

Who initiates Nordic comparisons?

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The pandemic has made us think about how the Nordic countries react both similarly and differently in their societal strategies. In newspapers and on social media, people have speculated about the different lines of reasoning that the Nordic countries took during the pandemic's first phase in spring 2020. Especially why Sweden deviated. Suddenly we saw new variances between countries: the Swedish Public Health Agency had a different role in Sweden than the corresponding authorities in Finland and in Norway. In Sweden, temporary constitutional changes can only be made during wartime. Who knew? At once, the meaning of Nordic comparisons became more evident in the classic realisation of “we are similar but still not the same”.

One area in which comparisons have always come quite naturally is research into major substance consumption trends and use patterns. For many decades, researchers have discussed how to make measurements more

uniform and how to interpret the analyses in comparable fashions. In this issue, we publish the results from a project with the aims of comparing Nordic situations and developments. In this project, alcohol use in old age has been studied by researchers from four Nordic countries. Kim Bloomfield and Christoffer Tigerstedt (2020) write in their introduction about the great lack of recent country-specific analyses of drinking patterns in old age. The studies of this journal issue focus on four aspects of alcohol use with the most comparative indicators: prevalence of current drinking, prevalence of frequent drinking, average amounts of alcohol consumed, and prevalence of heavy episodic drinking. Both the current situation in the countries (Bye & Moan, 2020; Jensen et al., 2020), as well as development over time (Raninen & Agahi, 2020; Tigerstedt, Härkönen et al., 2020) are mapped. In the end, the research group concludes and summarises the study with many

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interesting aspects to keep in mind for future Nordic comparisons (Tigerstedt, Agahi et al., 2020).

The project stems from a coordinated effort among interested (and stubborn) researchers, but Nordic research can be initiated in different fora. During times outside pandemics, Nordic comparative studies are initiated in different ways and in parts of the Nordic region: within the framework of Nordic research communities, in research networks and through, for example, joint applications to NordForsk. For a long time, the Nordic Council for Alcohol and Drug Research (NAD) on Annegatan in Helsinki was the primus motor of the Nordic comparisons in the area of alcohol and drug research. It took strong drive and vision to get the collaboration rolling and renewed in topical and interesting constellations – a task that was handled with a great drive by centre leader and sociologist Pia Rosenqvist. At each annual meeting of NAD's research board and civil servants board, new projects to be launched were decided on: new project groups would converge, new publications were to be compiled. Today, this cooperation is coordinated from the journal's publisher the Nordic Welfare Centre in Helsinki with centre leader Helena Lohman as leader and Nadja Frederiksen in charge of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. This secretariat still functions as a Nordic oasis in the middle of Helsinki. The editorial office of the popularising platform for Nordic studies on Alcohol and Drugs (www.nordicwelfare.org/popnad/) functions in the facilities. Malin Wikström is in charge of this work.

A Nordic perspective may have become more difficult to justify due to an expanding global perspective on most societal questions. Our upcoming special issue on exploring the onto-politics of cannabis is a good example. "The becoming of cannabis" is going on all over the world – what is the Nordic perspective? The seemingly global universal theories can feel more attractive and topical than a regional approach by students and young researchers. But the guest editors of this

thematic issue underscored that there really IS Nordic relevance also in questions such as the onto-politics of cannabis and this can be studied in the perspective of globalisation. Recent decades have seen gradual shifts in Nordic drug policies: Denmark, for instance, can be seen to be moving in a more repressive direction, while Norwegian policymakers are currently considering adopting a more liberal approach. The Nordic comparison-perspective is indeed a horn of plenty in itself: whatever the theme, whatever the time scope – there is always something interesting going on in the Nordic countries!

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