at cannabis information symposia. Cannabis is of course assigned with meanings by other actors (e.g., police, popular culture, and information campaigns) as well, and shaped in dialogue with other societal discourses that I could have included. But by choosing the approach I did, I could capture different cannabis meanings and struggles on how to define cannabis use, users, and policy. Also, the actors that are given voice in this thesis can be said to be key in assigning meaning to drugs; both journalists and professional representatives (such as politicians, researchers, and service providers) have traditionally been argued to be among the most important actors in shaping the conceptualization of the drug problem (e.g., Laursen, 1996; Olsson, 1994a), and internet messages about drugs have become increasingly noticed as an important influence on the drugs issue (e.g., Boyer, Shannon & Hibberd, 2005; Murguía, Tackett-Gibson, & Lessem, 2007). These actors can also be said to represent both “official” and “unofficial” societal arenas. Their views on cannabis use, users, and policy are interesting to compare, because they allow for different and competing moral,
juridical, and scientific approaches. From a social work perspective, it is also important to include views on cannabis from both professional service providers (such as social workers, school personnel) working with users, and from users and activists (that can be seen as potential service users).

Consequently, cannabis is a conflicted topic, and how it is handled can be seen as constructing what is normal and what is deviant. It is therefore a delicate issue to be dealt with in social work. Due to the conflicts, it can be difficult for social work practitioners to navigate the field and meet cannabis users and cannabis activism respectfully. Drawing on a broad approach, studying different arenas, I try to untangle some of these conflicts. It is vitally important for professional policy players, practitioners, and cannabis users to understand the different knowledge claims within this field.

Aim

A backdrop for this thesis is that views and perceptions on cannabis and its users are not given “truths.” Instead, I see them as products of how different actors in society have talked about, defined, and handled the substance. Cannabis and its users have been “constructed” through processes of interaction between a wide array of actors in different social, cultural, scientific, and political contexts. The overall aim is to study these processes, and to understand how they have evolved in Sweden during a period around the new millennium. Certainly, in some aspects these processes are rooted further back in time, which will also be noticed. This aim thus addresses three interrelated analytical levels. On one level, the focus is on how meaning is assigned to cannabis, cannabis use/users, and cannabis-related policies, and what this meaning presupposes and excludes. On another level, the focus is on how various scientific and ideological considerations contribute to assigning different meanings to cannabis and cannabis policy, with the overall aim to study power and resistance. On yet another level, attention is directed toward how international policy and debate influence perceptions of cannabis and policy at the local level.

To enable a broad and meaningful analysis, the thesis consists of three sub-studies (based on different empirical materials) that focus on both “official” perspectives (professional policy players and print media), and on “unofficial” or “oppositional” perspectives (online activists) on cannabis. As such, the sub-studies are based in different contexts that are relevant for the aim of this study, as they can be assumed to represent different views on cannabis use and policy, and because the actors in these contexts relate to and challenge each other. The four papers of this thesis are the result of analyzing the empirical material in the three sub-studies. The papers share a core focus on how meanings are assigned to cannabis, and all of the papers are based on a social constructionist approach recognizing that the world can be constructed in
different ways; what meaning is attributed to cannabis depends on the actor and on the surrounding context (see *Theoretical framework* for further discussion on social constructionism). A broad aim in all papers is thus to move toward a more comprehensive understanding of how cannabis use, users, and policy are subjective, and cultural constructs that can be challenged and reshaped.

More specifically the four papers included in this study seek to answer the following questions:

1. How do participants in online discussions construct cannabis, the use, and the users in relation to other substances?
2. What political demands are articulated in online discussions on cannabis legalization, and how are they linked to preferred policy measures and regulations?
3. What cannabis discourses dominate Swedish print media, and is there a change over time?
4. How do professional policy players legitimize current Swedish cannabis policy, what are the underlying assumptions, and what are the effects?
Background

This chapter introduces the subject of this thesis through previous research. As this relates to several research fields (social work, media, addiction, policy, etc.), it is important to include findings that are seen as significant within these different knowledge traditions. I therefore outline what the literature says about cannabis effects, patterns of use, cultural meanings of cannabis, how cannabis is regulated internationally and in Sweden, along with how cannabis is debated and discussed in relation to policy. The scientific and political context of this project is vital, because actors in all arenas studied here refer extensively to “what research says” and “how cannabis is regulated abroad.” As a point of reference it is thus useful for the reader to have some background information about this. That said, this chapter is not to be seen as a full-scale analysis of the scientific knowledge and political regulation of cannabis, but rather as a summary of some important areas of scientific and political interest.

The questions that I seek to answer in this chapter are: What meanings are attached to cannabis, cannabis use, and cannabis users in science, policy, and media? In relation to this, how is cannabis addressed politically and how are different cannabis policies motivated?

In the first part of the chapter the focus is on cannabis use and users, while the second part focuses on cannabis regulations and policy discussions. I concentrate on research and policy regulations in Europe and the US for several reasons; there is much more data and research available for these areas, and they have traditionally been the drug-consuming part of the world with substantially higher use rates (Room, Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter, 2010).

Cannabis: The substance and its effects

There is a large body of research on cannabis use and effects of use. I have identified certain areas as key in previous research and this section is structured according to these areas. Using the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014), the headlines below can thus be seen as nodal points in a scientific discourse on cannabis (for a definition of nodal points see Theoretical framework). The vast majority of cannabis research stems from (bio)medical and epidemiological research. Comparatively, there are surprisingly few studies based in the social sciences. The search term “cannabis” at the Web of Science for the period 2006–2016 showed more than
3600 records within psychiatry and more than 1300 within neuroscience, but only 18 from the discipline of social work (for a similar search see, Pedersen, 2009). As social science is the home field of this thesis, the focus on the physical and psychological effects of the substance in this background section might be surprising. However, in a thesis on cannabis and discourse it is necessary to present an overview of the most salient areas of research in the field. The choice to include such a section is also guided by the content of the cannabis “talk” studied in this thesis. The results from both epidemiologic and (bio)medical research on health effects have a high status in all discussions on cannabis, and many times seem to structure what can and cannot be said.

Pharmacological meanings of cannabis

The substance
It is common for most studies on cannabis to set off by describing cannabis as a substance derived from the female hemp plant Cannabis sativa (e.g., ElSohly & Slade, 2005; Iverson, 2007; McLaren, Swift, Dillon, & Allsop, 2008). Usually, plant products are classified into three main forms; extracts such as cannabis resin (pressed plant secretions, known as, e.g., “hashish”), herbal cannabis (dried leaves and flowering tops, known as, e.g., “marijuana” and “weed”), and distillation of active ingredients of the plant (a mixture known as cannabis oil) (Room et al., 2010). The primary psychoactive constituent is described to be delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) (Iverson, 2007). Cannabidiol (CBD) is also defined as a major compound in cannabis, and its effects are said to be antagonistic to THC (Bergamaschi et al., 2011). Thus, the ratio of CBD to THC is argued to affect the psychoactivity of the plant. The ratio between the compounds is stated to vary greatly between different plants, and the THC level is often described as having increased through breeding during the years (Corrigan, 2008; McLaren et al., 2008). In addition, cannabis is said to contain at least 500 active chemical components, of which the physical and psychological impacts on brain and behavior are not fully isolated and understood (ElSohly & Slade, 2005). The physical form and the psychoactive ingredients are usually the traits used to describe the substance in (bio)medical and epidemiological research.

Short-term effects of cannabis
Cannabis is typically described in terms of being smoked in a “joint” or a pipe in the form of marijuana or hashish, as smoking the substance is said to be the quickest way to generate desired effects (Iverson, 2007). A cannabis “high” is said to last approximately from one to three hours if the substance is smoked (Corrigan, 2008; UNODC, 2011). If the substance is eaten, the effect is said to be delayed and last longer (Corrigan, 2008). Physical effects that are emphasized are increased heart rate, relaxation of bronchial passages, and red
eyes. Behavioral effects are described as depending on dose and potency of the substance as well as on previous experience and present use setting (Hall, 2015; Hall & Degenhardt, 2009). However, some typical effects are stated to be feelings of euphoria, altered time-sense, cognitive impairment, and relaxation followed by sleepiness, anxiety, or paranoid thoughts when the first effects subside (Hall, 2009; UNODC, 2011). Psychotic symptoms and paranoia are described to be less common, and pleasurable effects such as laughter and talkativeness as more prominent among experienced cannabis users (Goode, 1972; Hall, 2015; Witton, 2008).

Cannabis overdoses, or acute toxicity, appear to be extremely rare as compared to other psychoactive substances (Corrigan, 2008; Witton, 2008). Cannabis poisoning leading to human deaths is almost unheard of in the medical literature (Hall, 2015). Instead, the most acute adverse effect of cannabis use is probably motor vehicle accidents caused by cannabis-intoxicated drivers. Skills important for driving such as reaction, coordination, and attention are described as affected by impaired cognitive and behavioral performance due to cannabis use. Drivers intoxicated with cannabis are described as having doubled the risk of motor vehicle crashes (Hall, 2015).

**Long-term effects of cannabis**

There is a substantial body of research on the health effects of cannabis use. EMCDDA (2008) reports that commercial publishers alone produce around 20 books on cannabis every year, and specialized and scientific literature by far exceeds this. Still, the ill-effects of long-term and chronic cannabis use are said to be uncertain in several areas, because there are very few valid studies providing necessary detailed epidemiological evidence about health effects of cannabis (Hall, 2009; Witton, 2008). Epidemiological evidence on health outcomes from cannabis use have been found to be challenging to evaluate, as alternative explanations (other drug use, genetic predisposition, etc.) of observed associations are difficult to exclude, and the product (the “joint”) is not standardized or consumed in the same pattern (Hall, 1994; Room et al., 2010; Witton, 2008). The widespread use of the drug is nevertheless seen to reflect a belief that cannabis is a “soft” drug much less dangerous than illegal drugs that are considered “hard” (such as heroin or amphetamine), or even accepted substances such as alcohol and tobacco (van Ours & Williams, 2012). This belief also tallies with scientific evaluations of the harms of drug use, indicating that cannabis is ranked as a less dangerous drug than “hard” drugs and to some extent alcohol and tobacco (Hall, Room, & Bondy, 1999; Nutt, King, Saulsbury, & Blakemore, 2007; Nutt, King, & Phillips, 2010; Room, 2005).

However, long-term heavy use of cannabis appears to be associated with health risks such as respiratory diseases, cognitive impairment of attention and memory, and cancer (Hall, 2009; Meier et al., 2012; Room et al., 2010; UNODC, 2011; van Ours & Williams, 2012; Witton, 2008). Although most
cannabis users do not seem to become dependent on the substance, the use is also associated with development of cannabis dependence syndrome (Hall, 2015; van Ours & Williams, 2012). Cannabis dependence seems to be characterized by an impaired control over the use of the substance along with withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, loss of appetite, insomnia and depression (Witton, 2008). For those who have ever used cannabis, the risk of dependence is stated to be around 9%, which could be compared to the stated risk of dependence for nicotine (32%), heroin (23%), and alcohol (15%) (Hall, 2015).

The mental health risks of psychotic disorders have also been increasingly researched, with, as it seems, a growing body of evidence suggesting that the use of cannabis is associated with an increased risk of psychosis or psychotic symptoms (Andréasson, Engström, Allebäck, & Rydberg, 1987; Degenhardt & Hall, 2001; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Fergusson, Horwood & Swain-Campbell, 2003; Hall, 2009; Hall, 2015; Hall & Degenhardt, 2000; Room et al., 2010; van Os et al., 2002). Several studies report that there is a dose–response relationship between frequency of cannabis use and schizophrenia or psychosis: the more drug use, the higher risk of developing schizophrenia or psychosis (van Os et al., 2002; Zammit, Allebäck, Andréasson, Lundberg, & Lewis, 2002). A hypothesis that has received some scientific support is that a small minority of cannabis users might be more vulnerable to the psychotic effects of cannabis (Witton, 2008). However, the issue of “cannabis-psychosis” (psychotic symptoms caused by cannabis use) is according to some scholars highly contentious, because the scientific support seems weak, partly because it is not seen to be clear if the incidence of psychosis has changed over the period of substantial increases in cannabis use among young adults (Degenhardt, Hall, & Lynskey, 2003; Hall & Degenhardt, 2000). Regarding the relationship between cannabis use and other mental health disorders such as depression or increased risk for suicide, studies have reported mixed results (Room et al., 2010).

Regarding social effects, cannabis use has been associated with impaired learning, poor school performance, and early school dropout (Hall, 2015). However, there seem to be different hypotheses on which factor is influential in this relationship: is it cannabis use that contributes to poor educational attainment (Kandel, Davies, Karus, & Yamaguchi, 1986), is it poor school performance that influences cannabis use (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992), or are there other common factors that influence this (Donovan & Jessor, 1985)? In relation to this, research on cannabis and cognition also seems to be an area of growing interest, with a number of studies being published in recent years (e.g., Jackson et al., 2016; Mokrysz et al., 2016). A study frequently cited in the empirical material in this thesis is the Dunedin study from New Zealand, which suggests that frequent cannabis use, especially in early ages, can result in enduring cognitive impairments and a
drop in IQ (Meier et al., 2012). The results, however, seem contentious, according to other studies (e.g., Schreiner & Dunn, 2012).

Patterns of cannabis use

Cannabis prevalence
Cannabis is usually described to be the most consumed illegal drug both internationally and in Sweden (Hibell et al., 2011). It is said to constitute around 80% of the illegal drug market (Room et al., 2010), and research describes various patterns of using cannabis, ranging from experimental and recreational use to medical and addictive use.

In Europe, lifetime consumption is roughly estimated to about 25% of the adult population aged 15–64 (EMCDDA, 2016). However, this seems to vary greatly between countries, with figures ranging from approximately 1% (Turkey) to 36% (Denmark) (EMCDDA, 2016). Sweden appears to be among the countries with a comparatively low consumption at 14% (EMCDDA, 2016). Sweden is also among countries with the lowest count of recent use in Europe, with only about 2% of the adult population having tried cannabis the last year (EMCDDA, 2010). The low prevalence numbers in Sweden are often credited to the strict drug policy (e.g., Swedish National Institute of Public Health, 1993; UNODC, 2007). However, cannabis use seems to have followed the same wave-like pattern in most Western countries. Put simply, the pattern of use is said to have peaked during the late 1970s, declined during the 1980s, risen again in the 1990s and then become more or less stabilized (Hall & Degenhardt, 2009; Korf, 2008; Vicente, Olszewski, & Matias, 2008). Therefore it seems that the trends in cannabis use are to a great extent influenced by factors that are not unique to any specific country, unlike in the case of, for example, drug policies (Asmussen, 2008; Korf, 2002). Researchers have still not managed to explain what these factors are, but youth culture and globalization are described as important influences in making cannabis more or less popular (Room et al., 2010).

Also, as a consequence of its illegality, which makes people hesitant to answer questions about their use, it seems difficult to measure consumption rates, particularly for the purpose of international comparisons. That said, the ESPAD surveys and EMCDDA annual reports are considered some of the most reliable sources of international comparative data. These surveys report that many individuals only use the substance on a few sporadic occasions, and that it is only a small group that continues to engage in regular or daily cannabis use for a longer period. The highest rates of use seem to be among youths, peaking somewhere in the 20s, to be given up before the mid-30s (Room et al., 2010). Also, as with other illegal substances, cannabis is described to be more common among males (Vicente et al., 2008).
Cannabis as a gateway

In Sweden (and other countries), cannabis has politically been viewed as a gateway drug; a starting point for drug users that in time will initiate use of “hard” drugs. Research has suggested that use of cannabis (and tobacco and alcohol) predicts progression to later use of other illicit drugs (Kandel et al., 1986; Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1984), and that higher frequencies of cannabis use increase the risk of subsequent “hard” drug use (Ellickson, Hays, & Bell, 1992; Fergusson & Horwood, 2000). It has also been suggested that adolescent drug initiation usually follows a certain pattern; i.e., “hard” drugs are rarely consumed before cannabis (Ellickson et al., 1992; Fergusson & Horwood, 2000; Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1984).

Researchers have found different explanations for the gateway pattern. One explanation is biochemical, suggesting that the use of cannabis alters the brain in such a way that drug use becomes “normal.” For example, Ellgren, Spano, and Hurd (2007) suggest that cannabis use alters the opioid system of the brain into promoting subsequent opioid use. Other researchers propose that cannabis use is associated with an increased risk of using other illicit drugs, and that cannabis users are prone to use a wider variety of illicit drugs but that it remains unclear which mechanisms underlie this causal model (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2006). But there are also explanations based on social models, relating the gateway effect to personal relationships and involvement in drug-using subcultures rather than the chemical composition of the drug (Goode, 1972; Johnson, 1972).

It is not only mechanisms behind the gateway pattern that are highly contentious, the gateway effect in itself is also questioned. The correlation between cannabis use and “hard” drug use is usually not debated, but it is the translation of this statistical correlation into causality that is questioned (Goode, 1972). For example, Morrall, McCaffrey, and Paddock (2002) suggest that although the gateway effect may exist, scientific evidence does not favor this explanation over alternative explanations suggesting that cannabis and “hard” drug initiation are correlated due to the common factor of a high propensity for drug use in general. Also, Degenhardt and colleagues (2010) analyzed cross-country data showing that the strength of such associations may be driven by background factors instead of causal mechanisms. Although they were rare, Degenhardt et al. also reported that variability in the gateway pattern was seen across countries, which suggested that the gateway theory is not undisputable. Even though researchers are disputing the effect cannabis has on subsequent drug use, the idea of cannabis as a gateway drug certainly has influenced drug policies worldwide (Golub & Johnson, 2002). Despite the lack of national studies on the gateway effect in Sweden, the theory seems to have been vital in defending prohibition policy (Goldberg, 2011).
Cultural meanings of cannabis

**Cannabis cultures and user identities**

As presented above, there is a large body of (bio)medical and epidemiological studies on cannabis. However, social science has also produced a substantial amount of research focusing on the cultural meanings of cannabis use and cannabis-using cultures (e.g., Aldridge, Measham, & Williams, 2011; Becker, 1963; Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Rødner, 2005; Sandberg, 2012 & 2013; Yablonsky, 1968), and the associations between cannabis use and different user group characteristics (e.g. Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998; Parker, Williams, & Aldridge, 2002; Pedersen, 2009; Rødner Sznitman, 2007a; Suchman, 1968; Young, 1971). The literature has thus provided detailed descriptions of cannabis use and users, and there seems to be a discussion on whether cannabis use belongs to subcultural practices or if it is normalized. Howard Parker and colleagues (1998) have developed one of the most cited theories in this field, claiming that recreational cannabis use among youth is normalized in the United Kingdom. According to their theory, using cannabis is no longer part of a deviant behavior conducted by a marginalized minority group but rather part of a mainstream adolescence. This does not mean that cannabis is used by a majority of youth (Shiner & Newburn, 1997), but that there is a growing acceptance of cannabis among both using and non-using youth and that the substance has become increasingly available for ordinary youth (Measham & Shiner, 2009; Williams & Parker, 2001). According to Parker et al. (1998), normalization also includes dimensions such as cultural acceptance. Several scholars outside of the UK have used the theory of normalization to capture national changes in the drug field, e.g., in Australia (Duff, 2005), Canada (Duff et al., 2012), Denmark (Järvinen & Demant, 2011), Finland (Hakkarainen, Tigerstedt, & Tammi, 2007), and Sweden and Switzerland (Rødner Sznitman, 2007b), and found that the theory at least in part can explain the cultural meanings of cannabis.

There are, however, also numerous scholars that criticize the normalization theory for exaggerating the increase in both use and acceptance of cannabis (e.g., Erickson & Hathaway, 2010; Hammerslay, Jenkins, & Reid, 2001; Hathaway, Comeau, & Erickson, 2011; Shiner, 2009). For example, according to Hathaway and colleagues (2011), normalization is challenged by the illegality of cannabis in the majority of all countries and regions. Thus, users risk both stigma and legal sanctions, which might mitigate a normalization process. In line with this, Sandberg (2012, 2013) claims that cannabis use is still to be seen as a subcultural activity (at least in Norway). Sandberg interviewed 100 cannabis users in Norway, concluding that their stories on cannabis can be seen rather in terms of cultural opposition and as a response to stigmatization. As such, their social position relates more to theories of subculture than of normalization. The notion of cannabis as part of a resistance
against dominating norms and as a marker of subculture is emphasized by a number of scholars within this research field (e.g., Becker, 1963; Goode, 1969; Golub, 2005; Pedersen, 2009). The context in which cannabis is consumed seems to matter a great deal in the discussion of perspectives on normalization and subculture. Similarly, as using cannabis is still an illegal activity and defined as a health problem in most countries, scholars have also emphasized the role of risk neutralization in user stories (e.g., Peretti-Watel, 2003; Sandberg, 2012; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Previous research has found that cannabis users use certain techniques to defend and discursively minimize the risk of their use (e.g., comparing or denying risks). This will also become visible in this thesis.

To a large extent, studies on cannabis emphasize adolescent use. In such research, the role of peers seems pivotal in both acquiring and using the substance, as well as in neutralizing the risks of using (Boys et al., 1999; Goode, 1969; Parker et al., 1998; Peretti-Watel, 2003). Scholars have however criticized the focus on young people in cannabis research, and Hammersløy and colleagues (2001, p. 136) claim that:

We know that many people in their twenties and beyond use cannabis, but know virtually nothing about them. This neglect may be a product of the general tendency to construct youth itself as, by definition, a deviant category.

To handle this, they suggest that cannabis use should be viewed in relation to a social identity process, to capture that consumption of the substance may mean different things in different situations. This also suggests that it may be less appropriate to focus on the user than to focus on the context, or setting, of use (Zinberg, 1984); and consequently to ask when and how cannabis use can be experienced as normal. Similarly, Hathaway (2004, p. 573) suggests that “the context of its use is becoming more important than the traits of those who use the drug per se.” Previous research has also suggested that cultural context and familiarity with cannabis influence professional views on addictiveness of the substance and its perceived danger to society (Simmat-Durand & Koski-Jänes, 2015).

Within the field of critical social science there is a substantial critique of (bio)medical research on drugs and addiction (e.g., Berridge, 1999; Bourgois, 2000; Levine, 1978; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985). Stemming from social constructionism, and influenced by Michel Foucault, these studies question universal truth claims of (bio)medical science and thus treat “‘addiction’ and ‘the addict’ as created and culture-bound categories rather than natural types” (Fraser, Moore & Keane, 2014, p. 4). A central critique concerns the way addiction and its related concepts make sense only in a specific cultural and historical context. Similarly, there is also a critique of the positivist contention that drugs, such as cannabis, can be reduced to one coherent and stable object (e.g., Duff, 2016; Gomart, 2002; Tupper, 2012). For example, Duff (2016, p.
discusses cannabis as a drug with several identities based in “divergent natures, cultures and materialities.” Consequently, more recently, there is an increasing scientific focus beyond the social constructionist critique of medical science (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Fraser et al., 2014; Vrecko, 2010). Scholarly work within a range of theoretical approaches (such as posthumanism and science and technology studies) apply a new interest in the materiality of the substances and the material experiences of the users (e.g., Fraser & valentine, 2008; Weinberg, 2002). This emerging field of addiction studies considers the social constructionist approach to be limited in that it does not acknowledge the influence of biology and materiality, and that they consequently are “forever locked into language alone” (Latour, 1993, p. 90).

In the same vein, it can be said that both (bio)medical and social science have a somewhat reductionist focus on cannabis that may accentuate rather than downplay differences between these various perspectives on cannabis characteristics and effects. Taken to an extreme, cannabis can be said to be either a psychoactive substance influencing brain activity or a cultural substance only defined by the users. Thus, the lack of a social perspective in (bio)medical research and the lack of biology in social science may limit the ways in which we can relate to the substance, which is something I will return to at the end of this thesis.

Cannabis in media messages

The identity of cannabis has also been of interest in media studies. The context of the mass media has been described to be specifically important in dispersing messages about illicit substances (e.g., Beckett, 1994; Forsyth, 2012; Gonzenbach, 1992; Hill, Oliver, & Marion, 2012; Johnson, Wanta, & Boudreu, 2004; Jones, Hall, & Cowlin, 2008; Stryker, 2003). The mass media have been recognized as a “battleground” in the drug field (Proctor & Babor, 2001), and there is a multiplicity of studies focusing on media depictions of illicit drugs (e.g., Bell, 1985; Boyd & Carter, 2010; Ekendahl, 2012; Gould, 1996; Jepsen, 2001; Lawrence, Bammer, & Chapman, 2000; Lilja, 2007; Törnqvist, 2009). Previous research suggests that the public is especially responsive to media descriptions of drugs, because they are an issue it has limited knowledge about (Gelders et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 1996; Jones et al., 2008; Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons, & Dillon, 2011). As the public usually lacks direct experience of drugs, it is suggested that it relies on other sources, such as media and political leaders, for information. Therefore, the public concern with drug use is also said to be greatly influenced by media coverage. Several studies suggest that plentiful media coverage can construct heightened concern, while lack of coverage can dampen interest in the issue (Beckett, 1994; Fan, 1996; Gonzenbach, 1992; Johnson et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 1996; Jones et al., 2008; Lagerspetz & Hanhin, 1994; Lancaster et al., 2011; Reinarman & Levine, 1989).
Media coverage of drugs is also assumed to influence policy making (Lancaster et al., 2011). Although previous research suggests that the relationship between the media, political leaders, and the public is complex (Gonzenbach, 1992; Hill et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 1996), several studies have shown that intense media attention can play an integral role in influencing drug policies (Beckett, 1994; Forsyth, 2012; Lancaster et al., 2011; McArthur, 1999; Olsson, 2008). These scholars claim that the more attention the drug issue gets in the media, the more likely it is that political leaders will take notice, and that media coverage will shape drug policy decisions. For example, Lawrence and colleagues (2000) describe how the Australian news media played a crucial role in shaping discourse and policy decisions into being restrictive as regards heroin prescription in the 1990s. In Sweden, Olsson (2008) argues that the media coverage on cannabis in the 1960s was central not only in shaping cannabis policy but in influencing the development of prohibitionist Swedish drug policy.

The illicit status of cannabis seems to have shaped much of newspaper coverage of the substance (Boyd & Carter, 2012; Bright, Marsh, Smith, & Bishop, 2008). Existing research on Swedish media coverage on drugs in general accords with these findings, showing that elements of the restrictive drug policy are emphasized (e.g., Gould, 1996; Pollack, 2001). However, Acevedo (2007) suggested in her UK newspaper study that the representation of cannabis was more nuanced than that, as it was represented by eight discourses constructing cannabis as either remedy or poison. Sznitman and Lewis (2015) have also emphasized that cannabis is framed as both medicine and an illegal drug in Israeli newspapers. Similarly, Haines-Saah and colleagues (2014) conclude that at least for some groups cannabis use is normalized in the Canadian media. Research that explores how cannabis is shaped in the media suggests that there are examples of coverage that includes a variety of perspectives (Lenton, 2004; McGinty et al., 2016), although much news reporting seems to contribute to a “symbolic shaming” of cannabis use (Cross, 2007).

There is also an increasing body of research indicating that news messages have effects on health-related behaviors such as drug use (e.g., Fan 1996; Stryker, 2003). Stryker (2003) found that media depictions of cannabis affect adolescents’ disapproval of the substance, which could impact their decision to abstain from or use cannabis. Beaudoin and Hong (2012) suggest that negative cannabis depictions in the press influence the level of perceived risk, which can decrease the likelihood of using cannabis. Despite these examples, comparatively few empirical studies have focused on media portrayals of cannabis. Earlier research tends to concentrate on “hard” drugs such as heroin (e.g., Ekendahl, 2012), and methamphetamine (e.g., Dwyer & Moore, 2013), or illegal drugs in general (e.g., Bright et al., 2008). Still, media reporting on cannabis has been studied to highlight the influence of anti-cannabis media campaigns (Alvaro et al., 2013; Kang, Cappella, & Fishbein, 2009;
Zimmerman et al., 2014), cannabis and national identity (Lipset & Halvaksz, 2009), policy implications (Lenton, 2004; Silverman, 2010), as well as ethnic and gender issues (Boyd & Carter, 2012).

Previous research has also focused on the internet as a particularly important influence on the drugs issue (Boyer et al., 2005; Forsyth, 2012; Murguía et al., 2007; Walsh & Phil, 2011). This research suggests that internet messages about a new drug can disseminate quickly, which might speed up the process through which a construction of a drug threat can be shaped and spread. Online drug messages also seem to spur interest in using a specific drug and increase the availability (Forsyth, 2012; Griffiths, Sedefov, Gallegos, & Lopez, 2010; Reinarman & Levine, 1989; Walsh & Phil, 2011). A “new” and unknown drug seems able to become common knowledge on a commercial market in just a few months, as in the case of Spice (synthetic cannabinoids) in 2007 or mephedrone (synthetic cathinones) in 2009 (Fleming, 2010; Forsyth, 2012; Griffiths et al., 2010).

Previous research has also focused on how internet has influenced drug using behaviors in several ways, for example, by making drugs more accessible, even to people who otherwise might not come in contact with illegal substances in their everyday lives (Forsyth, 2012). Also, the participatory culture online is suggested to have generated a massive amount of information about drugs that may facilitate the use. Attitudes may also be affected by pro-drug online messages (Boyer et al., 2005). This may be specifically influential for people who are already using drugs, and for young people, because it is suggested that these groups mainly consult social networks and peers to gather information about illegal substances (Boyer et al., 2005; Fejer, Smart, Whitehead, & Laforest, 1971). However, previous research has also found that online messages about drugs to a great extent are used to minimize harm in drug use, for example by discussing drug-using techniques (Barratt, 2011; Boyer et al., 2005; Tackett-Gibson, 2008). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the internet has effects on drug use and attitudes. Although these studies certainly have relevance within the field of cannabis research, online studies targeting cannabis specifically seem scarce. This thesis can thus be seen to contribute to this knowledge gap.

Regulating cannabis: Policies and control regimes

Although the use of cannabis seems to unite a great deal of the population worldwide (183 million users in 2014 according to UNODC, 2016), politically the drug is a controversial issue. In the Western world, cannabis is probably the most heavily debated controlled substance. Cannabis, its influence on health and social relations, its therapeutic potential, and its economic value for the state are issues that raise discussions within the worlds of science, politics, and the commercial market. The classification of cannabis in the 1961 UN
Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs as a substance considered to be particularly dangerous (listed together with heroin, for instance) is said to have incited uncertainty and disagreement among and within governments (Ballotta, Bergeron, & Hughes, 2008).

The previous section presented different scientific perspectives on cannabis and cannabis use/users. Bearing this in mind, this section is an overview of how cannabis is regulated. These two sections are related, as any drug policy is dependent on what the substance is considered to be in a specific context. Different political approaches form the backdrop of many discussions in the empirical material in this thesis, and contextual factors and historical views are important for understanding how certain perspectives may become hegemonic and commonsensical. Policies and restrictions may also influence the norms and attitudes toward a specific substance. For example, in Sweden cannabis consumption is connected to criminal actions, while in the Netherlands it is also connected with recreation. Therefore, in this chapter, I will present some background information on how cannabis use came to be constructed and regulated within the Western world generally and Sweden more specifically, and how different perspectives and rationales have resulted in different drug policy concerns and outcomes.

Drug policies can be said to consist of three levels; rhetoric, conventions, and practice (Svensson, 2012). This section refers to all three levels, but the main focus is on rhetoric (the cannabis policy debate) and conventions (both international and country-specific rules and regulations).

International cannabis policy development

A brief history of modern cannabis policy

For thousands of years cannabis has been used for various purposes. According to Ballotta and colleagues (2008) there is evidence that cannabis use has always been subject to debate, and that it has been under some sort of restriction since people learned of its presumed psychoactive effects. Although the banning of cannabis use dates back hundreds of years, and the first international attempt to regulate cannabis began already in 1925 as an amendment to the International Opium Convention, the focus in this section is the more modern history of prohibition policies. These were inspired in the 1960s along with the first UN Convention that attempted to shape a global regulation on drugs (see below, Main UN Conventions).

In much literature it is described that cannabis use had a primary wave in European and American majority youth cultures in the 1950s, coming in via the jazz scene (e.g., Abrams, 2008; Manning, 2007; Olsson, 2011; van het Loo, Hoorens, van’t Hof, & Kahan, 2003). In urban areas of Europe and the US, the “beats” or “hipsters” are claimed to have constructed their identity in relation to what was considered “black coolness,” engaging in jazz music and
smoking marijuana as resistance against dominant culture (Becker, 1963; Blackman, 2004; Manning, 2007). Although the use of cannabis in the 1950s is described to have been relatively sparse and caused little nuisance in society, the link between young people, drug use, and “deviants” such as black jazz musicians stirred up some media and political concern (Manning, 2007). Cannabis was constructed as something alien that did not belong to white Western culture, and racism has been claimed to contribute to promoting negative representations of cannabis users (Blackman, 2004; Courtwright, 2001). But it was not until the 1960s and the early 1970s rise of radical youth movements and hippie culture that the use of cannabis is said to have boomed (Room et al., 2010). It is also during these years that the first significant wave of convictions for cannabis offences is said to have occurred (Ballotta et al., 2008; Fischer, Ala-Leppilampi, Single, & Robins, 2003). This is also when cannabis became the focal point of drug enforcement in several jurisdictions. The first Drug Convention under UN auspices was introduced in 1961, and in 1971 the American president Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs. It is suggested that the new international Conventions were highly influential in national legislation in European countries, more so than prevailing domestic drug problems (Tops, 2001). Among other things, the conventions are claimed to have contributed to countries accepting the description of the drug problem as a social problem instead of a medical one (Goldberg, 2011). All signatories of the Single Convention had to accept the definition that “narcotic drugs constitutes a serious evil for the individual and is fraught with social and economic danger to mankind” (UN, 1961). Although the previously existing view on the drug issue as a medical problem prevailed after the 1960s, it is argued that social descriptions started gaining much more influence at the time (Tops, 2001).

When Ronald Reagan became the US president in the 1980s it is said that he, as well as many other Western countries, followed in Nixon’s footsteps (Goldberg, 2011). Although the use of cannabis is suggested to have diminished in several countries during the 1980s, the prosecution of cannabis users was still at the core of plenty of drug enforcement practices. The stated purpose of the War on Drugs was to eradicate drugs from society. Previous research has concluded that this was not only a national strategy (at least for the US), but it also came to have a serious impact on Latin American countries. Scholars claim that through the global War on Drugs strategy the US was given an opportunity to enter into drug-producing countries such as Colombia and Mexico (Blackman, 2004). Furthermore, several scholars, intellectuals, and journalists contend that the War on Drugs was only a transition period between the War on Communism and the War on Terrorism, as a way of legitimizing American military interventions abroad (Blackman, 2004; Feiling, 2009; Jelsma, 2011).

But the methods of the cannabis prohibition regime that spread among the Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s is also stated to have met resistance.
Scholars claim that the consequences of criminalizing cannabis use became increasingly viewed as a more severe problem than the drug itself (Fischer et al., 2003). Several national inquiries into cannabis policy at this time reached the conclusion that criminal control was too expensive and too ineffective (e.g., the UK Home Office Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence, 1968; Le Dain Commission in Canada, 1972; the Dutch Commissions, 1971/72; the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse in the US, 1972). It is argued that some countries chose to act on this inference by liberalizing the policies (as in the Netherlands), while others chose to disregard the conclusions and continue with prohibition (such as Britain and Canada) (Abrams, 2008; Fischer et al., 2003; Tops, 2001).

In the 1990s and early 2000s there appeared to be a common trend in Europe in the development of more liberal approaches toward cannabis. Scholars describe how most European justice systems seemed to agree that criminal prosecution for use and possession for personal use should be replaced by civil sanctions (Ballotta et al., 2008; Fischer et al., 2003). Further, politicians and intellectuals in Latin America were increasingly questioning prohibitionist policies (e.g., Casas-Zamora, 2009; Jelsma, 2008). Medical use of cannabis is also described to have become a dawning issue influencing policy discussions (Fankhauser, 2008). Since the turn of the new millennium cannabis can now be bought on prescription in, for example, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and Colombia. In addition, several European countries, such as Denmark, are exploring the possible medical benefits of the drug (e.g., for depression, multiple sclerosis, migraine, asthma, and pain) (Fankhauser, 2008; Witton, 2008). Similarly, in some US states cannabis is available with a doctor’s letter of approval, instead of a prescription.

This trend does not seem to be changing, as Canada is now looking to legalize cannabis; Uruguay and eight US states have already fully legalized cannabis; and according to a survey done by the Pew Research Centre (2013) over half of the US population want to legalize cannabis nationwide.

Main UN Conventions
Of the three main UN Drug Conventions, two specifically regulate cannabis policies worldwide today; the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The vast majority of governments around the world have signed the Conventions to render cannabis illegal except for medical and scientific use, and all EU Member States are signatories.

It is argued that the rationale behind the UN Drug Conventions is that there is a linear relation between the size of the drug market and the effects it will have on health and well-being for the population (Goldberg, 2011). Therefore, the focus of the enforcement of the Conventions is mainly on reducing the size of illicit drug markets in order to reduce their harms. The Single Convention provides for regulation of cannabis, as well as substances derived from coca
and opium. The Convention classifies cannabis as one of the most dangerous existing drugs due to its “harmful characteristics, risk of abuse and extremely limited therapeutic value” (Ballotta et al., 2008, p. 102). With the ambition of a global control policy, countries are requested not to allow use and possession of the substance (Article 33) and to prevent misuse (Article 28). However, criminalizing possession for personal use is not mandatory (Article 3), and the main focus of the Single Convention is said to be aimed at the supply-side (Svensson, 2012).

The 1988 Convention is described to have been created to strengthen global cooperation against drug trafficking and to clarify some points from earlier Conventions (Svensson, 2012). For example, it mandates that signatories make possession for the purpose of trafficking a criminal offence (Article 3), and discusses international police and customs collaboration. It also includes a paragraph (Article 3, §2) that unlike the 1961 Convention, mandates that necessary measures are taken to establish “possession, purchase and cultivation of narcotic drugs [...] for personal consumption” as a criminal offence. Although allowing for some differences in national control regimes by, for instance, giving the possibility for countries to offer treatment instead of punishment, the Conventions evidently leave no room for non-medical use of cannabis that would be accepted in a legalization regime (Ballotta et al., 2008, p. 104; Svensson, 2012).

Cannabis regulations

Prohibition

The possession, cultivation, distribution, and sale of cannabis is in some fashion prohibited in almost every country in the world today. As noted above, this does not mean that every country has a full prohibitionist approach. Different behaviors are tolerated in different jurisdictions; laws vary, penalties are different along with resources dedicated to enforcing the laws. It seems that only a small minority of Western countries still practice full cannabis prohibition. Sweden is one of those countries.

Under this category of control regimes, cannabis possession and use is prohibited by national or state criminal law (Fischer et al., 2003). Any amount of possession and use of cannabis results in criminal sanctions and a criminal record (van het Loo et al., 2003). Prohibition regimes are said to generally depend on a definition of drugs as dangerous and threatening to both the individual and the community (Goldberg, 2011). According to Goldberg (2011), drugs are constructed as bad or “evil,” which is why prohibition countries have “zero tolerance” against all type of cannabis use, even medicinal, and strive for a drug-free society. The rationale behind prohibition regimes is said to be that “the more stringent the policy, the larger the deterrent effect on cannabis use” (van het Loo et al., 2003, p. 17).
Alternative cannabis control regimes

While most nations, with few exceptions, are signatories of the international UN Drug Conventions requiring prohibition of possession, sale, and production of cannabis, the substance has taken on a legal or semi-legal status in several parts of both the US and Europe (Room et al., 2010). As the UN Conventions allow for discretion, and the EU mainly considers drugs to be a national concern, variations in national legislation are possible (EMCDDA, 2008). Some countries or regions have reformed their cannabis control systems away from the criminal prohibition approaches that dominated most of the 20th century.

Although they are commonly classified together as a single policy, the more liberal regimes are very heterogeneous. They vary in laws and regulations as well as in enforcement practices. There is no straight line dividing prohibitionist or liberal regimes; the issue seems much more blurred. For example, some countries accept possession and consumption by law, others by prosecution guidelines, and yet others by enforcement guidelines (Room et al., 2010). It is therefore hard to classify different types of cannabis use control regimes from different jurisdictions, and terms used to describe reformation away from prohibition often cause confusion. What is really the difference between depenalization, decriminalization, and legalization? According to Room and colleagues (2010) all of these terms relate to policies looking to liberalize or soften prohibition. However, it is described that while depenalization basically means a reduction of the severity of penalties associated with possession and use of cannabis, decriminalization is a way of changing the status of cannabis possession and use from criminal to a non-criminal offence (Pacula et al., 2005; Room et al., 2010). Decriminalization can thus be seen as a sub-form of depenalization. Examples of decriminalization/depenalization measures include the use of warning systems for minor possession offences, alternative arrest or trial measures intending to divert offenders from the criminal justice system to education or treatment, or civil penalties such as fines or administrative sanctions instead of criminal control penalties such as jail (Pacula et al., 2005; Room et al., 2010). Many of these measures are described to be directed at youths and first-time offenders and to cover possession of smaller quantities (Pacula et al., 2005). They are said to be motivated by the desire to reduce harm and “remove the burden of criminalization from a large proportion of young people” (Room et al., 2010, p. 84). It is suggested that a basic principle within this approach is to reduce social, economic, and health-related harms for both cannabis users and society at large (Svensson, 2012). However, by keeping cannabis an illegal substance, governments can retain a clear normative stance against the use of cannabis, and remain within the boundaries of UN Drug Conventions.

Legalization, on the other hand, is described as a control regime furthest from full criminal sanctions, because it means that all punitive sanctions for
cannabis possession and use are removed. Another important distinction is that between *de jure* and *de facto* reforms. While the former refers to reforms that are stipulated on the statute-book, the latter refers to how the law is manifested and realized in the criminal justice system (e.g., police enforcement, court guidelines) (Goldberg, 2011; Room et al., 2010). The rationale behind these different types of legalization can partly be found within the harm-reduction approach (for a discussion on harm reduction, see below *Introducing the policy debate development*), similar to the depenalizing/decriminalizing policies, such as in the Netherlands (Tops, 2001). However, according to Svensson (2012), legalization can also be motivated by arguments based on individual rights to consume the substance and the logic of regulating cannabis similarly to alcohol. A third motive for legalization is usually claimed to be a more pragmatic one; it is considered cost-effective due to reduction of police expenditure and increase in government assets due to cannabis tax revenues. Related to these economic discussions, it can also be concluded that in some contexts (as in Colorado and California) capitalist interests seems to have been vital for legalization as entrepreneurs have been pushing for a new legal market.

*Medical marijuana* regulations have also, in recent years, become increasingly noticeable, particularly in North America (Room et al., 2010). The rationale behind this control regime is said to be that marijuana is considered to have therapeutic qualities and can thus be prescribed or recommended for individuals with medical problems (Room et al., 2010).

The cannabis policy debate

**Introducing the policy debate development**

Whether cannabis should be criminalized, decriminalized, or legalized is a complex issue. The policy debate has therefore come to circle around a wide variety of aspects; ethics, ideology, pharmacology, public health, policy, and treatment (Svensson, 2012). Cannabis policy debaters do therefore not always focus on the same problems, which has caused confusion and created a debate where the different sides do not always refer to the same issues. Also, the debate relates to empirical evidence and pragmatism as well as ideological and moral concerns (Goldberg, 2011; Goode, 1998; Derrida, 1993).

The cannabis policy debate can however be said to consist of three principal tracks: prohibition, harm reduction, and legalization (Svensson, 2012). These tracks focus on different aspects of the cannabis issue, but much of the debate seems concentrated on problems of prohibition. And although harm reductionists and legalization advocates have a somewhat different focus, both adhere to a more liberal policy approach that is critical of prohibition. A basic opinion among prohibition policy critics, one that seems to have escalated in recent years, is that prohibition and the War on Drugs have failed: consumption rates
are growing, court systems are clogged with drug cases, and there is an increase in organized crime (Goldberg, 2011; Inciardi, 1991; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995; Stares, 1996; Svensson, 2012). It is also criticized for being both inhumane and ineffective.

The more liberal track (harm reduction and legalization) focuses on harm reduction through controlled but legal drug sale or decriminalization of use. Legalization advocates have traditionally been a controversial minority, but seem to have become increasingly accepted within the mainstream policy discourse (at least on an international level) (MacCoun & Reuter, 2001; Nadelmann, 1991a). MacCoun and Reuter (2001) reported that from the 1970s to the 1990s the opinion of American adults on drug policy was fairly constant; 70–80% opposed marijuana legalization. However, during the 2010s there seems to have been a remarkable change, demonstrated by the recent legalization of cannabis by popular referendum in several US states. Also, the list of prominent politicians, scholars, intellectuals, businessmen, and cultural personae (such as Cesar Gaviria, Kofi Annan, and Mario Vargas Llosa) advocating major harm-reduction reforms in drug laws has gradually grown and come to gain more influence in the discussion (Armenta, Metaal, & Jelsma, 2012). And, as seen above, alternative drug policy regimes are now present throughout the Western world.

**Key aspects of the debate**

In this section I further investigate the arguments in these different policy debate tracks. The description below certainly reduces the complexities and nuances this debate has to offer, and therefore this section should be seen as an overview of what I have identified as some of the key aspects (or nodal points, if using the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014) in the debate.

One of the key questions within this debate relates to the *public health aspect* of cannabis use; which cannabis policy will have a positive impact on the use? Prohibitionists argue that prohibition keeps numbers of cannabis users down, both by making the substance difficult to attain and also by signaling that it is dangerous (DEA, 2010). They recognize that cannabis use has increased and that there is a lot of drug-related violence, but argue that without prohibition the current situation would be a lot worse (DEA, 2010). For example, in Sweden both politicians and lobby groups have had a strong conviction that the Swedish prohibition drug policy has been successful and that we have it to thank for comparatively low numbers of problematic drug users (Lenke & Olsson, 2000). Thus, most prohibitionists assert that cannabis use would increase substantially if legalized. Legalization advocates do not agree with this, claiming that such an eventual increase would only be minimal (Goldberg, 2011; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001). Nadelmann (1991b, p. 804) argues that the illicit substances would never “become as popular as alcohol or tobacco even if they were legalized.” And lobbyists like NORML claim
that any increase in consumption numbers after legalization would probably be the result of “those who failed to report their use while it was illegal” (McVay, 1991, p. 148).

There is also a societal aspect in the debate. As a social consequence, critics of prohibition uphold that “countless lives and reputations are ruined by giving otherwise law-abiding citizens an arrest record” for using cannabis (McVay, 1991, p. 150). Also, prohibition and the War on Drugs are criticized for control harms such as corruption, violence, political and democratic instability, and environmental disasters in poor cannabis-producing countries (Goldberg, 2011; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995). In recent years it seems like Latin America has established itself as a geographic center for this critique (Svensson, 2012). Important voices have included the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, which wants to decriminalize cannabis, and several presidents are looking at, or have already passed laws on, legalizing cannabis use and in some cases cannabis cultivation to reduce the harm to these societies (such as Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and Uruguayan president at the time José Mujica).

As already suggested, there is also an economical aspect to this debate. Many legalization advocates claim that with legalization, money will not only be saved on (unnecessary) police work, but money would also be made through tax revenues (see, e.g., Pacula, 2010 on the Californian discussion before the vote on Proposition 19). Prohibitionists however claim that the cost for treatment of cannabis use/addiction outweighs any revenues that would be generated with legalization (DEA, 2010). Also, prohibitionists such as the DEA (2010) wonder whether it is really necessary to add another dangerous substance to the mix, given that large amounts of government money are already spent on alcohol and tobacco treatment and regulation due to high prevalence of problematic consumers.

The moral aspect of cannabis policy has also been debated. For example, those advocating legalization assert that current drug laws are racist and draconian (Blackman, 2004; Goldberg, 2011; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001): it is Western dominance and imperialism that have allowed alcohol and banned cannabis (Svensson, 2012). On such grounds, prohibition of cannabis is also claimed to be hypocritical. If dangerous activities such as alcohol use (or horseback riding, scuba diving, etc.) are permitted, why should the individual not be allowed to use cannabis? From this perspective, an important moral aspect is that individuals are prohibited from their right to do what they want with their own bodies by prohibitionist drug laws (Goldberg, 2011). This harm principle, which initially comes from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, has come to play a vital role in the cannabis legalization debate. Mill (1863/1982, p. 23) says that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any members of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.” This has also spilled over into arguments that cannabis use is a victimless
crime; a crime that only impacts the user. Prohibitionists do not agree with this argument, and claim that prohibition is necessary to protect individuals from risky activities such as cannabis use, and also that substance use definitely has an impact on a third party such as family members.

An alternative to basing the debate on moral grounds is the possibility to refer to scientific evidence as a basis of cannabis policy. This scientific aspect of the debate is in line with a development in Western societies to consider the legitimacy of policy measures to rest on scientific rather than ideological concerns (Lancaster, 2014; Monaghan, 2008; valentine, 2009). Similarly, it is argued in professional as well as lay contexts that cannabis policy arguments should rely on reason rather than morals and emotion (ALICE RAP, 2014; Nadelmann, 2014; Room, 2008). Scientific evidence is consequently considered vital in cannabis policy making. However, many scholars question if such rationality is possible and suggest that scientific evidence only marginally influences policy making (e.g., Bacchi, 2009; Lancaster, 2014; Ritter, Bammer, Hamilton, Mazerolle, & The DPMP Team, 2007; Williams, 2010). Stevens (2007) has also suggested that the use of science in policy can be described as “cherry-picking” rather than unbiased choices based on relevant research.

What emerges from this debate is that different interests relate to the issue from different positions and emphasize different approaches to the problem. The prohibitionists focus on reducing supply (by attacking both domestic and foreign production) and demand (by trying to make it difficult and norm-breaking to consume cannabis), while the legalization and decriminalization advocates focus on reduction of harm (by concentrating on net costs of drug policies). And while prohibitionists attribute drug-related harms to the drug itself and therefore argue that prohibition is helpful, the critics usually suggest “that prohibition itself causes many of the problems associated with illegal drugs” (Miron & Zwiebel, 1995, p. 175). Thus, debaters may agree that a reduction in harms for individuals and society is the goal for the drug policy; it is how this will be accomplished that divides them.

It is thus possible to approach the cannabis policy debate from several angles. Key arguments are linked with different types of demands, political aspects, and views on cannabis. This thesis will illustrate that traces of all these arguments can be relevant to discussions on cannabis in Sweden today. It will however also suggest that discussions on cannabis policy in Sweden carry specific traces of our political context and history.

**Swedish cannabis policy development**

In Sweden, any type of contact with cannabis is prohibited. Sweden has done everything to fulfill the commitment to the UN Drug Conventions, and has gone even further than requested in its ambition to prohibit drugs; personal use of cannabis (and other illicit drugs) is criminalized (Svensson, 2012;
This is regulated under the Narcotic Drug Punishment Act (1968:64), which forbids all production, purchase, sale, possession, and use of cannabis. The Swedish drug policy is usually said to rest on three pillars: control, prevention, and treatment. The control measures seek to limit the supply, whereas prevention and treatment measures are intended to diminish demand (Svensson, 2012). According to Ramstedt (2006), around 75% of the Swedish drug budget was spent on control, 1% on prevention and the remainder on treatment measures.

In part, due to the strict prohibition of personal use of cannabis, Swedish drug policy is often seen as particularly harsh. This does not mean that Sweden has the strictest drug laws internationally. From an international perspective it is however often seen as surprising that Sweden has chosen such a restrictive policy track, as it is commonly considered to be a liberal country in several other aspects. There are certainly different ways to explain why Sweden chose a strict prohibitionist policy track, and here I will try to pan out some of the mechanisms that have been suggested as important in this political development. In this description I will move between discussing drug policy and cannabis policy. In Sweden, it seems impossible to discuss cannabis without placing it within a general drug policy framework, because there is no division between “soft” and “hard” drugs. This is also one of the particularities of Swedish drug policy; it is one policy that includes all substances, and thus cannabis is not singled out in a particular policy.

The current Swedish drug policy is usually argued to stem from the 1960s when people started to call for new actions against what was described as a considerable drug problem (Lindgren, 1993; Olsson, 2008 & 2011; Träskman, 2011). In 1965 a government commission (Narkomanvårdskommittén) was appointed to address this issue, and scholars also claim that drugs became articulated as a social problem rather than a medical one (Edman, 2011; Olsson, 2011; Träskman, 2011). As in many other Western countries, one of the most important factors for this change was suggested to be the new connection made between cannabis, youth, and socially deviant subcultures (Lindgren, 1993; Olsson, 2008). Scholars claim that despite low absolute numbers of consumers, media and other important actors (e.g., the government commission) depicted cannabis as a threat to society (Lindgren, 1993; Olsson, 2008; Törnqvist, 2009). The prevailing discussions about cannabis and youth thus seem to have played an important role in steering Swedish drug policy toward issues such as morality, legality, and social problems (Olsson, 2008; Tops, 2001). Olsson (2008, p. 54) goes as far as saying that “it is doubtful whether our views on drugs and the policies developed upon them would have looked the same if cannabis had not existed.” This development can be attributed to several aspects of the Swedish society central at that time, including a political tradition of involvement in controlling psychoactive substances (such as alcohol), the influence of a strong temperance movement in Sweden, the impact of a centralized and powerful police, lack of knowledge.
about the substance, medical influence in formulating the drug problem, and formation of influential NGOs and pressure groups (Kassman, 1998; Lenke & Olsson, 2002; Olsson, 2011; Tops, 2001).

Several scholars describe how it was in the decades following the 1960s that Swedish prohibitionist drug policy was created, step by step becoming more restrictive (Goldberg, 2011; Olsson, 1994b; Tham, 2012; Träskman, 2011). With the criminalization of drug use in 1988 (resulting in all use of non-prescribed drugs being criminalized and classified as misuse), more severe sentences, hundreds of millions spent on drug treatment and special police work, it has been concluded that Swedish society had a high priority on reaching “the drug-free society” (Goldberg, 2011; Lenke & Olsson, 2002; Lindgren, 1993; Tham, 2005; Törnqvist, 2009). Lindgren (1993, p. 162, my translation) maintains that the progress of the Swedish prohibitionist stance was not a rational answer to a growing social inconvenience but rather “a result of certain approximations, problem definitions, threatening pictures, risk assessments, and action requirements that had a strong influence on public opinion and therefore became relevant on a political level.”

According to Tham (1998), the use of drugs is in itself considered a problem in Sweden, and this has led to a focus on restricting experimental and street-level cannabis users. This focus is partly attributed to the research and political impact of one of the most important actors in the development of the Swedish drug policy, Nils Bejerot, doctor in social medicine. Bejerot was an active public debater and also held a central role within the police; he had close connections to the first national police commissioner and provided the Swedish police with education about drugs (Olsson, 2011). It is thus argued that his views on drugs came to influence the public and political opinion as well as police work in a repressive direction. According to Bejerot, drug use was to be seen as a contagious disease that needed to be contained to prevent a societal disaster (Edman, 2012). To do this, extraordinary measures were necessary, such as compulsory care and increasing penalties for both use and supply of drugs. According to Lenke and Olsson (2002, p. 69) Bejerot was crucial in changing the focus of the Swedish drug policy “from international syndicates and the treatment of ‘drug victims’ to a police-oriented strategy whose objective was to clear the streets of drug pushers.” Bejerot’s view on drugs is also described as vital for the focus in Swedish drug policy on the gateway theory (Goldberg, 2011). Such a focus necessarily puts cannabis at the heart of the drug policy, as cannabis use is believed to cause “hard” drug use. Some researchers also attribute part of this development to the strong (and radical) Swedish temperance movement and how the decline in support for alcohol temperance caused this movement to direct its attention to illegal drugs (Lenke & Olsson, 2002). For example, Lenke (1991) describes how the gateway theory had already been applied by the temperance movement on beer (“soft” alcohol) in relation to liquor (“hard” alcohol) and claims that there
is a connection between countries that have had a radical temperance movement and have later chosen the political goal of a “drug-free society.”

When drug use was criminalized in 1988, Träskman (2011, p. 59) claims that youth cannabis consumption was central in the discussions. The prevention of youth drug “abuse” was similarly cited as a reason for introducing stricter sentences for drug use in a government bill in 1993 (Proposition 1992/93:142). Following the introduction of these drug laws, Träskman (2011) notes that Swedish drug policy has come to prioritize petty drug offences and that a substantial part of these efforts are made possible by urine and blood tests aimed at youth. Similarly, prevention has been described as focused on deterring youth cannabis use. Tops (2001, p. 163) writes that information on drugs to the public aimed at repudiating every form of non-medical use of drugs, and that it has been “a weapon in the struggle against drugs, and cannabis was the main target.” One possible conclusion may thus be that cannabis has played a particular role in Swedish drug policy development and that a focus on youth consumption has enabled a strict prohibitionist policy. As will be seen in this thesis, a focus on youth consumers is still central among policy players.

Public opinion has also been suggested to be relatively unanimous that all types of drugs should be illegal. Consequently, few people propagate liberalization, and debates about alternative drug policies seem to have been strikingly absent (Goldberg, 2011; Hübner, 2001; Lenke & Olsson 2000 & 2002; Tham, 2005). Sweden has also been an active promoter of prohibitionist cannabis regimes internationally (Träskman, 2011), and it seems that the comparatively low numbers of youth cannabis use have played a part when Swedish drug policies have been attempted to be exported (UNODC, 2007). However, it has been claimed that the effectiveness of Swedish drug policy has never been evaluated, and in recent years Sweden has been criticized for its high numbers of drug-induced deaths (Olsson, 2011).

Nevertheless, even if the goals and means of Swedish drug policy are fundamentally the same, some new trends may be dawning. Harm reduction, which used to be disqualified in Swedish drug policy and regarded as equivalent to drug liberalism is today highly visible in the Swedish drug debate (Blomqvist, Palm, & Storbjörk, 2009). There is no longer a clear-cut division between harm reduction and prohibition; needle exchanges and methadone treatment used to be controversial, as the position was that all supply of treatment ought to be aimed at abstinence, but now both are part of the restrictive Swedish policy. Also, since 2011 the Supreme Court has been working toward developing a new praxis where drug crimes connected to personal use receive lighter punishments than crimes connected to criminal gangs (Asp, 2011). As will be seen in this thesis, some people, at least in certain contexts, agitate for a liberalized Swedish cannabis law. Even though these voices might predominantly be heard outside of traditional political arenas, it demonstrates that this is not a settled issue.
It is, however, not certain whether these new trends can be considered as movements toward a more liberal drug policy in Sweden. For example, although the fear of HIV/AIDS, and to some extent the increase in heroin use, can be seen as having driven the initiation of needle exchanges and maintenance treatment from the 1980s onward, it was only after the new millennium and the increasing focus on evidence-based practice that these measures gained political approval (Johnson, 2007). So some researchers claim that the measures should not be seen as an increasing acceptance of harm reduction, but rather as a representation of a “re-medicalization” and “re-individualization” of drug use problems, driven by an individualized society and economic restraints (see, e.g., Edman & Blomqvist, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Olsson, 2011). It is also worth noting that harm-reductive practices have not in any way been directed at cannabis.

The change in court praxis became politically controversial and seems to have spurred the former Minister for Justice Beatrice Ask to counter this initiative by increasing the severity of penalties for serious drug crimes (Ask, Linander, Szyber, & Pehrson, 2014; SOU, 2014). These conflicting aspects make the fourth research question in this thesis (how contemporary Swedish cannabis policy is legitimized among certain professionals) particularly interesting.

**Concluding remarks**

As has been shown above, cannabis is a growing concern in international policy and public debate. There is a wide range of different ways to regulate the substance, and there is presently considerable movement in the policy arena. A key argument for liberalizing cannabis policies is that prohibition causes more harm than good. Therefore different reforms away from prohibition are seen to improve the situation for cannabis users (e.g., in relation to health issues and social aspects) as well as society at large (e.g., in relation to public health and economy). It can however be concluded that in Sweden such reforms are not visible and that policy, the media, and the public seem to agree that prohibition has been and is preferable. Certain actors seem to have been particularly important for this political outcome, including Narkomanvårdskommittén, Nils Bejerot, the police, and the temperance movement.

It can also be concluded that much research has been dedicated to the (bio)medical effects of cannabis; research that links cannabis use to health and mental health problems (cognitive impairment, psychosis, poor school performance, etc.). This research has become key in discourse on cannabis, and consensus has emerged on some causal relations between cannabis consumption and adverse effects. Social science research on cannabis in fields such as sociology and social work, however, seems to be scarce, but existing
research has criticized such universal truth claims. This research opposes the
construction of cannabis as a stable object and points to variations in cultural
and material experiences of cannabis. In line with this, this thesis draws on the
notion that the cultural understandings of cannabis, and the cultural
interpretations of research, are important for how cannabis is understood and
handled in society.

Previous research also indicates that different media representations of
drugs influence policy and public debates as well as user behavior and
discourse. Further, that professional constructions of cannabis affect
centric parties (such as consumers) is emphasized by several scholars. It is
therefore crucial to study how cannabis is mirrored in different media
environments and among professional actors, and what constructions of the
substance, the use, and the users are emphasized.

Cannabis is clearly a controversial substance, both in relation to what
science can tell us about what the substance is and what effects it has, and in
relation to how the substance is best regulated. Politically, cannabis is handled
in a variety of ways in different countries and regions around the world, and
it seems that a Swedish-type strict prohibition is becoming more and more
unique (at least in the Western world). With this description of the political
development internationally and nationally I try to set the stage for this thesis,
which covers a broad field of research and policy. This has certainly been
important in the analysis of the empirical material in the different studies
included. Readers of this thesis will therefore benefit from an overview of this
field, as the results of the analysis will bear traces of both national and
international discourses and practices. This background section has hopefully
provided the reader with a preliminary understanding of what can be expected
in the results section.

Building on the previous research, the study includes three different yet
interrelated arenas: online activist forums, print media, and professional
cannabis symposia. By including different actors, the thesis can contribute to
a nuanced understanding of how cannabis is discussed in Sweden today and
the possible impacts it might have. It also enables a focus on possible (and
probable) differences between arenas in the Swedish context. Using social
constructionist theory, the thesis hopes to develop a deeper understanding of
the assumptions that are important in promoting different views on cannabis
and cannabis policy.
Theoretical framework

Starting point: Social constructionism

This thesis rests on the social constructionist contention that reality is in part something reflexive and “made up” through language. The way in which the empirical material is analyzed and discussed springs from the theoretical understanding that the knowledge we hold about the world is constructed through social processes and struggles over meaning; making some acts accepted while others are considered deviant. Consequently, language is considered to be an important social activity that is both constituted by social context and constituting social phenomena (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Language shapes the way we see society and provides a demarcated structure for conceiving and talking about it; it is in the linguistic articulations that the world is conceptualized. This, of course, does not mean that nothing exists outside of language and that the material world only exists in our minds. It rather means that we cannot think about objects outside of certain meaningful discourses and practices. Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014, p. 94) put it eloquently:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence.

As this quote illustrates, all objects and actions are discursive, but they are not reduced to language only. Laclau and Mouffe thus circumvent such idealistic claims that reality can be reduced only to the ideas of it. The existence of a material world external to our thoughts is not rejected, but an “extra-discursive” or independent realm of objects that are meaningful in themselves is. To be meaningful, objects must be part of a discursive framework. And consequently, the world is only possible for us to grasp through available discourses. In this theoretical approach, no discourse holds the truth about the world, but there is a constant struggle for dominance.
between discourses, and a certain discourse may become dominant (hegemonic) at a certain time making it seem like the truth. By calling something a discourse, its “truth status” is put into question (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35). This is also a main focus for this thesis: to study how various scientific and ideological perspectives struggle to make different cannabis “truths” dominant in the Swedish environment. In line with this, the background chapter is articulated in terms of a scientific discourse on cannabis, rather than as a presentation of scientific evidence seen as “truths.” Scientific results are thus to be seen as constituted in a particular field of problematization (e.g., science) in this theoretical perspective; “they ‘emerge’, as objects for thought in practice” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 4).

To render the character of the empirical material in this study more intelligible, I draw to a large extent on discourse theory as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and on Foucault-influenced poststructuralist theorists such as Carol Bacchi, Nikolas Rose, and Peter Miller. I do not intend to outline the complex deconstructionist method of Marxist ideas that led Laclau and Mouffe to the formation of their theory. Neither do I intend to outline the full scope of theoretical work done by Bacchi, Rose, and Miller. Instead, in this chapter I aim to introduce some of the concepts from their work that I have operationalized to analyze my material.

Discourse theory draws on and develops Marxist theory as put forward by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, and also includes ideas by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In Hegemony and the socialist strategy (1985/2014), Laclau and Mouffe criticize the determinant structure of economy in Marxist theory, as well as Gramsci’s post-Marxist theory, for relying on an objective material reality. For Laclau and Mouffe the division of society into base and superstructure needs, for analytical purposes, to be dissolved entirely as they do not believe that there is an objective material base dividing groups into classes. Instead, groups are to be seen as constructed through politics and discursive processes (Laclau, 1990). As mentioned above, the existence of real objects (e.g., a falling brick) is not denied, but can according to this perspective be understood only through discourse. Laclau and Mouffe argue that it becomes more theoretically fruitful not to separate the non-discursive and the discursive (e.g., the base and the superstructure). Consequently, discourse theory focuses on language, which is not seen as something neutral that we use only to communicate, but rather as constituting social activity. Hence, the choice of language made by an actor is important, and my emphasis will be on what meaning it expresses; the focus is on the “talk” about cannabis and not on the drug consumption per se. The basic task of discourse theory in this study is thus to recognize patterns present in the “talk” about cannabis that may not be immediately recognizable. As such, discourse theory adheres to the social constructionist way of seeing and analyzing the world.
The Foucault-inspired theories developed by Bacchi, Rose, and Miller are in many ways similar to those of Laclau and Mouffe. There is a focus on language and how language limits “what it is possible to think, write or speak about a ‘given social object or practice’” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35). These theorists however complement the analysis with a particular focus on analysis of (the problematics of) government. Emanating from the work on governmentality by Michel Foucault, these theorists deal with the ideals of government and the art of governing (Bacchi, 2009; Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006). Bacchi as well as Rose and Miller have developed analytical practices based on the problematization of public policy and the assumptions it holds about the world “to understand how governing takes place, and with what implications for those so governed” (Bacchi, 2009, p. vi). Including a problematizing approach in the theoretical framework of this thesis enables a deeper understanding of the potential effects of policy on the subjects addressed by it, and thus adds to the understanding of power in discourse.

Discourse

Discourse is a concept central to this thesis. The concept brings the papers together in that the different studied arenas can be seen to represent different discourses on cannabis. The concept of discourse is however difficult to lock down as it has taken on several meanings in different analytical traditions. In a broad understanding, discourse is a fixation of a certain meaning in a particular domain (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999). In relation to the field studied in this thesis it is, for example, the fixation of cannabis as a harmful drug among policy players in Sweden (see paper IV) or the fixation of cannabis as a harmless drug in online environments (see papers I and II). More specifically, discourse can be described as a group of actions, words, and signs that constitutes the objects or fields it is trying to describe (Bacchi, 2009), or as “a structured totality resulting from an articulatory process” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014, p. 91), or as performative systems of thought (Rose and Miller, 1992). A discourse is consequently a certain structuring of meaning, and at the same time an exclusion of other meanings. Discourses limit the way we can talk and think about the objects they construct (Bacchi, 2009). This reduction in possible ways of relating to and seeing the world is ultimately an exercise of power (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000). Or, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014, p. 98f) put it:

Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre.

However, whenever meaning is fixated and conventionalized in a discourse, it is contingent; it is possible but not necessary. Discourses are never totally stable due to this contingency of language and due to competing
discourses. Within discourses there are thus tensions and contradictions. This is a shared premise for all the theoretical approaches included here (Bacchi, 2015). According to Laclau and Mouffe it is in this instability of discourse that we find the political; instability can reveal social conflict. For example, outside events, or dislocations as Laclau and Mouffe call them, which cannot be incorporated into the discourse, may disrupt the stability of a discourse and cause discursive change (Howarth, 2000). Such disruptive events can thus politicize what was considered common knowledge. In this thesis, this is illustrated by the influence of international events on Swedish discussions on cannabis.

That discourses are contingent does not imply that everything is constantly changing unobstructedly. Instead, the social is rather characterized by inertia and when discourses change they are seen to do so in relation to previous discourses. So, even if all discourses are theoretically described as contingent, it is impossible to make sense of the world outside of discourse. Some discourses might even become so accepted that any trace of contingency seems vanished, making them particularly difficult to think outside (Laclau, 1990). Discourses can therefore be seen as processes in themselves that are “speaking through” the discussion participants in this study.

There are also differences between these theoretical approaches. For example, they have contrasting views on discourse and materiality. According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourses are not only based in language, they are also material and can include institutions and economy. There is thus no separation between the discursive and the non-discursive in this reasoning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). Following Foucault, Rose and Miller (1992) instead argue that although language is a key element, it is one among many in creating realities. Bacchi (2009) also suggests that there are always non-discursive factors that need to be addressed in discourse analysis; for example, material effects of problematizations. In fact, Bacchi claims that it is necessary to not only identify discourses but also to assess them and the material effects they have on those addressed by them. Bacchi’s approach can thus be seen as “less strict” in relation to constructionism than Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, as she points to effects “in the real” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 33). However, I do not think that this is an unworkable contrast, for Laclau and Mouffe do not deny that a physical world exists (see above). Rather, they are saying that we can only understand it through discourse. To them, the discourses are material. For example, in discussing youth as a particular group different from adults, this difference is not only linguistic. It becomes material in that it shapes the physical room by creating particular institutions such as schools and youth treatment facilities. I do however think that Bacchi’s approach complements Laclau and Mouffe in focusing more concretely on how discourse impacts everyday life. For instance, paper IV discusses how a focus on young people in professional cannabis discourse might have an effect on who is targeted as a subject for intervention.
As indicated here, there is a wide range of ways to relate to constructions, materiality, and the empirical world. Some theories are more prone to accept certain objects as objective and constant (see, e.g., the discussion on marijuana in Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985), while others (such as Laclau and Mouffe) emphasize the discursive character of all objects. Similarly, some constructionist studies look at changes in statistics as a source for discussions on claims-making, while others consider statistics as part of a problematization that needs to be questioned rather than accepted (see, e.g., the discussion on crime statistics in Bacchi, 2009). In this thesis I try, as unambiguously as possible, to engage with my material as well as with previous research in coherence with the views of Bacchi, Laclau, and Mouffe, who share the view that “our understandings of the world are the product of social forces” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 33).

Due to variations in the analyses of the empirical material, the discourse concept is used somewhat differently in the four papers. For example, the analyses in papers I and II are structured around the controversy between two overarching drug discourses – legalization/oppositional discourse and prohibition discourse. In these papers, other broad societal discourses that may not apply to cannabis in particular are also seen as influencing legalization and prohibition discussions, e.g., a social democratic discourse and a harm-reduction discourse. Similar to this, in paper III, a juridical discourse, a social problems discourse, and a medical discourse are seen to influence how cannabis is portrayed in the print media. Using the concept of discourse in this paper, I rather seek to analyze which broad societal discourses are important in the print media construction of cannabis. In paper IV, the discourse concept is not used in the analysis of the empirical material, instead the paper seeks to analyze a certain discourse – the “official cannabis discourse” in Sweden.

The papers included in this thesis can thus be seen to present different and competing discourses trying to conventionalize, or hegemonize, one specific construction of cannabis. Thus, hegemony is another key concept in the theoretical approach of this thesis.

Hegemony

Following Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe describe hegemony as discursive articulations that become social consensus, or meanings that come to be seen as a “natural order.” A hegemonic discourse is thus an articulation seen as an objective “truth” (Bacchi, 2009). Such “truths” can never become permanent or complete. “Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 18). In this perspective no discourse is closer to the “truth,” but as Bacchi (2009, p. 33) writes, certain discourses may have more “sticking power.” Governmental constructions in
particular seem to have a privileged role, as their versions of a problem are articulated in legislation and government technologies.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, hegemonic struggles can however occur in different practices, both in everyday communication and as strategic acts by political groups. This is also why the combination of materials from several arenas of social life (internet, newspapers, and professional symposia) is central in this thesis.

Nodal points, empty signifiers, and floating signifiers

Laclau and Mouffe contend that all discursive identity emerges through the establishment of relations between different elements into a totality. This totality is however always contingent and only partially fixated. In this study, discourse analysis is thus an attempt to untangle the process by which meanings of signs can be fixated. To do this, Laclau and Mouffe introduce some key concepts that have been important in my analysis of the empirical material (papers I, II, and III): nodal points, empty signifiers, and floating signifiers. These concepts are specific for the theoretical approach of Laclau and Mouffe, and therefore this section builds on their theory.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, there are privileged signs within a discourse, so-called "nodal points", which help to structure and stabilize meaning. Discourses are centered on nodal points around which other signs are grouped and attributed with meaning (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). For example, in paper I "danger" and "discrimination" are such nodal points that structure the discourse on cannabis liberalization and work as a backdrop to make other elements in the discourse meaningful (e.g., addiction and stigma). In paper II, it is also made evident that the nodal points can be different in their particularity, but that they can be made equivalent in a shared opposition against something that is seen as threatening (such as prohibition). Laclau (2005) uses the example of the common enemy that unifies different sectors of society, because they share the position of the oppressed. It is thus the felt oppression that brings the particular nodal points together. The metaphor of the common enemy is used in paper II to examine how different political positions can be unified in their relation to prohibition.

Certain nodal points can be seen to be at a discursive center; the "empty signifiers". The empty signifier can be seen as an empty node in the sense that it can function as a vessel for any elements or nodal points to be symbolically represented by it, and as such it can signify a discourse as a whole (Laclau, 2005). For example, in paper II, decriminalization, legalization, and liberalization are classified as empty signifiers as they seem to signify all nodal points that are identified in the material and since they provide links between them in relation to a common outside/enemy.

Some nodal points are up for contestation by antagonistic discourses. These are "floating signifiers", and they are important, because they highlight
controversies between discourses that are trying to hegemonize a certain field (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). The meaning of the floating signifier can thus change depending on which discourse is trying to define it (Laclau, 2005). In terms of this study, cannabis is seen as such a controversial element that the different discourses articulated in the empirical material are trying to assign with a particular meaning; making it appear to “float”. For instance, cannabis can be constructed as a harmful drug, a harmless drug, and a medicine in different discourses, although it is generally considered to be one more or less standardized product in popular discourse (Duff, 2016).

It is important to note that both empty signifiers and floating signifiers are also nodal points, although they have certain privileged or contested characteristics. According to Laclau (2005, p. 133), the empty and the floating signifiers are similar and should be seen as “partial dimensions [...] in any process of hegemonic construction”, where the empty signifier refers to the structure within the discourse and the floating signifier refers to struggles between discourses.

Subject positions

One key aspect in this thesis is to study who the concerned individuals are in discourses on cannabis: Who is the expert? Who is the user? In this theoretical framework, it is through discourse that certain subject positions become available (Bacchi, 2009; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Rose & Miller, 1992). Accordingly, categories such as “expert,” “youth,” and “cannabis user” are not simple reflections of a given reality but the result of discursive practices that assign certain meaning to individuals or groups (Bacchi, 2009). This also influences how a person comes into being. As Bacchi (2009, p. 16) describes it:

And when such a position is assumed, a person tends to make sense of the social world from this standpoint, all the while being subjected to the full range of discourses constituting this position. Hence, who we are – how we feel about ourselves and others – is at least to an extent an effect of the subject positions made available in public policies.

Accordingly, the individual has no essential meaning outside of discourse, and “every subject position is a discursive position” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014, p. 101). This raises the question of what role these subject positions play for governmental action on cannabis and how they give meaning to different constructions (Bacchi, 2009). For example, the construction of cannabis users as either flimsy youth who use the substance due to a lack of impulse control, or as rational and well-informed adults using the substance for recreation, opens up the possibility for different governmental action.
The construction of certain subject positions or people categories is done by excluding alternative interpretations and other categories against which the current category can be defined (Laclau, 1996). Differences within the category are ignored. This raises the question of how focusing on youth as a general category (see, e.g., papers III and IV) might distract attention from important differences within this extremely heterogeneous group.

The construction of certain subject positions is consequently a process that emerges over time (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). The process involves both the influence of different discourses and various governmental techniques, such as surveys and censuses, for “constituting” people (Rose et al., 2006). In particular acts of governing subjects are created to “produce the ends of government” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 89). For example, Rose (1989) argues that in neo-liberal governing subjects are created to be free and thus required to comport themselves in responsible ways to optimize their own lives. In relation to this study, the neo-liberal subject is central in describing the way the cannabis-using subject is constructed in various discourses, such as in constructions of the cannabis user as a rational and well-informed individual in paper II.

It is however not only in relation to cannabis users that the theoretical concept of subject positions is important. To be able to participate in political processes one has to be recognized as a political subject, and as seen in papers III and IV, the expert position (e.g., doctor, police officer, and social worker) is thus also a discursive one. From this perspective, experts become representatives of a certain subject position to which certain attributions of responsibility and behavioral expectations are implied (Bacchi, 2009). The statements of these experts are interpreted as coming from “within discourse” (at the same time producing and reproducing discourse), not as examples of political agency. As such, I am not looking to investigate intentions or the influence of certain experts on policy, but rather on “the knowledges through which rule takes place” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 26).

Problem representations

As discussed above, a focus in this thesis is to problematize taken-for-granted assumptions about cannabis and to study that which is considered “true” or “real.” To problematize, in a basic meaning, is thus to question or interrogate an issue. However, within certain theoretical traditions it has a more complex meaning: it is “a way to critically assess assumptions and presuppositions in political and social theories” (Bacchi, 2015, p. 2). Discourse theory is useful when investigating how a certain issue has been constructed, or problematized, by key actors. It could however be seen as lacking in instruments when assessing the effects of “deep-seated conceptual logics that underpin governmental problematizations of existing policies” (Bacchi, 2015, p. 5). This is why the Foucault-influenced mode of problematizing analysis
offered by Bacchi as well as by Rose and Miller has come to be used in this thesis. Including a problematizing approach in the theoretical framework of this thesis enables a deeper understanding of the effects of policy on the subjects addressed by it, and thus adds to the understanding of power in discourse. Consequently, I intend to avoid any type of social constructionist debunking (Best, 1995), as I do not seek to demonstrate that there is actually an alternative and correct way to think about and govern cannabis.

Bacchi (2009) suggests that policies are not rational answers to “true” problems, but rather something that shapes the problem. Bacchi does not claim that problematic conditions do not exist. Instead she claims that problems are fixated and given shape within policy. She maintains that we need to focus on these problematizing activities to understand how policies govern human behavior. Accordingly, in this study one important question is how certain problematizations, such as cannabis use, are connected to governance by looking at professional policy dissemination and service provision. To do this, Bacchi encourages asking certain questions to specific policies in order to analyze what the problem is represented to be in that specific policy or rule, what presuppositions underlie problem representations, and what implications follow from this (Bacchi, 2009). This is done in paper IV to analyze how practitioners and professionals problematize cannabis. However, I have only had limited access to what goes on in practice, as I have studied social work through symposia presentations. The discussion of the implications of this problematization does not emanate from cannabis users’ lived experiences, but rather from images filtered through the lens of the speakers at the symposia studied here.

Political rationalities

Rose and Miller (1992, p. 181) argue that government should be seen as a “problematizing activity,” and the term rationality does accordingly not refer to politics being rational, but rather to the rationale that is the backdrop of certain styles of governing (Bacchi, 2009). Thus, political rationalities can be defined as shared problematizations and ways of thinking that identify how government can be enacted and what techniques it uses (Rose et al., 2006). This includes political ideals or principles (such as freedom, equality, efficiency, and prosperity), how tasks are distributed between different societal institutions (such as politics, family, and church), the nature of what is governed (such as society, population, and economy), and the persons governed (such as children, legal subjects, and part of a population). How this is articulated in language is extremely important. In the words of Rose and Miller (1992, p. 8):
[...] political rationalities are articulated in a distinctive idiom [sic]. The language that constitutes political discourse is more than rhetoric. It should be seen, rather, as a kind of intellectual machinery or apparatus for rendering reality thinkable in such a way that it is amenable to political deliberations. It is here that a vocabulary of State has come to codify and contest the nature and limits of political power. Political rationalities, that is to say, are morally coloured, grounded upon knowledge, and made thinkable through language.

This theory is however not applied in this thesis to study public policies or governing, but rather to analyze the demands for alternative cannabis policies in the internet discussions. As such, using this theory helped to identify where demands for cannabis liberalization may be seen to belong politically. Two political rationalities were identified in the search for suggested governmental techniques for handling cannabis, which authorities seemed essential in the different policy demands, and who the demanded policy was described to govern: a welfarist and a neo-liberal rationality (Rose & Miller, 1992). The concepts of political rationalities are thus used in this study not to examine how cannabis users are governed by political practices, but how the online discussants wish to be governed. This tells us something about the way cannabis-liberal discussions can take shape in the Swedish context.
Material and methods

This thesis aims to tease out how cannabis is constructed in Sweden today, and how international changes have influenced this construction. In order to enable a broad and meaningful analysis it was necessary to include empirical examples from several arenas. Although different empirical materials have been included, the methods for analysis have been similar. Due to the social constructionist backdrop, the focus has been on analyzing language and texts.

Materials

The empirical material in this thesis can be characterized as text. In two papers (I and II), the text consists of discussions from an online discussion forum, in one paper (III) the text comes from newspaper articles, and in one paper (IV) the text is presentations from cannabis information symposia. Several types of texts, or empirical material, would of course have been possible to capture cannabis discourses in contemporary Sweden: official documents, interviews with cannabis users, interviews with politicians, blog texts, Facebook groups, etc.

The choice of these empirical materials is however based in a contention that the arenas that produce them are important in the contemporary cannabis debate. As these arenas are very different, in relation to both power and structure, it can be questioned if it is relevant to compare them and weigh their different constructions of cannabis and policy against one another. As noted above, official constructions can be seen to have a privileged role, while online discussions can be interpreted as much more marginal. On the basis of discourse theory it can however be concluded that symmetrical relations between arenas are not necessary for investigating struggles for hegemony. Any challenge against “official” or hegemonic constructions means that its contingency is exposed and thus possible to think about in a different way (Laclau, 1990). It can also be concluded that these arenas relate to each other and compare their constructions of cannabis with the constructions in other arenas (sometimes explicitly and sometimes in more general terms). For example, in the internet material the discussants often start out from newspaper articles in their argumentation, and in the symposia material the internet is depicted as an important influence on youth opinions about cannabis. These arenas stimulate each other, which makes it relevant to
include them in this thesis. Also, the empirical materials can be seen to represent both “official” perspectives (symposia presentations, newspaper articles) and “unofficial” or “oppositional” perspectives (internet discussions). Consequently, they can be claimed to capture a variety of voices.

Internet material
There is an abundance of information and discussions about cannabis online. Information and opinions about cannabis that used to be available to only a few are now open to the many. Hence, internet usage can possibly influence attitudes about cannabis, and online discussions may compete with hegemonic constructions of cannabis in shaping public opinion (Tackett-Gibson, 2008). Especially well-known websites with large numbers of visitors are more likely to shape public opinion. Therefore Flashback Forum was chosen for this sub-study. It was at the time of this study one of the largest online forums in Sweden.

Originally, Flashback Forum (from now on just Flashback) was created by Jan Axelsson in 1983 with the goal to “take the Swedish freedom of speech further” (https://www.flashback.org/kontakt). Since then Flashback has existed in the form of fanzine, TV, magazine, and website (Gustavsson, 2008). The forum was launched in the year 2000 as “Flashback’s conference room”, and it has since grown rapidly (Gustavsson, 2008). Flashback.se is still functioning as a sort of news site on freedom of speech, but it is the forum part at Flashback.org that has become synonymous with Flashback today.

Flashback is currently one of Sweden’s most-visited sites with over 2 million unique visitors each week according to Wikipedia, and over 1,000,000 registered members (in 2016). The minimum age of registration is 18. There are several main topics: computers, drugs, family, culture, food, politics, etc. These topics are divided into sub-forums. The drugs sub-forum has different discussion topics, including benzodiazepines, cannabis, drug rehabilitation, drug shops, and stories about taking drugs (so-called trip reports). The discussions in the drugs sub-forum are predominantly drug-liberal; prohibition voices are scarce and get plenty of attention. The website also signals drug liberalism: at the time of this study it was filled with banners promoting web shops for, e.g., research chemicals (RCs) and cannabis paraphernalia.

Each discussion or thread on Flashback is started by a registered member, a TS (thread starter). If the first post is interesting enough, other registered members will start to reply. Some threads will result in thousands of replies while others will not stimulate any. The single post is usually no longer than a few lines and can comprise text, emoticons (such as smileys), and links to other webpages. The writing style is informal, and orthographic rules, such as capital letters or punctuation marks, are typically neglected.
There is no background information about the participants regarding
gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, etc. Available information about the
participant is limited to username, avatar (a picture that is seen to represent
the participant), duration of membership, number of posts made, and whether
the participant is a moderator, administrator, or a regular participant. There is
however a general opinion in Sweden that Flashback is mostly inhabited by
young men. Although previous research shows some support for this
hypothesis (Barratt, 2011), it is impossible to test, because usernames usually
are creative pseudonyms that do not resemble everyday names. A participant
could also be a “troll,” a discussion participant who deliberately wants to
antagonize other participants and instigate discussions, often by voicing
extreme opinions. There is no way of knowing if the participants are
participating in the discussions as “themselves” or if they have assumed a role
to disturb and feed the discussion. However, this is not important for this
study. Who is responsible for the posts on Flashback, troll or not, lies outside
the scope of this study.

Due to the size and topical spread of Flashback, it would have been
impossible and irrelevant to incorporate all available threads. Therefore, the
material was sampled in ways fitting for the aim of the study. In light of the
nature of the Flashback discussions, the inclusion of this empirical material
allowed for an analysis of an “oppositional” perspective. Voices that may not
be present in regular debates and discussions about cannabis, due to the stigma
of being cannabis-liberal in Sweden, are heard here.

Newspaper material

Different types of media play an important role in this thesis. As plenty of
theorists have emphasized, media can be seen as a key creator of our social,
cultural, political, and economic lives (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998; Castells, 1996;
Fairclough, 1995; Thompson, 1990). In modern society media has become
increasingly powerful in influencing both what people talk about and how they
talk about it (Fairclough, 1995; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By drawing
attention to and foregrounding certain issues repeatedly, the media can prompt
what discussions circulate in the public agendas, and which ones are
backgrounded. From a discourse theoretical point of view, media is thus not
just an intermediary reflecting what goes on in society; it is a producer,
reproducer, and transformer of social phenomena. The media can therefore be
a strong influence on public discourse, government actions, and political
parties (Fairclough, 1995; Lancaster et al., 2011; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Previous research has shown that the Swedish print media generally
emphasize elements of a restrictive drug policy and that drugs are presented
as a criminal justice problem (Gould, 1996; Pollack, 2001). Following these
studies, and the contention of an international shift in discussions on cannabis,
it was considered interesting to see if these research findings still appeared relevant, or if this was changing over time.

Five Swedish newspapers were chosen to be included in this study:

- **Dagens Nyheter** – one of the largest daily papers in Sweden. It has a national spread but a focus on Stockholm. The editorial is “independent liberal.” The paper is owned by the Bonnier group.
- **Svenska Dagbladet** – one of the largest daily papers in Sweden. It is based in Stockholm but has a national spread. The editorial is “independent moderate.” The paper is owned by the Schibsted group.
- **Aftonbladet** – one of the largest national evening papers with a tabloid character. The editorial is “independent social democratic.” The paper is owned by the Schibsted group and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO).
- **Expressen** – one of the largest national evening papers with a tabloid character. The editorial is “independent liberal.” The paper is owned by the Bonnier group.
- **Sydsvenskan** – one of the largest regional daily papers. It is based in Malmö and has a spread in the south of Sweden. The editorial is “independent liberal.” The paper is owned by the Bonnier group.

The newspapers were chosen to include variation in the type of newspaper, political views, ownership, and geographical diversity. However, the largest papers in Sweden do not vary much in their political views; most are described as “independent liberal.” There are smaller newspapers that take a more distinctive political stand (such as ETC, which is a left-wing newspaper). Including such papers might have brought in different perspectives, but the number of articles in such papers was very small. **Sydsvenskan** was included, although it is a regional paper, as it has a large readership and covers a region of political importance. Several other regional papers would of course also have been possible contenders as they could have provided interesting information from other important contexts (e.g., Göteborgs-Posten). Yet, **Sydsvenskan** was considered as particularly important in a study with a focus on international change, as it is geographically located close to contexts that can be seen as more liberal in relation to cannabis (e.g., Denmark).

The material was sampled to cover two years – 2002 and 2012 – for three main reasons. The first reason was practical: 2012 was the latest year at the time of the analysis. The second reason was more analytical, as 2012 was an important year in international cannabis policy. For example, cannabis legalization was propagated and approved in two US states (Colorado and Washington). And third, 2002 was chosen because ten years was considered
a substantial amount of time to allow looking for significant change in the reporting on cannabis.

The web-based media archive Retriever (https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html) was used to collect the articles. I used the website search tool to find all articles that mentioned cannabis, marijuana, and/or hashish in the chosen newspapers. In the search I chose not to include any supplementary newspapers on topics such as entertainment, lifestyle, or food since they did not exist in both 2002 and 2012. Furthermore, it is not probable that these supplementary newspapers would have included much information about cannabis. For sampling reasons I included articles from every third month of the year (January, April, July, and October), which resulted in 513 articles in total, 313 from 2002 and 200 from 2012. All types of articles were analyzed: news, editorials, features (travel, cars, food, and biographic descriptions), columns, and opinions (debate/letter to the editor). This sampling resulted in a large variation in the length of the articles included; the shortest consisted of just a few words while the longest spanned several pages. I chose to include articles of any length, because discourses can be seen to be shaped and reshaped every time we read about the substance – even in a short reference.

The choice to include newspaper material was motivated both by its relevance in the other materials included in the thesis (e.g., the frequent references to print media in the internet discussions) and because of its assumed role in influencing drug policies and affecting public opinion and perception on drug issues (Forsyth, 2012; Lancaster et al., 2011). In comparing this empirical material to the internet discussions and the symposia presentations it can be concluded that it is neither strictly “unofficial” nor “official” in its character. Although the experts in the newspaper articles are typically police officers, researchers, or other types of persons in authority, the newspaper format also allows for other voices to be heard, such as those by former drug users and people working on cannabis farms.

Symposia material

How professional opinions and discourses on cannabis are shaped is of course difficult to capture. Several different types of material could be helpful, including policy documents and guidelines or interviews with professional policy players. The initial intention in this study was to investigate internal material from the Public Health Agency of Sweden on the preparations for a particular governmental cannabis bid during 2011–2014. This material was however impossible to access to due to restrictions imposed by the Public Health Agency, and the focus of this study consequently changed.

During the years of working with this thesis it had dawned on me that there seemed to be one important arena that shapes and spreads a professional construction of cannabis: cannabis information symposia. These symposia
approach professional groups – social workers, health care personnel, school personnel, and NGO workers – that in some way come in contact with cannabis users. During approximately one working day or so, experts such as researchers, politicians, civil servants, and experienced social workers and health care staff give presentations about cannabis. The presentations usually address issues such as cannabis harms, prevalence, treatment, and sometimes policy debates. Presentations generally last between 20 and 40 minutes and include a questions and answers section at the end. There is commonly some sort of attendance fee, and judging by the attendance lists, it is not uncommon for entire work teams to attend. During a two-year period (2012–2013), more than 20 such symposia were held throughout Sweden, often with overlapping presentation headlines and experts. I did not attend all the symposia, but was present at several, both in Stockholm and in Gothenburg, and found that they had a relatively coherent construction of cannabis and that this construction seemed to reach a substantial group of professional actors. To include a manageable yet dense material, two information symposia were sampled, recorded, and transcribed. Comparing them to the other symposia held during that period suggests that the presentation titles and the professional status of the speakers seemed representative. In all, 21 presentations were analyzed in this paper.

As it turned out, both of the included symposia were in some ways part of the cannabis bid handled by the Public Health Agency. One of the symposia treated presentations from projects that had been financed by this bid, while the other symposium was arranged by an organization that during this time had received funding from the Public Health Agency. In a sense, the interest in the Public Health Agency had shifted from providing background material of a particular bid to the outcomes of it.

The presentations at these symposia can be seen to both represent and shape a professional construction of cannabis, which motivated the inclusion of this material in the thesis. The empirical material represents an “official” and in a sense governmental perspective in that the Public Health Agency can be seen as a key government actor, and as such it complements the other two sets of empirical material. Still, the speakers at these symposia represent a particular group of professional policy players, because the rationale behind these two symposia was to sustain a joint view on cannabis and to counter drug-liberal opinions. Researchers, politicians, or service providers with a differing view on cannabis were not likely to be invited to speak at these events.

Methods
After delimiting the large scope of empirical material to create a reasonable sample (for the complete sampling process, see the full-length papers), each sampled material was entered in the qualitative software Atlas.ti to create a
working corpus for analysis. Using Atlas.ti enabled an initial coding of all material. The first steps of reading and coding are similar in all papers: it is an open reading that follows the patterns that appear in the text to create codes. This reading is consequently done to create an overview. The second step is to look at the coded material in a more theoretical way. This includes more comprehensive and close readings and re-readings of the texts with certain theoretical questions or concepts in mind. The different papers are all based in a social constructionist theoretical framework, but different theoretical tracks are emphasized. The second step thus includes some methodologic variation. To use a common metaphor, these readings are done with different sets of theoretical glasses.

In papers I, II, and III theoretical concepts from Laclau and Mouffé’s discourse theory are used to analyze the material on a deeper level. Concepts such as discourse, nodal point, empty signifier, floating signifier, and subject positions are applied to the material to get a deeper understanding of the texts. Papers II and IV apply concepts from Foucault-inspired theorists such as Bacchi, Rose, and Miller to the material. For example, in paper II the material is analyzed by both discourse theory and the theoretical concept of political rationalities. In paper IV the analysis is deepened by asking the material a set of theoretical questions about problematization, developed by Bacchi.

In the analysis of the different empirical materials, comparisons have also been an important theoretical instrument. Looking at distinctions or analogies (paper I), political frontiers (paper II), or dichotomies (paper IV) allows for a more detailed analysis of what is actually said in the different arenas. All of these different concepts have helped me to see the statements in new and more analytical ways, and thus to think about and understand how the different actors construct cannabis. As such, these concepts can be seen as methodological “tools” for structuring and analyzing the results.

It can thus be concluded that the process of working with the empirical material has been characterized by an abductive approach (Wodak, 1999). The analysis has moved back and forth between the theoretical concepts and the empirical material. For example, in paper I an initial overview of the empirical material resulted in a decision to focus on alcohol–cannabis comparisons as a way of theoretically investigating the construction of cannabis.

Key validity, reliability, and generalization issues

In terms of validity and generalizability, this thesis can be criticized for making too much of what seem like snapshots from everyday “chitchat” in online forums, print media, and information symposia. Similarly, it is not known who the online discussants are and if they are discussing “as themselves” or if they are trolls, while the symposia environment probably spurs the speakers to use simple language and less nuanced argumentation,
and the print media texts are known for being categorical. Consequently, the arenas studied in this thesis can be seen as relatively extreme: internet forums with activists, print media with black-and-white dramaturgy, and professional symposia with a lobbying-like approach. All of these arenas can thus be considered as political in some sense. For example, Rødner Sznitman (2007b) noted in her study on integrated drug users that many of her informants pursued a political agenda that perhaps made them less likely to discuss anything discreditable about their drug use. The value of the discussions and presentations can thus be questioned. I would nevertheless argue that these problems resemble those of any qualitative research. For example, we can never know what people “really think” – and in a study based on social constructionism that is not the key issue. Instead, I believe that it is in the tangible use of language that discourses are created, reproduced, and changed. In that sense, “talk” in any context is important. Consequently, I believe that the Flashback discussions, the print media articles, and the symposia presentations offer a valuable insight into how oppositional and hegemonic views on cannabis can be presented and negotiated in contemporary Sweden, and as such they provide important information about conditions and boundaries for national cannabis discourses. In extension, these discussions tell us something (but not everything) about how cannabis is constructed in Sweden today. If other arenas had been included in this thesis, it is possible that other results would have emerged. However, it has been concluded that the findings from these papers appear to be reasonable in comparison to other scientific studies, as well as in comparison to political debates in other contexts. It should however be made clear that this thesis does not attempt to establish how common or widespread a certain opinion is. And even though the study can be criticized for drawing general conclusions from different empirical materials, I see this as a case study that can demonstrate the ideological, scientific, and political ground rules for the cannabis debate in Sweden today.

In relation to aiming at reliability, all texts have been read repeatedly, all coding has been double-checked on several occasions, and all results have been thoroughly discussed with my supervisors and other colleagues. A lot of work has also gone into getting to know the field. I have attended several cannabis information symposia in Sweden, as well as several international scientific conferences focusing on qualitative research on drugs. I have tried to keep up with both international and national cannabis political development, online discussions, as well as with the relevant research throughout the period of this study. I can conclude that even though the structure of a compilation thesis enables the doctoral student to move on from a particular set of data after a paper is published, my work has rather been characterized by being present in all three arenas throughout the years of this study.
Ethical reflections

In this thesis different sets of ethical reflections are considered important in relation to the empirical materials. Regarding the newspaper material and the symposia material, one main aspect was central: to anonymize the names of all individuals as well as the names of the different symposia. I am aware that this might not be a complete disguise of who the individuals are, but as these materials come from arenas that can be considered as public, this was deemed to be sufficient. A wholly different set of ethical reflections was considered important regarding the internet material. Internet research is conducted in a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, media studies, and cultural studies. But the common field of internet research is relatively new and has yet to establish unanimous ethical guidelines. This, along with the sensitive nature of my research topic, makes the ethical aspects of the online sub-study difficult, and it has created several dilemmas along the way. Therefore I have read a great deal of literature regarding ethical aspects of online research. This has in no way provided me with straight answers, but it has given me perspectives on the difficulties of working with online material and facilitated ethical decisions in the study. Below, I first outline how this topic has been discussed by other scholars and then use this to describe the process of making my own ethical guideline for this study.

Because the internet is generally considered to belong to a social domain, this has led to an extensive use of the human subject research model in internet research. The ethics from human subject research “regard the rights of the human subject as primary and the aims of the researcher as secondary” (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002, p. 234). While plenty of research uses these guidelines as decisive when conducting internet research (Kozinets 2011; Sharf, 1999), there are “discussion and disagreements as to whether these should be applied in different disciplinary approaches to Internet research” (Berry, 2004, p. 324). There is thus an ongoing discussion regarding ethical research practices such as informed consent and anonymity in internet-based social research. There are no clear ethical recommendations, maybe because the internet is in a state of constant flux (however for ethical guidelines, see Ess & the AoIR ethics working group, 2002), and earlier research has approached this in different ways. For example, Denzin (1999, p. 123) described himself as “a passive lurker” who did not reveal himself to the internet newsgroup he studied, while Barratt (2011) emphasizes the need to come forward and interact as a researcher. She has actively contributed to the discussions on the forum she studies, has started her own discussion thread, and invited people to join her in the study.

To decide how to treat your material ethically, two main questions are central: is your internet material of private or public character (see, e.g., Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Berry, 2004; Elgesem, 2002; Ess & the AoIR ethics working group, 2002; Herring, 1996; King, 1996; Moe & Larsson,
2012)? Are you doing research on people or research on text (see, e.g., Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Berry, 2004)? If the material is considered public, there is less of a need to protect the research subject as regards both informed consent and the need for anonymization. Also, if the material is considered as text, it belongs to a public domain, and is therefore open for reproduction.

Consequently, it is decisive, as regards ethical decisions, to characterize the internet material included in the study. It is a difficult question that seems to generate a variety of answers. Kozinets argues (2011, p. 194f): “Internet is not a place or a text, it is neither public nor private. It does not contain just one type of social interactions but several.” Internet material thus seems to be a little bit of everything or none of the above, and there is not one answer as to how the researcher should treat the material. What can be said is that doing internet research is different from traditional face-to-face methods such as ethnography, focus groups, or personal interviews. The researcher uses material that is produced without the intrusion of the researcher and without the informant’s confiding in the researcher. The internet can thus be considered as a form of cultural production similar to traditional media such as newspapers or TV (Basset & O’Riordan, 2002). However, the material can also be viewed differently, depending on whether it resembles private conversations or conversations in a public place. This issue is highly contentious (see, for example, Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Berry, 2004; Elgesem, 2002; King, 1996). Basset and O’Riordan (2002) imply that most internet discussions de facto lie in the public sphere, Waskul (1996) suggests that we cannot fit internet into existing spatial metaphors, and King (1996) wants researchers to treat all internet discussions as private. Other researchers have suggested that there is a continuum of levels between private and public (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2001). Two aspects that also influence the material are the nature of the medium (e.g., synchronicity, persistence of material over time, and channels of communication) and the situation (e.g., participation structure, and purpose and topic of the site) (Herring, 2007). Internet is an immense and diverse domain, which makes it impossible to generalize universally between all types of computer-mediated communication (Herring, 1996). Thus, depending on the character of the particular material, our methodological and ethical research frameworks seem to change (Berry, 2004).

In this study, I have chosen to regard Flashback as a public website. In terms of technology, Flashback allows both synchronous (e.g., real-time chat) and asynchronous messaging (e.g., forum message board). Asynchronous messages are generally structured in such a way that they reach a greater public and remain on the website over time, and these are the messages I analyze (Kozinets, 2011). In terms of the situational factors, Flashback can be seen as a public site due to its size and member anonymity.

Because I have characterized the Flashback material as public, I have chosen not to collect informed consent from the participants. According to the
Association of Internet Research (AoIR), a general consideration is that “the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.” (Ess & the AoIR ethics working group, 2002, p. 5). This decision has also been made due to the use of discourse theory. As I am doing research on social phenomena rather than individuals, the focus is not on who says what but rather how discourses take shape through online discussions.

Even though Flashback is public, I have chosen an almost complete disguise of the participants, which is motivated by the sensitive nature of my research. Similarly, I have chosen to exclude any names included in the newspaper articles or in the symposia presentations. Although Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) suggest that it could be damaging for an ongoing political struggle to disguise usernames, in this situation I see it as preferable because many participants admit to the criminal act of using cannabis. Also, most ethical discussions conclude that all participants should be disguised as far as possible (e.g. King, 1996; Kozinets, 2011). Similarly, the quotes included in the material are unsearchable, as they have been changed from Swedish to English. That I have not chosen to disguise the name of the website I have studied is motivated not only by its public character, but also because it allows for critical evaluation of my claims (Herring, 1996).
Results: Summary of papers

This chapter consists of a brief summary of the four papers included in this thesis. Each paper is consequently presented separately. A more general discussion of the results is found in the following chapter.

Paper I: Legitimacy through scaremongering: The discursive role of alcohol in online discussions of cannabis use and policy

This paper examines how cannabis is constructed in Swedish online discussions. In early stages of the analysis it became clear that comparisons between cannabis and the legal substance alcohol were central in these discussions as a way of either supporting or challenging dominant images of cannabis. The aim of this paper is therefore to describe and analyze the discursive role of alcohol in Swedish online discussions of cannabis use and policy. By analyzing alcohol-related posts in cannabis discussions on the online forum Flashback, this paper can be seen as an examination of how cannabis is constructed in an “unofficial” or “oppositional” arena. Based in social constructionist theory and by employing concepts such as floating signifier and nodal points (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014), the analysis seeks to examine how the meaning of alcohol and cannabis is produced and reproduced in the discussions. Analytical tools such as analogies, distinctions and typological examples (Marková, Linell, Grossen, & Salazar Orvig, 2007) are also applied to show how actors argue to make abstract ideas tangible.

The analyzed material consists of approximately 700 alcohol-related posts made during one year (November 2010–November 2011) in a Flashback subsection called “Cannabis in media.”

The analysis shows that discussions are primarily centered on the relative dangers of cannabis and alcohol and on the discriminatory character of the Swedish legal system. Consequently, danger and discrimination are nodal points that structure this liberalization discourse. One basic analogy – that alcohol is a drug just like cannabis – is vital for constructing alcohol as more dangerous than cannabis. With this analogy as a backdrop, alcohol can be described as addictive, lethal, to produce psychosis, and to be a gateway to “hard” drug use. Thus, discussion participants seem to mimic a prohibitionist
discourse where these qualities are normally applied to cannabis, and make it pivot around alcohol instead. Accordingly, alcohol is rejected as a dangerous drug and cannabis is promoted as harmless.

The analogy that both cannabis and alcohol are drugs is also the backdrop of discussions centered on discrimination. Discussion participants conclude that Swedish drug policy is inconsistent, because only one of these drugs is illegal (cannabis), that this inconsistent control produces stigma for cannabis users as they are made criminal, that it prioritizes one group of consumers (“the foolish drinker”), and that it is based on ignorance and moralizing (instead of science, which would promote cannabis-liberal policies). In these discussions, participants dissociate themselves from alcohol consumers by describing them as brainwashed by a prohibitionist society and unaware of science. In relation to this, cannabis consumers are portrayed as enlightened free thinkers. Also, in a comparison of the substances, cannabis appears in better light, while alcohol becomes a devil in disguise. In this way, the two substances “change places,” and the characteristics that are usually associated with cannabis in Swedish restrictive rhetoric are shifted toward alcohol. This indicates that the meaning of both alcohol and cannabis is disputed and unfixed in contemporary Sweden, which makes it relevant to perceive them as floating signifiers.

Although this can be seen as a study of oppositional opinions on cannabis, it was concluded that the official prohibitionist drug discourse is essential in these discussions. As the forum participants first present and then negate ideas from prohibitionism, they both reject official constructions of cannabis and use them to legitimize cannabis use. It is common to portray drugs as a threat in Sweden, and such “scaremongering” is employed in the discussions at Flashback but directed at alcohol instead of cannabis. One conclusion is that the Swedish prohibitionist cannabis discourse thus steers the direction of liberalization discussions at Flashback, and traditional arguments against cannabis come back at alcohol.

Paper II: A dawning demand for a new cannabis policy: A study of Swedish online drug discussions

This paper examines how online discussions on drug policy formulate an oppositional cannabis discourse in an otherwise prohibitionist country such as Sweden. The aim of the paper is to identify demands for an alternative cannabis policy as well as describing and analyzing their political belonging. Of particular interest is how these demands relate to both international trends and traditional Swedish politics.

The empirical material for this paper consists of discussion threads mentioning cannabis that were active during 2012 in the Flashback sub-forum.
Drug policy. The final sample was 56 discussion threads containing 3652 posts.

By drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014), I have examined different strategies of constructing an oppositional discourse. The analysis shows that Flashback discussion participants demand a new cannabis policy in opposition against a prohibitionist discourse, which is seen to be based in moralizing and unscientific thinking. The discussion participants are consequently in the midst of trying to attribute meaning to legalization, decriminalization, and liberalization, and they apply a wide range of different demands for each of these regulations. These demands are in their particularity different from each other, but they all become equivalent in their opposition to prohibition. Legalization, decriminalization, and liberalization turn to vessels that symbolically represent all the demands and can thus be seen as empty signifiers.

The demands for a new cannabis policy are thus versatile but could be gathered into four key areas (or nodal points): cannabis, harm, state, and freedom. Flashback discussions construct “cannabis” as relatively harmless if handled correctly, while prohibition discourse suggests that the substance is always harmful. Its meaning is thus contested as there is a struggle between these discourses for hegemony, and the nodal point “cannabis” also becomes a floating signifier. Demands that relate to “harm” generally center on public good and health (e.g., improve treatment, take social responsibility, and reduce drug use). The demands related to the nodal point “state” focus on both state regulation and control as well as on individual freedom and a free market. The demands that relate to “freedom” focus on individual choice and the right to decide over one’s own body. These demands also reflect that the discussions are not based on pathology and deviance, but instead on consumers with strengths and competence. It can be concluded that these different demands for a new cannabis policy describe different ways of organizing society. To further deepen the analysis and examine how the demands for such an oppositional policy are linked to governance, I applied the concept of political rationalities, as developed by Rose and Miller (1992).

This concept showed that, based on a common construction of cannabis as a harmless substance, policy demands originate from both neo-liberal and welfarist political rationalities. Neo-liberal and welfare demands are mixed, and participants are simultaneously asking for state- and individual-level approaches to handle the cannabis issue. The Swedish online oppositional discourse on cannabis widens the scope beyond the confines of drug policy to broader demands such as social justice, individual choice, and increased welfare. These demands are not essentially linked together and many may seem as politically contradictory, as for example state regulation and liberal freedom are typically not compatible. This is also significant for the discourse; it appears not to be “owned” by a certain political position. The discourse is negotiated between the neo-liberal vision of an alternative policy demanding
individual freedom, and the welfarist vision demanding social responsibility. This implies the influence of both international cannabis-liberal policies as well as a heritage from the social democratic discourse centered on state responsibility, which has been dominant in Swedish politics in modern times.

Paper III: The same old story? Continuity and change in Swedish print media constructions of cannabis

The overall aim of this paper is to describe and analyze how cannabis use, users, and policy are constructed in Swedish print media. Through a diachronic analysis of newspaper articles from 2002 and 2012, this paper aims at analyzing if discourse has changed over time. A key question is also if and how an international change of perspectives on cannabis is mirrored and processed in traditional Swedish print media. By employing the theoretical concepts of discourse and subject position from discourse theory (as developed by Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014), the paper seeks to examine how cannabis and relevant subject positions are constructed in print media messages.

The analyzed material in this paper consists of 513 articles (313 from 2002 and 200 from 2012) that in some way mention cannabis. The articles come from the newspapers Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen, Aftonbladet and Sydsvenskan. Some of these papers have a tabloid profile, others have a broadsheet character; some have nationwide coverage, one is regional in its nature.

The analysis demonstrates that in both 2002 and 2012 three previously well-established discourses construct the meaning of cannabis: a juridical discourse, a social problems discourse, and a medical discourse. The juridical discourse is the most dominant discourse in both years, as the bulk of all articles tie cannabis to illegal activities (e.g., illegal consumption and smuggling) and policing (e.g., custom seizures and arrests). Consequently two primary subject positions are made relevant through this discourse: the law enforcer and those affected by the law.

Often combined with a juridical discourse is a social problems discourse. In both 2002 and 2012 cannabis use is repeatedly described to be part of a “bad life story” starting in adolescence and involving broken homes, bad company and self-destructive behavior along with illegal drug use and crime. Accordingly, cannabis is a powerful symbol of social deprivation, and the “bad life story” illustrates that reasons for consuming cannabis relate to negative circumstances in life. These types of stories, relating cannabis to social problems, usually center the subject position of the cannabis-using youth. Youth are however never experts on their own problems, as their opinions are hardly reported in the material. Instead, knowledgeable
professionals such as school representatives, police officers, social workers, and former drug users are the experts that get to comment on youth cannabis use.

Throughout the material cannabis is described as a harmful substance. The social problems discourse focuses on the harms of destructive living, but there are also articles that link harm to physical damage and thus draw on a medical discourse. With descriptions of cannabis as influencing “the brain’s reward system” the substance is given a (bio)medical meaning. The experts that become relevant when drawing on a medical discourse are medical doctors or researchers. However, cannabis is described not only as a pathogen, but also as a medical remedy (in both years). Either way, the substance is constructed as a potent medical substance.

In 2012 there are articles that describe cannabis in ways that do not seem to fit within any of these three discourses. For example, some articles depict cannabis as an ordinary commodity, similar to alcohol. The consumers are described as actors on a regular commercial market, while the producers of cannabis are depicted as regular workers or business persons. New perspectives on cannabis are thus being introduced, and these descriptions could be seen as belonging to an economic discourse. Further, the articles within the scope of the material that depicted cannabis as a recreational activity, without condemning the consumption, could be characterized as belonging to a recreational discourse.

It could hence be concluded that continuity by and large characterizes print media reporting on cannabis. The three main discourses represented in this material have also been identified by previous research. Swedish print media thus seems to continually strengthen a political prohibitionist approach in both 2002 and 2012. But there are signs of change. When reporting on international events in 2012, discursive alternatives, such as recreational use, are articulated. It is however unclear if new ways of portraying cannabis will strengthen or challenge prohibitionist constructions.

Paper IV: Protecting prohibition: The role of Swedish information symposia in keeping cannabis a high-profile problem

This paper is an analysis of how cannabis and cannabis policy is constructed in an official and professional context. By analyzing how policy players (such as politicians, researchers, civil servants, and service providers) invited to speak at professional symposia dedicated to dissemination of scientific cannabis information “talk” about cannabis, this paper aims at understanding how cannabis is maintained as a high-profile problem in Swedish society. Of
particular interest is how prohibition can be legitimized in a context where global perspectives on cannabis are becoming more liberal.

Key questions that have steered the analysis are: how is cannabis constructed in this professional context, and how is normalization of cannabis resisted? Using Carol Bacchi’s theoretical approach “What’s the problem represented to be?” a few theoretically driven questions have also been helpful when identifying how the cannabis problem is constructed and what the underlying presuppositions are. These questions also helped to identify how this problem representation is sustained and what is left unproblematized. Bacchi’s approach offers a way of analyzing how a problem is being produced within a certain policy or through policy suggestions. In analyzing the material it was thus important to bear in mind that an underlying assumption at these symposia is that all handling of cannabis should continue to be prohibited in Sweden.

Two symposia were sampled (held in Stockholm in November 2013 and February 2014), and all 21 presentations during these symposia were analyzed.

The analysis shows that these symposia constructed cannabis as a complex youth problem. Throughout the presentations it is young people’s consumption that is discussed and problematized. Youth are portrayed as extremely vulnerable to the effects of cannabis as well as particularly prone to using the substance, as they lack control over their impulses. A coherent prohibitionist response to youth cannabis use, based on what is described as “reliable” research and “undisputable” facts, is promoted as righteous and compassionate. Cannabis-positive attitudes are seen as extremely problematic and are ruled out as dubious and alien to a Swedish context. Speakers at the symposia construct a morally upright “us” who can save problematic youth by promoting “real” scientific evidence about cannabis and its harms. This construction may have certain material effects. For example, the overwhelming focus on youth diverts attention from the potential prevalence of other consumer groups that need attention and help. Also, the reliable/unreliable research dichotomy obscures any perception that research on the dangers of cannabis use does not automatically mean that prohibition is the most advantageous cannabis policy. In this construction, the choice between keeping cannabis prohibited and opening up for liberalization is presented as one between letting reliable or unreliable research direct cannabis policy.

It can thus be concluded that in this professional arena cannabis is described as extremely harmful, that the primary users are youth, and that all use should continue to be prevented and prohibited. The paper argues that in a globalized world, where cannabis is increasingly handled like an ordinary commodity, youth becomes a perfect category for rationalizing a political status quo in Sweden and for protecting prohibition.
Discussion and conclusions

This chapter starts off by introducing some of the main findings in the papers under the headline Continuity and change. These findings are then related to each other, to theory and to previous research, and they are discussed in relation to the overall aims of the thesis; to study how cannabis is constructed in Sweden today, what policy responses are promoted as rational, and how international cannabis trends are received. In the final part of the chapter some concluding remarks are made on implications for policy and practice.

Continuity and change

This thesis takes its start in the changing views on cannabis internationally and how this is handled in the prohibitionist context of Sweden. The main findings can thus be gathered in discussions on continuity and change, as all of the papers included here in some way relate to this. Looking at the online study, papers I and II show that there seems to be a strong desire among discussion participants to change Swedish cannabis policy in line with international models (as applied, for example, in the Netherlands and the US). These discussions also emphasize a need to nuance the current “official” and hegemonic construction of cannabis as an extremely harmful drug. The participants in these discussions propagate alternative views on cannabis, in which comparisons to alcohol become vital and more liberal cannabis policies become logical. These discussions are also characterized by continuity, as many of the arguments for liberal cannabis policies seem to be based in traditional social democratic values requesting more welfare and international solidarity. Similarly, the strong presence of traditional prohibitionist “scaremongering” arguments in alcohol–cannabis comparisons indicates continuity, as such constructions are used to denigrate alcohol and legitimize cannabis.

In relation to paper III, continuity seems to be what characterizes traditional print media material. Cannabis is generally portrayed as a potent and illegal drug that produces social problems. However, in this arena there are also signs of change, for the material from 2012 includes stories on cannabis as an economic asset as well as a recreational substance. Although these “new” ways of giving meaning to cannabis are scarce, it indicates that international changes influence how cannabis is portrayed in Swedish print media.
Both traditional print media and the cannabis information symposia (paper IV) focus on youth consumers that are seen as particularly vulnerable to the effects of cannabis. It is concluded that such constructions are important for protecting prohibition and for a prohibitionist discourse centered on the dangers of cannabis. Although the “official” arena, represented in some way by both the traditional print media and the information symposia, reaches the conclusion that prohibition should prevail, it is nevertheless obvious that this discourse is influenced by new political conditions internationally. The “old” prohibitionist discourse is forced to change in order to legitimize its position, for example by focusing on the immature brain of youth and by emphasizing the need for scientific evidence.

These results are undoubtedly very much marked by the particular time during which this study was made. Due to the political movement in this field it is probable that, should this study had taken its start in 2017, different materials and events would have been included. For example, the anonymous online discussions could be exchanged for the much more open discussions in relevant Facebook groups that have grown in recent years, and the recent decision to allow medical cannabis for a couple of individuals in Sweden would certainly be necessary to follow up (Wicklén, 2017). As this field to a large extent is characterized by change, there is also a need for future research to further investigate how cannabis use, users, and cannabis policy are perceived by the public in Sweden today. Similarly, it would have been desirable to go into more detail on user perceptions about cannabis. The online discussions included here cannot be seen as representative of the user group, as the participants to a large extent can be characterized as cannabis activists. Although previous research from both Sweden and other Nordic contexts has investigated consumer views (e.g., Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Rødner Sznitman, 2007b; Sandberg, 2012), there is little knowledge about user views in Sweden after the dramatic movement in cannabis policy and opinion internationally. It would also be desirable to expand this research by studying the development of Swedish cannabis policy and the positioning of the political parties in the near future.

Controversies about harm

One of the main aims of this thesis has been to study how cannabis, the use, and the users are constructed in contemporary Sweden. The results show that there is not one fixed idea on which everyone can agree. Quite the opposite, what cannabis is, how it is used, and who the users are seem to be heavily debated with contradictory constructions being presented in the three arenas. Using the language of discourse theory it can be concluded that cannabis is a floating signifier constructed differently in the different discourses. The
arguments can be said to rest on one basic controversy: how harmful is the substance?

In discussions on the internet it becomes clear that the participants are trying to construct a substance that is harmless if handled correctly. These discussion participants are trying to normalize cannabis by comparing it to the legal substance alcohol (and reaching the conclusion that cannabis is far less harmful), by calling it a “soft” drug (instead of a “hard” drug), by trying to promote an image of cannabis users as rational and responsible (instead of irresponsible “junkies”), and by emphasizing that it is a medicinal plant (and thus “natural” and curative instead of harmful). As illustrated in Table 1, this image is constructed in opposition against what can be seen as an official and hegemonic construction (presented by both traditional print media and experts at the information symposia) of cannabis as an extremely harmful and dangerous drug. In this official construction comparisons to other substances become relevant as well, but instead of using alcohol as a measure point, other illegal drugs (such as heroin) are used to highlight dangers (e.g., that cannabis affects the human brain “just like any other drug”). Unlike the Australian way of talking about these substances as “alcohol and other drugs” (Fraser et al., 2014), the Swedish professionals studied in paper IV talk about “alcohol and drugs,” thus drawing a strict line between the legal alcohol and all other, illegal substances. (It is however important to keep in mind throughout this discussion that the professionals studied here were invited to speak at symposia with a rationale to counter drug-liberal opinions, which certainly creates a select rather than a representative group – see discussion in Symposia material.) The online discussions thus seem closer to international scientific discussions, as many of the discussion participants not only compare alcohol and cannabis, but also as they construct alcohol as a drug. Although traditional print media can be said to mainly draw on discourses based in prohibition when giving meaning to cannabis, there are also signs of new constructions that break with the harmful/harmless dichotomy. For example, by drawing on an economic discourse, the print media presents cannabis as an ordinary commodity on a regular market – a construction that is not focused on potential harm.

Table 1. Overview of substance constructions in different arenas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online forum</th>
<th>Traditional print media</th>
<th>Symposia professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmless</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>Medicinal</td>
<td>Illegal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Soft”</td>
<td>Ordinary commodity</td>
<td>“Hard”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cannabis users as pliant youth or well-informed adults

Despite some new trends in traditional print media to present cannabis users as consumers on a free market or as sick people in need of cannabis as medicine, both the traditional print media and the symposia presentations commonly accentuate the harm aspect described above by focusing on youth users. Youth are in these constructions described to be hindered to function as rational decision makers (which is why they consume the substance despite its alleged danger), as their brain is not yet fully developed. Society therefore has to step in as proxy for youth rationality. That the harm and danger of cannabis is tied closely to youth is not unique for the official arenas studied here. To construct drugs, particularly cannabis, as a youth problem goes back as far as the 1950s in the Swedish context. When the modern Swedish drug policy started to take its current form, the connection between cannabis and youth users was already described to play “an extraordinary important role” (Olsson, 2008, p. 54). Both political discussions and print media images from that time on connect cannabis use with youth, and this is described as having structured the Swedish drug policy toward strict regulation with repressive measures (Edman, 2012; Olsson, 2008; Törnqvist, 2009).

To structure political discussions around youth is thus not unique for this empirical material, or even for the drug field in general (see, e.g., Höjdestrand, 1997 on video violence). The link between youth and the well-being of society as a whole is also a classic sociological theme (see, e.g., Pearson, 1983 on youth crime) closely connected with the extensive social science research on moral panics (e.g., Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), describing how certain groups or conditions can be defined as threats to core social values. Although these theories focus on youth as a threat, rather than youth as threatened, they are similar in their perspective on youth as a central element for social stability. Youth have thus been central in a variety of political discourses, and the constructions of cannabis as a severe threat to young people can be seen as part of a political tradition. A continued focus on youth users reiterates well-known images that heighten the sense of danger and call for action. It was phrased thus at the information symposia: youth need to be protected from a dangerous substance that might negatively impact their brain and social development, otherwise it might have serious consequences “for the entire nation.” By making the discussion on youth pivot around brain development, a new aspect is added which seems to make the construction more robust. With the help of (bio)medical science, which is seen as gold standard scientific evidence, the professional policy players studied here can outline and hold intact a youth category that functions differently from adults due to specificities in the brain. If youth brains are different, and not as developed as adult brains, this warrants measures directed toward protecting young people, as it is physically and mentally impossible for them to take responsibility for their own actions.
This also creates a solid ground from where adults and professional policy players can dismiss alternative constructions of cannabis presented by young people. Even though several speakers at the symposia noted that it was sometimes difficult to discuss cannabis with youth, as they might be well-read about the subject, youth arguments about cannabis can be cast aside as irrational. It can thus be concluded that the particular focus on youth users, together with a (bio)medical focus on brain developments, protects a prohibitionist outlook, which claims to safeguard a vulnerable group.

This notion contains a controversy around the consuming subject, illustrated in Table 2 below. Where traditional print media and symposia speakers construct the consumer as irresponsible and pliant youth, internet discussants construct the user as a responsible and well-informed adult. The online discussions appraise cannabis users as rational individuals who search for pleasure in an informed way and who dare to think outside societal norms. The cannabis-using subject is in this construction a neo-liberal subject in tune with modernity that chooses to use cannabis. Thus, with these two very different prototypes of the consumer, different responses to cannabis use become relevant. However, despite such differing constructions of the cannabis-consuming subject, all of these constructions (regular consumer, pliant youth, responsible adult) start out from the notion that cannabis use/misuse is an individual problem, something that the individual does or does not do, and is therefore grounded in the body of the consumer. The use/misuse is rarely defined as a symptom of poor living conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online forum</th>
<th>Traditional print media</th>
<th>Symposia professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible adults</td>
<td>Irresponsible youth and criminals</td>
<td>Irresponsible youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Overview of user constructions in different arenas

Cannabis as an “empty” substance

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, the construction of cannabis is also a question of power. In this aspect, online discussions can be seen as marginal, because the public generally views them as unreliable. However, the discussions in both “new” and traditional print media challenge a hegemonic prohibitionist discourse by introducing recreational and adult use/users, in defining cannabis as a “soft” drug, or as an ordinary commodity on a regular market, and in discussing it within a framework of alcohol and other drugs. These constructions also seem to be used frequently in international political and scientific debate on cannabis (e.g., Fraser et al., 2014; Room et al., 2010; Tops, 2001). Despite the introduction of these oppositional constructions in the Swedish debate, it seems that the policy players examined here are holding
on firmly to prohibitionist ideas of the substance and the users. It almost seems
that the appearance of these oppositional constructions is tightening and
bolstering a prohibitionist discourse. Using Laclau’s example of the common
enemy as unifying, it can be concluded that prohibition promoters appear to
be experiencing the oppositional constructions as threatening. If so, this is
probably an indication that such oppositional or liberal claims are becoming
increasingly important also in the Swedish context.

When the Swedish professional policy players studied here are forced to
handle these “new” perspectives, they seem to do it within the prohibitionist
discourse, which can be seen as rigid as well as fluid. It is rigid in that the
basic assumption of cannabis as a problem in itself remains firm, yet fluid in
that the argumentation shifts in relation to how other arenas are trying to
oppose it. More bluntly, it seems impossible to impact the basic assumption
that cannabis is an extremely harmful drug, and that the users are young,
irresponsible, ill-informed, and lack control – and foremost, that all handling
of the substance should be forbidden. Thus, all oppositional arguments can be
met and countered within prohibitionist discourse. The recurring discussion
about (bio)medical science and the development of the youth brain is an
example of how “new” research can justify an “old” prohibitionist
assumption. Alternative policy suggestions are in this sense ruled out by
default, which can be seen as a perfect breeding ground for “cherry-picking”
of evidence suitable for a prohibitionist approach (Stevens, 2007).

Hence, a joint analysis of the discussions about cannabis in these different
arenas shows that cannabis is not one stable object. Cannabis can be a harmful
and illegal substance that impacts the physical and social development of
youth users, it can be a commodity on a regular market consumed
recreationally by responsible adults, and it can be a medicine consumed to
cure or ease certain medical conditions (see, Table 1 and 2). It can, however,
be concluded that it seems impossible for these different constructions to “get
along” in the Swedish context, as each of them is defined in opposition to the
others. This basically makes room for one construction at a time in each
context. However, as seen above, the controversies regarding the user, for
example, rarely concern the same group of people (e.g., youth or adults), and
the controversies regarding the substance rarely concern the same object (e.g.,
medicine or recreation) – which would allow for several constructions to co-
exist in the same context. One might even say that cannabis is impossible to
consider as only one thing. For example, Duff (2016, p. 678) concludes that
“cannabis no longer refers to a single, coherent object” as the substance
“consumed in a tincture prescribed by a health care professional is not the
same ontological object as the cannabis smoked outside a bar on a Friday
night.” As seen in the constructions put forward by the different actors studied
in this thesis, it is clear that these actors are in fact discussing what seem to be
very different cannabis objects. In this sense, cannabis is not only to be
considered a floating signifier in these discussions – it can also be described
as theoretically empty. Referring to Laclau (2005), it functions as a vessel for any elements to be symbolically represented by it. It appears as “nothing” without the eager activity of the actors in the different arenas trying to define it. This is also one of the main conclusions of this thesis – that the substance seems to be able to take on any meaning, and that it therefore ends up empty. This is also illustrated in Table 1 and 2 above; cannabis can take the form of both harmful and harmless depending on who is defining it. It can also become both recreational and medicinal, as well as “soft” and “hard.” Similarly the users can be defined as both responsible and irresponsible. These are some examples illustrating that cannabis seems to be able to represent anything and as such be “used” by any purpose to promote a whole set of policy ideas. It is possible, and theoretically probable, that other constructions of cannabis would have emerged in other empirical materials. In this sense, when cannabis is described as theoretically empty it means that it discursively may take on a plethora of different meanings.

Rational answers to different problems: The importance of scientific evidence

As expected, the different actors in the material do not agree on what kind of cannabis policy is to be preferred. Table 3 shows that prohibition is promoted by symposia professionals, and to a great extent by traditional media, while more liberal policy options are promoted online (and to some extent also seen in traditional media). In the online environments, arguments for liberalizing Swedish cannabis policy are based on prohibitionist ways of reasoning and reactions against them. The discussants use traditional prohibitionist “scaremongering” arguments, but direct them at the legal substance alcohol to make cannabis legitimate. At the same time the demand for more liberal cannabis policies are constructed in opposition against what can be seen as the prohibitionist enemy. Accordingly, prohibition is vital in the argument for liberalization. This can also be seen to work in both ways, as prohibition is strengthened in its opposition against liberal policy demands. “New” and oppositional arguments can seem threatening and thus encourage the protection of well-established prohibition. The different policy options are thus visible in all arenas, and influence how the discussion goes.

Table 3. Overview of policies mainly represented in different arenas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online forum</th>
<th>Traditional print media</th>
<th>Symposia professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legalization</td>
<td>Prohibition (Liberalization)</td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decriminalization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberalization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How cannabis, the use, and the users are constructed is of course the basis of what cannabis policy can be promoted. Or, to put it in Bacchi’s (2009) terms, we could say that this is a process that works in the opposite direction. What policy is promoted creates the substance and the using subjects. In the different arenas, however, different policies are promoted as rational answers to a stable and fixed cannabis problem with certain inherent properties. This makes it difficult for the different perspectives to “meet,” as the problematization of the substance is very different depending on which policy is promoted. If there is no consensus on what the problem is, then it is no surprise that it is hard to agree on how it is to be “fixed.”

It can be concluded that the basic harm dichotomy discussed above is closely connected to different policy suggestions. The main focus and problematization of cannabis as a harmful substance in the official arenas (traditional print media and professional symposia) makes prohibition rational. Looking at it from a different perspective, it can be concluded that prohibition necessitates a problematization of cannabis as a “hard” drug that creates dependency, as well as physical, mental and social problems, as this makes prohibition reasonable. Statements that might seem extreme elsewhere (e.g., that trying cannabis once is dangerous, or that just thinking about trying cannabis is problematic) make perfect sense in this context. By the same token, it seems impossible to diverge from this construction of cannabis at the symposia and say something like “cannabis can be consumed occasionally without any problems,” as this would bring down the foundation of the rationality behind the policy. If, however, cannabis is constructed as harmless, the above statement becomes unproblematic. More drug-liberal policies make such a construction of cannabis rational and accordingly perceive Swedish cannabis policy as extreme. The online discussions studied in this thesis are empirical examples of this.

A focus on harm does however not necessitate strict prohibition. For example, in the case of heroin Sweden has permitted harm-reducing measures such as needle exchange and substitution treatment, even though heroin is usually described as one of the most harmful substances on the illegal drug market (Ekendahl, 2009; Tryggvesson, 2012). Consequently, the construction of cannabis as harmful is just one element in the argument that makes strict prohibition reasonable. This thesis shows that it is rather the combination of constructing cannabis as harmful as well as representing it as a youth problem that is central. Different problematizations of the substance have lived consequences for the users as regards both control and service provision. If cannabis were not constructed as a youth problem, harm reduction measures might be introduced, as in the case of heroin (see, e.g., Fischer, Rehm, & Hall, 2009 for discussions on education of users and decriminalization).

Even though the different actors studied in this thesis push for different cannabis policies and therefore problematize cannabis in different ways, they all seem to agree on the importance of science and scientific evidence in policy
making. The dominant position of science as guiding policy decisions in these discussions can be described as an ideal “story of governance” (Lancaster, 2014, p. 949). Both symposia professionals and internet discussants claim that their preferred policy is based on science and that other policies are based in ideology – a dichotomy signaling that the former is legitimate and the latter illegitimate. In professional presentations, in newspaper articles, and in internet discussions scientific evidence is upheld as vital in promoting a rational cannabis policy. It is thus interesting that scientific evidence seems to be able to support diametrically opposite cannabis policies (e.g., prohibition and legalization). This is certainly not exclusive to this field; scientific disputes where research results are used as political weapons are known from other controversial areas (see, e.g., Kärfve, 2000 on the case of Deficiency in Attention, Motor Control and Perception (DAMP) in Sweden). Although this seems unreasonable, it makes sense if it can be concluded that the different actors cannot agree on what the problem is. If the problem with cannabis is defined as youth consumption, this calls for scientific evidence about why young people use the substance and how the substance affects them. If the problem with cannabis is defined as people dying in international drug wars, then a whole other assortment of studies becomes relevant. From this perspective, different policy suggestions (prohibition, legalization, decriminalization, etc.) can all be evidence based, as there will most certainly be relevant science addressing and supporting these different problematizations.

Previous research has questioned the possibility of science-based policies, and it can be concluded in this thesis that none of the actors seem to emanate from science in search of a policy based on evidence alone. Rather, this way of using science to support a certain policy can be characterized as validation of policy knowledge (Lancaster, 2014), as the different actors use suitable science to fixate a construction of cannabis appropriate for the preferred policy. In doing this, there are research results and studies that are referenced repeatedly and treated as evidence that cannabis is either harmful or harmless. For example, that nobody dies from cannabis overdoses is such a “scientific fact” that the online discussants refer to repeatedly to validate that cannabis is harmless. Another example comes from the professional symposia where one study in particular, “the Dunedin study,” is referenced repeatedly and described to hold so much scientific power that it can crush all doubts about the harmfulness of cannabis. The Dunedin study is a large-scale longitudinal study from New Zealand that, among other things, measured the correlation between early use of cannabis and development of IQ. It is stated in various ways that this study shows that “exposure to” or “frequent use of” cannabis during adolescence lowers the IQ permanently. Simplification of research results is certainly necessary at these symposia due to their format, but it is nevertheless interesting that these results are treated as unproblematic facts that can be generalizable outside of their context (Hilgartner, 1990). What
these examples tell us is that research can reach an almost myth-like position in these arenas. The original results might be changed or distorted and what it actually shows might be greatly exaggerated (Bell & Ristovski-Slijepcevic, 2015).

From a social constructionist perspective the focus on whether or not a particular policy is evidence-based seems misguided. We need to look beyond this claim for a so-called science-based policy and look for what is actually said to be the problem. This process of problematization is not scientific but rather deeply political. Although actors – from the former Swedish minister responsible for drug issues, to a journalist at one of the largest newspapers in Sweden, to an anonymous participant at an online discussion forum – claim that a rational cannabis policy is based on science, I would argue that such claims are unrealistic. Any definition of a problem is actually political. Also, as previous research tells us, knowledge relevant for policy making is rarely based only in science “but [is] rather constituted by context, discourse, practices and participants within the policy process” (Lancaster, 2014, p. 950). From the perspectives of the actors included in this study, however, it seems impossible to say that the demand for any type of cannabis policy is based in ideology, moral beliefs, or practical experience, because there is such a strong consensus on the appraisal of policy as science-based. Such a strong conviction that scientific evidence is vital for policy-making creates a dilemma for policy players – to admit that a policy process might actually be much messier could jeopardize the legitimacy of any policy suggestion (Williams, 2010).

International trends as threat or salvation

The results show that an international change in cannabis policy and debate is influencing the discussions about the substance in Sweden today. The four papers included in this thesis can be seen as empirical examples of how arguments from more drug-liberal environments in some way shape the Swedish discourse on cannabis use, users, and policy. In the two papers studying online forum discussions (papers I and II), examples from drug-liberal policies in, for example, the Netherlands and the US are used as prototypes for rational responses to cannabis consumption. In comparison to these more cannabis-liberal policies, the Swedish system is constructed as reactionary, moralist, and unjust. This comparison concludes that the Dutch coffee shop system is “a functioning system” that actually works, while Swedish prohibition is not working out for the users. In this way, international trends influence how the discussion participants perceive Swedish cannabis policy and how they criticize it. The discussion participants in the online environment also recycle arguments often heard in international debates to legitimize a drug-political change in Sweden (e.g., alcohol is legal yet much
more dangerous, people are killed in Mexico due to harsh drug laws, a tax on cannabis sale would lead to major improvements in the welfare system). That medicinal cannabis is legal in several international contexts is also used as a springboard for demands for a new Swedish cannabis policy – both for allowing cannabis for medicinal purposes and also for recreation (after all, a healing plant cannot be that harmful according to Flashback discussions). That cannabis has become more accepted in large parts of the world seems to make it easier to reject Swedish expert statements and to create “new” meanings about cannabis. What seems to matter is that powerful politicians and reputed researchers in other environments advocate more liberal cannabis policies. It is their credibility that the discussion participants at Flashback rely on.

Some findings from the study on newspaper material (paper III) appear to follow a similar pattern. This paper shows that although Swedish newspapers still very much mirror a prohibitionist attitude toward cannabis, reporting from cannabis-liberal environments opens up the discourse on cannabis to include “new” ways to think and write about the substance (e.g., cannabis as commodity and recreation). Although the intention in these articles is not to take a stance for or against a more liberal cannabis policy, articulating alternative handling of cannabis enables dissemination of new ways of thinking about cannabis use, users, and policy. In these two media environments cannabis-liberal trends thus influence the discourses on cannabis in a way that might challenge traditional Swedish prohibitionist constructions.

In the paper that examines cannabis information symposia (paper IV), the drug-liberal trend is not something that opens up the discourse. Instead, these outside influences are used as shocking examples of how Swedish drug policy should not develop. Generally, the idea of liberal cannabis policies is described as something alien to Swedish norms and beliefs, and pro-cannabis messages are said to come from dubious online environments and well-organized international lobby groups. Arguments for any cannabis policy reform (e.g., legalized sale can increase tax revenues, fewer people will be incarcerated, cannabis is not that harmful) can therefore be rebutted as false. Individuals in Sweden that in some way argue for liberalization of the cannabis policy are said to be misled by bad influences and thus unreliable; they are reduced to “consisting mainly of youth and cannabis smokers” (paper IV, p. 218). In the same vein, any critique against cannabis prohibition is rejected as incorrect and based on opinions rather than facts. International changes in cannabis regulation are presented as a cause for concern, an external distortion that might mislead youth in Sweden. Even though this forces the discourse to include new and sometimes unexpected arguments, thus changing the discourse in some ways (e.g., by focusing on neuroscientific explanations for a problem usually handled by social work), the prohibitionist starting point in this arena seems to be reinforced by opposing such liberal constructions.
It can be said that international drug policy changes and debates in some way influence all of the arenas studied here. In one arena international drug-liberal ideas dominate the discourse (online forum), in another arena these ideas strengthen prohibition (professional symposia), and then there is the traditional print media that in some way has to report on these changes, which seems to open up for new ways to represent cannabis less dramatically (see Table 4). From this perspective, it is interesting to see that the more liberal discussions in the online environment, usually considered as marginalized in the Swedish context, seem to resonate better with well-reputed international researchers (ALICE RAP, 2014; Nutt et al., 2007; Room, 2005) than the group of experts discussing cannabis in the professional arena studied here. Online drug-liberal discussions are deemed as unscientific by the Swedish experts at the symposia, but the main arguments in the online discussions studied in this thesis to some extent seem to mirror how international social scientists discuss cannabis use, users, and policy. For example, in comparisons of alcohol and cannabis the latter is usually considered less harmful (Nutt et al., 2007), the gateway theory is questioned and debated (Degenhardt et al., 2010), and the harms of prohibition are deemed as by far exceeding the harms of the substance (ALICE RAP, 2014).

Table 4. Overview of relation to international cannabis-liberal trends in different arenas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online forum</th>
<th>Traditional print media</th>
<th>Symposia professionals</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embracing</td>
<td>Cautious reporting</td>
<td>Rejecting</td>
</tr>
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Looking at Table 4, one can conclude, perhaps unsurprisingly, that all arenas have some relation to the international changes in cannabis policy, which indicates that these changes cannot be ignored. It seems impossible to restrict a discussion on cannabis to only relate to Sweden. It thus seems inevitable that a changing perspective on cannabis internationally will influence Sweden in some way.

Implications for policy and practice

It can be concluded that cannabis, the use, and its users are constructed in different ways in Sweden today. There is not one fixed idea about the substance that everyone can agree upon but rather several constructions that dominate different arenas. Cannabis is described to be a harmful drug in professional symposia discussions, as relatively harmless recreation in online forums, as well as a medical remedy in different media outlets (newspapers as well as online forums). What these different constructions have in common is that they all try to fix cannabis as one stable object. The complex meaning of
the substance, the use, and the users is in this sense reduced. It can be argued that such a narrow description of cannabis is unwieldy, as the substance seems to take the form of many different and fluctuating objects. Depending on context, it is possible that cannabis is a medicinal substance, as well as a light recreational substance, and a harmful and addictive substance. If so, and if all of these constructions are in some way “real,” then the legal, social, and political framing of the drug necessitates a much more tailored and nuanced response than prohibition can offer. If all of these constructions are considered important, then maybe policy reforms can be offered to support these diverging constructions and be more in line with how other social phenomena are handled; access to medical marijuana can be promoted, recreational use can be permitted, and people who experience cannabis-related problems can be helped. Echoing the discussions on Flashback, it could be stated that cannabis could probably be handled with a less universal solution if a variety of descriptions of the substance and its users were included in the problematization. For example, the regulation of alcohol includes prohibition for certain groups (e.g., the young) and restricted legalization for others (adults). Another example is heroin, for which regulation allows both prohibition and harm reduction. Regarding cannabis, the overwhelming focus on young users overshadows that different cannabis regulations can be potentially rational for different groups. In relation to social work, a less prohibitionist policy would certainly imply much more complex evaluations of client needs for practitioners in the field, and probably more voluntary help-seeking because risks of juridical sanctions and stigmatization would be diminished.

Today, when social work policy and practice seem to favor certain knowledge claims anchored in a hegemonic and “official” discourse on cannabis, the views of practitioners are limited and steered in a certain direction. By demonstrating that cannabis can be problematized and symbolically represented in different ways, and by showing that scientific evidence can be used to support and validate diametrically different policies and practices, the results from this thesis thus have important implications for policy as well as social work practice and education on several levels. With a nuanced view on cannabis, and social problems in general, practitioners can be better equipped to consider knowledge claims opposing dominating discourses and to listen to the experiences of the users. A less one-sided response to cannabis could also create a more open environment that would allow for clients to speak more freely, and perhaps more honestly, about their cannabis use. Further, this could also allow for a better foundation to identify and evaluate the meaning of certain interventions among different client groups. On a more general level, it is important for social workers to be aware of the discourse that they are operating within, as this opens up a space for professional self-reflection.
Bearing this in mind, it seems logical to reflect upon how cannabis will be handled and discussed in Sweden in the years to come. I, of course, have no definite answer to this, but building on the results from this thesis along with previous research, I would suggest that Sweden will probably continue along the same political line for quite some time. I do however believe that the liberal voices on Flashback (and in similar environments), along with cannabis liberalization internationally, are important for instigating change – at least on a discursive level initially. It seems reasonable to believe that these opinions will spread among young people (who might not be that firmly rooted in a prohibition discourse), as oppositional opinions are easily available, and might even seem dominating in some arenas. It is certainly impossible to say if and when these oppositional voices will “tip over” and become hegemonic, but in the Swedish context with its social democratic values and focus on welfare, it will probably take a while. During that time, I am however convinced that we will have a more open debate about cannabis that is held not only in anonymous online forums.
Svensk sammanfattning

Det övergripande syftet med denna avhandling är att undersöka hur cannabis konstrueras i samtida Sverige, vilka politiska åtgärder som framställs som rimliga och hur internationella cannabistrender mottas i denna kontext. En central utgångspunkt för studien är att synen på och hanteringen av cannabis håller på att förändras i omvärlden (exemplifierat genom legaliseringen av cannabis i Uruguay samt i ett antal amerikanska delstater), samtidigt som cannabis fortfarande är strikt förbjudet i Sverige. Således har det tydliggjorts hur cannabis kan tillskrivas olika mening i olika geografiska och kulturella kontexter, och denna brist på överensstämmelse är central för avhandlingen. Detta knyter an till en socialkonstruktionistisk syn på världen som konstruerad och föränderlig, snarare än fast förankrad i en objektiv verklighet. Detta är också den teoretiska utgångspunkten för avhandlingen; att världen kan konstrueras på olika sätt och att cannabis således kan tillskrivas olika mening beroende på aktören och den omgivande konteksten.

Syftet med avhandlingen kan brytas ned till tre olika, men sammanhängande, analytiska nivåer: 1) hur mening tillskrivs cannabis, cannabisanvändning/användare och cannabispolitik, och vad denna mening inkluderar och exkluderar, 2) hur olika vetenskapliga och ideologiska perspektiv tillskriver mening till cannabis och cannabispolitik, med det huvudsakliga syftet att studera makt och motstånd, och 3) hur internationella perspektiv påverkar uppfattningar om cannabis och politik på lokal nivå. Avhandlingen består av tre delstudier där olika arenor undersöks (internetforum, dag- och kvällspress, samt informationskonferenser) och analyserna har utförts i fyra olika artiklar. Genom att inkludera dessa olika arenor syftar avhandlingen till att fånga olika röster och studera hur cannabis konstrueras ur både ”officiella” och ”oppositionella” perspektiv.

I den första artikeln undersöks hur cannabis konstrueras i diskussioner på internet. I ett tidigt skede av analysen blev det tydligt att jämförelser mellan cannabis och alkohol var centrafa i dessa diskussioner, och i artikeln analyseras därför cirka 700 inlägg i cannabisdiskussioner på internetforumet Flashback (aktiva under november 2010–november 2011) som på något sätt relaterar till alkohol. Syftet är att beskriva och analysera den diskursiva roll som alkohol spelar i svenska internetdiskussioner om cannabisanvändning och politik.

Analysen visar att diskussionerna främst kretsar kring de relativa farorna med alkohol och cannabis och den svenska lagstiftningens diskriminerande


Även i den tredje artikeln undersöks media, men här analyseras mer traditionellt mediamaterial; nämligen tidningsartiklar från svensk dags- och kvällspress (Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen, Aftonbladet och Sydsvenskan). Syftet med denna artikel är att beskriva och analysera hur cannabisanvändning/användare och cannabispolitik konstrueras i svensk press. Genom att göra en jämförande analys av artiklar från 2002 (n=313) och 2012 (n=200), syftar artikeln till att analysera om detta har förändrats över tid.
En huvudfråga är huruvida förändrade internationella perspektiv på cannabis avspeglas i detta material.


I den fjärde artikeln undersöks hur cannabis och cannabispolitik konstrueras i en officiell och professionell kontext. Genom att analysera presentationer (av aktörer såsom politiker, forskare, tjänstemän och praktiker) från två olika informationskonferenser om cannabis syftar denna artikel till att förstå hur cannabis upprätthålls som ett högprofilerat samhällsproblem. En huvudfråga är hur förbudspolitik legitimeras i en kontext där globala perspektiv på cannabis är i förändring.


En sammantagen analys av de fyra artiklarna visar att cannabis inte kan ses som ett stabilt objekt. I talet om cannabis kan det vara både en skadlig och illegal substans som påverkar den fysiska och sociala utvecklingen hos unga användare, en handelsvara på den fria marknaden som konsumeras rekreationellt av ansvarstagande vuxna, och medicin som konsumeras för att
läka eller lindra vissa medicinska åkommor. Utifrån analyserna i de fyra artiklarna förs argumentet att cannabis tycks kunna representera nästan vad som helst och således kunna “användas” diskursivt för att föra fram en generell idé om till exempel samhället eller dess styran. Det innebär att olika typer av cannabispolitik förs fram som nödvändiga för att hantera dessa olika konstruktioner av substansen och brukarna. Detta gör det svårt för olika perspektiv att mötas eftersom det inte finns någon konsensus kring vad problemet med cannabis är. Trots denna oenighet tycks alla arenor vara överens om att en cannabispolitik måste vara baserad på det man ser som vetenskaplig evidens, och trots de olika slutsatserna om hur man ska reglera substansen tycks alla aktörer kunna argumentera för att man har vetenskapen på sin sida. Även om detta kan verka orimligt, så kan det begripliggöras genom att varje aktör kan förlita sig på vetenskap som verkar rimlig inom sin problembeskrivning; t.ex. om problemet med cannabis är ungdoms-konsumtion så blir studier om ungdomars användning viktiga, men om problemet med cannabis är att människor dör i narkotikakrig i Sydamerika framstår ett helt annat forskningsfält som relevant. Från ett socialkonstruktionistiskt perspektiv är dock fokus på huruvida en speciell politik är evidensbaserad eller inte missriktad. Från detta perspektiv är det i stället nödvändigt att se förbi diskussionerna om så kallad evidensbaserad politik och studera vad som sägs vara problemet med cannabis, eftersom en sådan definition alltid är djupt politisk snarare än vetenskaplig.

I den sammantagna analysen av artiklarna framkommer också att de internationella förändringarna i cannabisfrågan påverkar diskussionerna om substansen i Sverige idag, både som avskräckande exempel men också som tänkbara förslag på hur framtidens cannabispolitik bör se ut. Utifrån dessa analyser förs argumentet att de liberala diskussioner som pågår på internet, och som vanligtvis betraktas som marginaliserade i en svensk kontext, verkar överensstämma bättre med hur välrenommerade internationella forskare diskuterar frågan än med de diskussioner som förs av de professionella som studeras i avhandlingen.

En slutsats är att cannabis, användningen och användarna konstrueras på olika sätt i Sverige idag. En alldeles för snäv definition av cannabis tycks därför svårhanterlig eftersom substansen representerar många olika och flytande objekt. Beroende på kontext är det möjligt att cannabis är en medicinsk substans, likaväl som en lätt rekreationssubstans, och en skadlig och beroendeframkallande substans. Om det är så att alla dessa konstruktioner av substansen på något vis är “verkliga”, så bör den samhälleliga hanteringen av substansen vara mer nyanserad än vad förbudspolitiken kanerbuda. Om dessa olika konstruktioner ses som viktiga är det kanske möjligt att en förändrad politik kan erbjudas, rekreationellt bruk bland vuxna användare kan tillåtas, och bruk som upplevs som problematiskt kan förbyggas och behandlas.
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