



Research Paper

Khat chewing and acculturation in East-African migrants living in Frankfurt am Main/Germany

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ABSTRACT

Ethnopharmacological relevance: Khat (*Catha edulis*, Forsk) is a drug widely used in countries around the Red Sea (East-Africa and Arabian Peninsula). In Germany khat chewing is illegal but nevertheless an often observed habit in immigrants from this region. This study investigates the interrelation between immigrants acculturation processes and traditional khat chewing habits.

Materials and Methods: Sixty-one khat chewers (14 female) from East-African countries were interviewed about their khat chewing habits and acculturation strategy using standardized questionnaires.

Results: Results indicate that immigrants' khat chewing behaviors are similar to what is common in countries with traditional khat use. But khat chewing tended to be less among immigrants who were relatively more oriented towards their cultures of origin. Chewing khat was subjectively considered to help coping with problems, to forget bad memories and to concentrate better.

Conclusions: It was concluded that khat chewing serves a functional use of coping with stressful events in the present or in the past within this sample.

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1. Introduction

When migrants come to a new country they bring their cultural habits with them. Some of those habits might be unknown, strange or exotic to the hosting society, some might even be in conflict with the norms of the receiving society, as is the case with khat chewing in Germany.

Khat (*Catha edulis* Forsk) is an evergreen shrub that grows in East-Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Hebshi and Skaug, 2005) and is a member of the staffree family (Celastraceae). Its leaves are harvested and consumed legally in these regions. Chewing the leaves of the khat shrub evokes a mild amphetamine like effect which can be attributed to the pharmacological potent phenylalkylamines—cathinone and cathine—which are also structurally related to amphetamines (Kalix, 1994). Cathinone is the more active ingredient of khat. It induces an increase in the activity of the dopaminergic pathways in the central nervous system (Kalix and Braenden, 1985) and an inhibition of noradrenalin uptake (Drake, 1988). The short term psychological effects of khat are characterized by feelings of optimism, elation, alertness, and general sense of euphoria and well-being (Cox and Rampes, 2003; Al-Hebshi and Skaug, 2005; Bongard et al., 2011a).

Migration of people from countries with a tradition of khat chewing, mainly from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Yemen has brought this habit to Europe and North America where khat was widely unknown until the 1990s. In Germany, as in the majority of the countries of the EU, khat is regulated and chewing khat is illegal (see Griffiths et al., 2010). Recent bans were established in the Netherlands in 2012 and United Kingdom in 2013. However, banning the drug does not mean that the tradition of khat chewing vanishes in immigrant communities (Nencini et al., 1989; Stevenson et al., 1996; Griffiths et al., 1997).

For example, a survey on khat chewing in Sweden revealed that 16% of a sample ($n=206$) of immigrants from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia reported to be khat users. Within a Somali subsample the prevalence was 49% in this study (De Cal et al., 2009). Within a sample of 204 male Yemeni khat chewers living in London, UK, approximately one third of the khat users reported symptoms consistent with dependence syndrome (DSM IV; Kassim et al., 2013). Griffiths et al. (2010) concluded that, while there is a shortage of data on the use and patterns of khat use in Europe, khat chewing is limited to immigrant communities from countries where khat use is common.

The aim of the present study therefore was to provide some insight into khat related behaviors in Germany. We attempted to describe khat consumption patterns of East-African migrants living in the city of Frankfurt am Main and to explore some factors that might affect this habit.

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The acculturation strategy migrants follow when coming to a new country may influence the extent to which individuals maintain their traditional behaviors. Acculturation is defined as those processes of cultural and psychological changes that come into effect when people from a different culture come into continuous first hand contact (Redfield et al., 1936). The most widely accepted psychological model of acculturation is that which was based in John W. Berry's writings (e.g. Berry et al., 1989; Berry, 1997). He postulates that immigrants are faced with two fundamental issues when they come to a new country. The first issue is to what extent immigrants consider their cultural identity and characteristics worthy of being maintained and striven for. The second issue addresses the question to what extent they want to become involved in the cultural group of the hosting society or to remain primarily among themselves. Accordingly Berry constructed a two-dimensional model of acculturation with one dimension representing an orientation towards the culture of origin and the other representing an orientation towards the host or receiving or majority society and its culture. Depending on how migrants handle these two issues Berry differs between four distinctive acculturation strategies: *integration* if migrants show a strong orientation to both the culture of origin and the host culture, *assimilation* if they participate in host culture while relinquishing their culture of origin, *separation* if they maintain their culture of origin, with little contact to the host culture, and *marginalization* when they have little contact with both cultures.

Since some researchers emphasize the identity-defining function of khat use in immigrant communities among western countries (Ahmed and Salib, 1998; Odenwald, 2007) and based on the Berry model of acculturation, we hypothesized that reported khat use would be greater in migrants who feel bound to their culture of origin. We did not have directed predictions related to migrants orientation towards the German culture and khat use patterns.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Sixty-one migrants (14 females) from countries with a tradition of khat chewing participated in this study. Twenty-eight were originally from Ethiopia, 15 from Eritrea, 15 from Somalia and 8 came from other countries (Kenya 4, Djibouti 2, and Sudan 2). Only volunteers who reported to be khat users were included in this study. Further, participants had to be 18 years of age or older to qualify for participation and their age ranged from 23 to 56 years ($M=33.77$; $SD=6.14$). The majority (61%) reported to be single or living separated while 39% were married or in a relationship. Forty-six (75%) migrated themselves to Germany but 14 (23%) were migrants in the second generation.

The far majority of participants were employed (89%) by the time of this study with shifts of 40 h per week or more (36%) or shift hours between 20 and 40 h per week (39%). The remaining reported working occasionally for less than 20 h per week. About one-third of the sample ($n=19$) reported to have a monthly net income between 800 and 1200 Euro and about a quarter of the sample reported incomes of 400–800 € ($n=16$) or 1200–1800 € ($n=15$) respectively. Fifteen percent ($n=9$) reported an income of less than 400 € and 2 (3%) had an income of 1800–2500 € but nobody reported an income of more than 2500 € per month. Seventy-seven percent of the sample ($n=47$) reported smoking with an average of 13.11 cigarettes per day ($SD=6.32$).

Participants were asked for their explicit consent and they had the opportunity to ask questions before the interview started. They did not receive any compensation for participating. The study

was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology, Goethe-University Frankfurt.

2.2. Questionnaires

2.2.1. Sociobiographical and khat related questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed that was divided into three sections. The first part inquired about sociobiographical backgrounds (age, family status, religion, citizenship, migration history, employment and monthly income). The second part explored khat related behaviors (regularity and amount of khat chewing, money spent on khat, age of first khat use, reasons for chewing khat, wish to quit chewing, etc.). The third and last part asked other drug and addiction related issues (smoking, drinking, health problems, etc.). Some of these items were taken or adapted from the the Fagerström Test of Nicotine Dependence (Heatherton et al., 1991).

2.2.2. Frankfurt Acculturation Scale

The Frankfurt Acculturation Scale (FRACC) is a 20 item self-report questionnaire (Bongard et al., 2007) that assesses two factorial independent strategies (dimensions) of acculturation, labeled as *Orientation towards Culture of Origin* (CO) and *Orientation towards Host Culture* (HC). Each factor is composed by 10 items and has been shown to provide satisfactory internal consistencies (CO: $\alpha=.847$; HC: $\alpha=.845$) and validity (Bongard et al., 2011b). Example of items included in CO is "I generally live according to the traditions of my native country" and in HC is "I use the German mass-media (tv, newspapers, magazine, etc.)". On a seven point Likert scale the test person rates how much the behavior described in the respective item applies to his or her own behavior.

Based on their ratings on this scale participants were distributed to four groups representing the four acculturation strategies according to Berry (1997). The middle of the range for each scale was defined as the split point resulting in a grouping to *integration* if CO was > 36 and HC > 41 ; *assimilation* if CO was ≤ 36 and HC > 41 ; *separation* if CO > 36 and HC ≤ 41 , and finally *marginalization* when CO ≤ 36 and HC ≤ 41 .

2.2.3. Social Desirability Scale

Since khat chewing is illegal and considered socially undesirable in some societies, we expected answers concerning khat related behavior to be biased by social desirability. To control for such a bias we administered the Social Desirability Scale 17 (SDS-17; Stöber, 2001). The SDS-17 is a one-dimensional scale in German language which has been shown to be a valid measure of social desirability (Stöber, 2001). It contains 17 items to which respondents can agree or not agree. It has previously been shown to correlate with measures of impression management, but not with self-deception. The consistency has been shown to be satisfactory with a Cronbach's α of .72 and a test–retest correlation of .82 across four weeks (Stöber, 2001).

However, in the current study this scale showed an unacceptable internal consistency with Cronbach's $\alpha=.28$. Therefore, we excluded items with the lowest item-total correlation until Cronbach's α could not be substantially further increased. This procedure produced a scale which consisted of 6 items (5, 7, 11, 13, 14, and 15) with an acceptable internal consistency of $\alpha=.69$. A total score was calculated from these items (SDS-6) and used in the current analysis.

2.3. Procedure

Potential participants were approached individually at a café in the city of Frankfurt am Main. The café was locally known as a place where people from East-Africa meet for khat chewing

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