

DRUGS AS PART OF THE PSYCHEDELIC TRANCE DANCE PARTY

ALENA KAJANOVÁ,[†] TOMÁŠ MRHÁLEK^{††}

Abstract: The aim of our paper is to analyze the position the psychedelic trance subculture takes on drug use and whether it applies to prescriptive regulatory systems on drug-taking. A qualitative field research strategy was adopted with the use of semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Actors at three levels of participation in the subculture (experts, long-term participants and newcomers to psychedelic trance parties) were interviewed. The results showed that the subculture distinguishes between tolerated and non-tolerated drugs. This distinction is different from the mainstream paradigm. The subculture also has unwritten rules relating to the behavior expected of an intoxicated person. However, there is only limited potential for the subculture to enforce these standards and recognition that this represents a threat. Psychedelic trance stands out from other dance scenes in the use of specific drugs—hallucinogens—that dominate and inform its culture.

Key words: drugs; subcultures; norms; psychedelic trance; dance party

Introduction

Psy-trance is the most psychedelic LSD-friendly music ever. There is no other music that makes bodies on acid dance for fourteen hours on stretch (Saldanha, 2007, p. 74).

Subcultures are—when connected to drug use—associated with the abuse of drugs that are not socially tolerated or at least with descriptions of the dangers of drug use in the subcultural environment. Mainstream culture views the subcultural norms and social practices of drug use as a pathological behavior. The term “normalization of drug use” shows that drugs can be seen as an essential part of the everyday experiences of subcultures. Subcultures normalize drugs by cognitively evaluating the benefits and consequences of drug use. Subcultures also demarcate themselves from the mainstream understanding of drugs (Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998; Rock, 1973). This discourse is most visible in dance

music subcultures. Recreational drug users can primarily be found among the participants of dance parties, as drug use is often connected to a specific lifespan, period or age (Johnson, 1980). Dance parties are attended by persons addicted to drugs, as well as those who have never used them.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the attitudes to drug use in the psychedelic trance subculture and whether these apply to the subculture's relevant normative regulatory systems. The theoretical starting point is that subcultures, like any other social group, construct mechanisms of social control and that there is no reason to believe this differs in relation to drugs. In the empirical part, we discuss a case study on psychedelic trance in the Czech Republic. The location was one we could easily access and although psychedelic trance is global in style we were able to synthesize each of the specific elements of the local culture within the global subculture (cf. Roudometof, 2005).

Psychedelic trance

Psychedelic trance is one of the relatively new offshoots of worldwide electronic dance music. It is characterized by individual experience combined with the collective experience of dancing (Perplex, 2001). It follows the motto PLUR (peace – love – unity – respect) which evolved from the African-American gay community, Latino disco and house scenes in New York and Chicago, and was adopted by the acid house music scenes in London and Manchester and by North American Rave (St John, 2009).

Psychedelic trance is musically based on the Goa style established at the beginning of the 1990s. It also has deep roots in the Goa of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in the hippie subculture. These can be combined with the psychedelic focus of the subculture (Perplex, 2001). Roughly speaking, it is a techno sound with a wide range of psychedelic sounds, noises, ticks or samples which are interspersed throughout the songs. Well-mixed psychedelic trance tracks suggest massive energy flows, surrounded by layered distortions and sound patterns that have the ability to take people onto other levels of consciousness (into a trance).

Psychedelic trance culture is primarily found at dance parties. The members of this subculture meet—when not at dance parties—on various internet forums, but it is at the parties that the drug use occurs. The atmosphere of a psychedelic trance party is achieved through full sensory perception. Besides the auditory experience, there are also visual stimuli—decors with unusual, fantastic and bizarre patterns containing many symbols. Typical motifs include the universe, fauna, fantasy worlds, or 2D and 3D mandalas in UV active colors. All this is accompanied by video projections. In the summer, weekly parties take place in the form of large open-air festivals about once a week. During the rest of the year, the parties are less organized one-night club parties, in large cities. A summer party is a meeting place for subculture members from abroad and for friends the partygoers encounter only at the parties. The atmosphere of the club party differs from that of the open-air party to some extent. At festivals, in addition to the music, other cultural activities can be observed, such as various workshops, theater performances and art exhibitions. Everything is community-based: if people want to help others, there is something they can do and they have the space to do it. The connection with nature is very important and explicit.

Open-air festivals take place on beaches, in the mountains or in forests (Vitos, 2010). The parties are named so as to reflect the mystical experience, connections with other people, and the universe itself—in the Czech Republic, there are festivals such as “Mystical Ritual” or “Mystic Forest” (cf. Brookman 2001, p. 24). In the Czech Republic, psychedelic trance parties have been organized since 1999, so its scene is among the youngest in the world (Trancers Guide to the Galaxy, 2005). The Czech psychedelic trance “community” is one of the smaller ones, amounting to around one or several hundred regular partygoers. It has a certain exclusivity—the partygoers know that their scene is not known to the media or accessible to the public and they consider this an advantage.

It is questionable whether psychedelic trance can be considered a social group. There are various views on whether psychedelic trance is a neotribe (Ryan, 2010; St John, 2009) or a postmodern subculture (Wilson, 2006). Greener and Hollands (2006) report that psychedelic trance has elements of both a classical subculture (a system of shared values, the construction of identity and community) as well as elements of postmodern subculture (members of varying social status, globality) (cf. Bennett & Peterson, 2004). The psytrance community differs from other purely postmodern subcultures, as it does not share their superficiality, fragmentation and variability (cf. Blackman, 2004). The members perceive themselves to be a community, a tribe with a group spirit, and they maintain relationships with one another after the party, especially over the Internet.¹

In the Czech Republic, pure psytrance parties have been organized since 1999, making the Czech scene one of the youngest in the world. The first open-air event took place in 2000 (Trancers guide to the galaxy, 2005). The Czech psytrance “community” is relatively small, consisting of tens of (or a hundred) regular partygoers. A certain level of exclusivity is typical of the community, as is the case with the Australian scene (see St John, 2010). In other words, partygoers are aware that the scene is not known to the media or accessible to the public, and see it as an advantage. Communication between members takes place on the community online page, www.psytrance.cz, or more often on the forum nyx.cz (which is not directly aimed at psychedelic trance listeners but is a meeting place for different alternative groups that can converse in closed discussion threads). Social media, primarily Facebook, is another frequented communication channel.

Drugs as part of psychedelic trance parties

Studies that have looked at psychedelic trance parties in terms of drug use have named hallucinogens (especially LSD and psilocybin mushrooms) as the most frequently used drugs (cf. Vitos, 2010). According to Vitos (2010), the visual aspect of psychedelic trance parties is adapted to the visual experience obtained under the influence of hallucinogens. Ryan (2010) expresses a similar view, categorizing psychedelic trance as neo-tribalism (old shamanic techniques in conjunction with new technologies), and seeing drugs such as LSD, DMT and MDMA as integral to the parties. In recent years, the growing use of drugs at psychedelic

¹ A subculture is a group that differs to some extent from other groups in its structural and functional traits. Subculture members share common values and standards that are different from the values and standards of the hegemonic society, as they have a different lifestyle (Hebdige, 1979).

trance parties has been associated with the commercialization of subcultures and the arrival of partygoers wishing to experience something different, but who do not hold any of the subculture's values. For the participants in our research, it is all about consumerism—the general preference for material goods over other things such as spiritual values.

The names of many artists, titles, labels, sets, parties and so on are linked to psychedelic drugs: for example, the artist called Hallucinogen (real name, Simon Posford) and his album LSD (1995), the band Infected Mushroom (duo Erez Eisen and Amit Duvdevani) and their album Army of Mushrooms (2012) or 1200 Micrograms (members of the GMS, Raja Ram and Chicago), whose name reflects the fact that Raja Ram consumed 1200 micrograms of LSD while working on their first album. Their eponymous album (2002) contains nine tracks with characteristic psychedelic names: Ayahuasca, DMT, Mescaline, LSD, Marijuana, Hashish, Ecstasy, Magic Mushrooms and Salvia Divinorum.

A pioneering study on the subcultural theory of drug use by Becker (1953) focused on marijuana users. In it he described the process of learning how to use marijuana. His theory was expanded by Johnson (1973), who noted that drugs have an important value in subcultures, and that drug use, although ultimately an individual decision, is influenced by the dialectic of specific (sub) cultures.

Different subcultures favor different drugs. This is not only a question of personal preference, but also highlights the existence of knowledge capital which influences the choice of drugs. Members of subcultures who consume drugs, confirm the legitimacy of their use within the subculture (Golub et al., 2005). Experimenting with drugs, as well as their prolonged use, is becoming the norm for members of the subculture, as is the argot, symbols and rituals (Johnson, 1980). The fact that the drug use is illegal may reinforce the in-group identity and a sense of belonging to that particular subculture. Nonetheless, this does not mean that a subcultural norm such as drug use must be unconditionally accepted. According to Parker et al. (1998), drug normalization is affected by changes in the perception of drug use among young people who identify with drugs more and focus specifically on them. Subcultural norms are more or less reflexions of the individual behavior of their members (Golub et al., 2005). Whether a subculture prefers a drug is based on the attitudes towards it of the subculture's "opinion leaders". Changes in drug use and the introduction of new drugs can take form of evaluation and can result in positive or negative judgements—depending on the original understanding of drugs within the subculture. Since subcultures are highly dynamic, this is also reflected in the use of certain types of drugs (Johnson, 1980). Parker et al. (1998) state that some drugs have become part of normality within certain subcultures. Examples are cannabinoids, nitrites, amphetamines and ecstasy. These drugs are less physically addictive and less problematic in young people's cultural lives (unlike heroin and cocaine, which are not part of normality). Shildrick (2002) states that the concept of normalization can be used to pathologize drug use and to misinterpret drug use as normal. For this reason, we believe that it is necessary to examine the subculture itself and not relate the theory of normalization to the whole population.

Subcultures may affect the pattern of drug use among their members on several levels (Johnson, 1980):

Experiment

Members of the subculture are expected to experiment with the kinds of drugs used by other members of that subculture. Drug attitudes—which may have been negative in the past—can therefore change. Gourley (2011) states that the subculture movement and encounters with drugs can change the concept of drug use. If drug use is perceived to be the norm by the subculture, then newcomers come to see it as normal.

Drug use as a standard behavior²

The subculture expects its members to use the same type and amount of drugs regarded as common in that particular subculture.

Reciprocal standards

When members of the subculture offer drugs for free or cheaply, they expect to receive the same amount for the same price in the future.

Distribution standards

The subculture expects its members to understand and adopt the system of informal and illegal drug distribution.

Methods

Psychedelic trance partygoers as the object of research

We conducted research among Czech psychedelic trance partygoers who were involved in the psychedelic trance subculture to various degrees. There is typically a subcultural difference in the extent to which its members participate in activities associated with the subculture. There is a relatively small group who form the core of the subculture, and around them congregate members who participate to varying degrees. Most only consume the subculture's products—in this case, the dance party music and entertainment—and accept the subculture fashion.

In our research, the active supporters—"experts"—are represented by two DJs, one party organizer and two individuals responsible for the visuals and decor. Passive members of the subculture were selected from those only attending psychedelic trance parties at the time of the research (3 participants) and those who also attend other music parties (3 participants). We expected to obtain different responses from this diverse research sample, but this was not the case.

² Our article focuses on the second level, i.e. on the way drug use is established as a normal, standard behaviour in the psychedelic trance subculture. We look at the drugs and types of consumption perceived to be "normal" among psychedelic trance partygoers. We also explore how the psychedelic trance subculture defends drugs and their position in its normative system.

To select a sample, we used our personal knowledge of the subcultural environment, and the snowball sampling method. Given the isolation of the Czech psychedelic trance community, saturation point was reached at eleven respondents. The data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and participant observation of eight psychedelic trance parties in the Czech Republic. The questions were based on the theory of subcultural drug abuse by Johnson (1980). The informal interviews took place during two or three sessions (each session lasted around 45 minutes).

Additional data was collected through participant observation and an analysis of Czech and foreign psychedelic trance community websites, these techniques are part of the insider research methodology (Hodkinson, 2005). The researcher's status within the subculture can improve the quality of the interviews and reduce the time required; however, there is a risk that the researcher will be unable to break free of the group's values and rather than being a critical analyst becomes a spokesperson for the subculture. Therefore, personal experience should be viewed with distance and reflexivity.

Our research was conducted between May 2011 and November 2011. All the respondents were familiar with the research and were kept anonymous. However, during the interview, three respondents refused to be included in the research sample. After the interview, two other respondents asked us to omit some data on topics they considered too sensitive.

The clustering method and simple coding were used in the data analysis (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and discussion

Drugs as part of subcultural norms

Psychedelic trance, like other subcultures, constructs its own moral order—a system of values and norms (cf. Barker, 2006). Drugs are part of the dance subculture world and, regardless of whether their use is purely hedonistic, form part of these standards. The relationship between drugs and subcultures can be seen at several levels of this regulatory system.

Subculture and the mainstream

First, the world of mainstream culture and world of the subculture are separate (cf. Blackman 2004); in the words of the respondents, “the world at the party” and “the world outside the party”. It is not advisable to use drugs in the world outside the party, but:

... the value of drugs and how they are perceived changes significantly during the party. Outside the party, a joint is madness and something stronger is considered a big problem. At the party, a joint is just normal and anything stronger is basically tolerated. (R6, male, DJ)

Taking drugs outside the party, such as in the city: I don't like it. It attracts people's attention and the drug user is confronted with the prejudices that the society has towards drugs and drug users. The party is generally a good place. When someone only takes drugs at a party, it is not that often. (R6, male, DJ)

If we understand the visitors of psytrance parties as members of a neotribe, then we can describe a psychedelic party as a temporary autonomous zone. A temporary autonomous zone is, according to Bey (2003), a free territory where a gathering, in our case party, takes place. The zone is then dissolved, and the “tribe” disperses into the mainstream to be eventually re-established in another time and space. In our ordinary life, people consume legal drugs, such as caffeine, nicotine or alcohol. When attending a psychedelic trance party, we become participants in a zone where there is an increased drug use tolerance. Drug use is normalized (cf. Parker et al., 1998) by specific subcultures, as indicated in the fact that the party is both spatially and symbolically separated from the “mainstream” world. These two worlds cannot be transited without a change in style of clothing and there is usually a classical entrance rite, which may be a grand opening party with a fire and dance show, mimicking “archaic pagan” rituals.

“Tolerated drugs” within the psychedelic trance subculture and other subcultures

Drug use, as a part of the normative system, further shapes the boundaries that separate psychedelic trance dance from other subcultures. The fact that attendees of psychedelic trance parties prefer to consume specific kinds of drugs (such as LSD, MDMA and others) marks them out from other dance subcultures. Members can identify themselves as being distinct from other subcultures and, thus, create a feeling of exclusivity and even elitism.

In the psychedelic trance subculture, drugs are strictly divided into tolerated drugs and non-tolerated drugs. Tolerated drugs are used more and are generally affordable. These are cannabinoids (hashish and marijuana), crystalline MDMA and hallucinogens. Cannabinoid use is widespread even among the mainstream population. MDMA are not seen as specific to psychedelic trance parties because they are used similarly on other dance scenes.:

In my opinion, MDMA belongs to the culture of dance music in general, not directly to psytrance. People want to party till dawn, into infinity and beyond at all dance parties. (R9, male, attends dance events)

In the psychedelic trance subculture, hallucinogens are a “high added value” drug. This, and the standards and rules associated with their use create a specific psychedelic trance subculture. Other drugs, especially stimulants and MDMA, are consumed for entertainment or to stay awake longer. This is no different from other dance parties:

Psychedelic drugs are taken because of the experience... Whereas the point of ecstasy is not to think about anything, just to dance and keep going till morning. (R11, male, attends dance events)

Hallucinogens, especially LSD, are the preferred type of drugs for the use at parties, which is typical for the psychedelic trance subculture. This preference can be traced back to the initial history of the subculture and its roots in Goa and the hippie culture. Experiences of hallucinogen use are an inspiration to those who belong to the active core of the subculture, and affect their work. Hallucinogens are drugs that are compatible with the “cultural taste” (per definition by Bourdieu, 1986) preferred by members of the psychedelic trance

subculture. Hallucinogens (especially LSD, on whose use the entire history of the subculture was based) have an exclusivity that means they can be considered to create the specific capital of the psytrance subculture. The use of other drugs was described by respondents as a “lack of taste”. Displays of psychedelic trance culture are, to a certain extent, manifestations of psychedelic experiences that the “experts” try to share with the partygoers:

And then [while using LSD] I experienced those visions, where I saw different scenes from various ancient cultures, religious symbolism, self-realization, energy and so on. The different things that people try to portray on those canvases (decorations), are an attempt to materialize these visions... (R4, male, party visuals and decor)

The party’s environment is reflected in the hallucinogenic experiences – the fact that party visitors use hallucinogens influences how party organizers prepare the party. Unfortunate circumstances have the potential to cause a very negative experience (a “bad trip”) (Stafford, 1993). The so-called “set” (how an individual acts and what his/her experience will be) can be significantly influenced by the quantities of used substances, previous experiences with that or other drugs, current mood and expectations. Hallucinogens stimulate their consumers to look at themselves differently, which some of the respondents see as a means of achieving personal growth or of having a mystical experience:

... they push (us) beyond the boundaries of our being and living, open up horizons to us, we become more responsive, friendlier ... (R2, male, psy events organizer)

Using hallucinogens at psytrance parties is influenced by suitable external conditions (environment, people)—the so-called “setting”. The environment is often embellished by visual installations that catch the attention of the intoxicated partygoers. The environment of the party can also facilitate different stages of intoxication.

LSD and psychedelic mushrooms certainly belong to this culture (psytrance) ... They both fit right into this psychedelic world. Psychedelic trance requires psychedelic drugs. Colorful decorations, UV lights, projections. Everything’s prepared even for the relaxation— soft chill-outs³, stands with nonalcoholic drinks and so on. Everything is set up for enjoyment, but also so the trip can be survived. (R9, male, attends dance events)

Hallucinogens are also used at other kinds of dance parties, but are considered less suitable or even potentially hazardous in a party environment not set up for a psychedelic experience as psychedelic trance events are:

I took LSD many times at tekno parties⁴, the setting wasn’t good... so I experienced... darkness of the soul and hell, nothing nice at all. (R4)

³ A “chill out” is a separate area for relaxation and regeneration. The music is slower and quieter. Chill out music is not for dancing to but for listening to. The room is equipped with seats for sitting and lying down and is sometimes used in the event that the guest does not feel well under the influence of the drugs.

⁴ Another “harder” style of dance music.

The definition of “non-tolerated drugs” as a subculture’s defense against social change

Respondents roughly positioned themselves against drugs they considered inappropriate for use at a party. These subculturally “non-tolerated” drugs belonged to two categories—opiates (especially heroin), and methamphetamines. These two categories are labelled by the respondents as “hard” and “destructive” drugs and—unlike with tolerated drugs—use can easily lead the user into addiction. Respondents gave two principal reasons for not tolerating the use of these drugs:

- a) this behavior cannot be accepted as it differs from that of the rest of the partygoers who actively move around, dance, express positive emotions, and so on:

Opiates are not suitable, you need to jump, have fun, smile and dance. (R9, male, attends dance events).

...they can (non-tolerated drugs) fuck you up, make the entire atmosphere into pure panic. People on Special K, rolling around on the dance floor or similar experiences definitely aren’t the most pleasant things to experience. Horrible, right. (R2, male, psy events organizer)

- b) intravenous drug use is not acceptable (and certain drugs, such as opiates, are seen as “only” to be injected):

Opiates are not good for the party. Just the idea of injecting something into myself ... (R8, woman, attends dance events)

Parker et al. (1998) distinguishes two groups of drugs in terms of normalization. The group of tolerated drugs includes opiates and cocaine, and the second group (non-tolerated drugs) includes most of the remaining drugs. In the Czech Republic, cocaine use is relatively rare, which could be why it was not reported by respondents (Csémy et al., 2000). However, heroin was often emphasized in the answers.

Although, the psychedelic trance subculture stipulates which drugs are appropriate (and therefore tolerated) and which are not, violation of this taboo is not punished and is ineffective in practice. Protesting against non-tolerated drugs tended to be expressed on a personal level and in a passive way:

(Participants) would be angry and will shun the people who took the non-tolerated drug. (R7, male, psychedelic trance partygoer)

Those who take non-tolerated drugs can still be ostracized, but there are no mechanisms for direct excluding or segregating such individuals. This inability to prevent the use of a non-tolerated drug is backed by the fear that non-tolerated drugs will destroy the subculture. But which is worse: drug use, or the inability to enforce standards which are part of the subculture’s self-definition?

One possible means of protecting the subculture from anomy is identification with the original norms. In this case, it is about accepting the psychedelic culture with its psychedelic drug use and trying to emphasize the exclusive use of the psychedelics, even though they are slowly being replaced by other (newer) types of drugs. In both cases, the collective identity refers to its tradition and rooted memories which are suddenly under threat (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995).

Drug use within the psychedelic trance scene is evolving based on social changes, which can be understood as vanishing phenomenon, in which the original values of the subculture disappear—previously preserved by the members of the subculture who were there at its inception. This is also called the fusion of scenes, which is very common for dance subcultures (Muggleton, 2000). Members of other dance scenes (e.g. tekno) bring with them drugs that were tolerated in their original subculture but are not tolerated in the psychedelic trance subculture. The psychedelic trance culture “is not adapting” to these “new drugs”.

Our respondents reacted strongly and negatively to the change in type of drugs used at psychedelic trance parties. Compared with a few years ago, both the volume and type of drug used has increased:

When I started going to parties in the nineties, it was all about LSD ... today it is so..., everything is fairly accessible. (R1, male, DJ)

There was no difference between the respondents who had been members of the psychedelic trance subculture since it began in the Czech Republic or who had long been part of it, and the respondents who had only been members for a short time.

Hallucinogens, which were specific to the psychedelic trance party and which had shaped the psychedelic trance culture in the past, have now ceased to dominate:

... I don't think it's what it was ten or fifteen years ago, when everyone was on LSD ... those were completely different worlds. (R4, male, visuals and decor)

... hallucinogens have been replaced by speed, MDMA and cocaine. (R3, female, visuals and decor)

The change in drug types that are consumed has (according to the subculture's members) led to its “spirit” disappearing. For this community, the term “spirit” means expressing the unique atmosphere at the party: harmony, an emphasis on spiritual values, and values connected to psychedelic drugs.

The loss of the “spirit” can lead to the loss of the original values of the group and thereby opening the scene for a larger group of people. This latter is associated with new partygoers who did not respect the original values of the scene. It is a phenomenon that exists in all social formations when the “new” versus the “old” begins to be established, and involves the redefinition of the rules of membership, a struggle for legitimacy and ultimately, the negotiation of the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion.

... the magic disappeared, and it became the common trance shit without a bit of depth ... and now it's all wrong – the music and the spirit ... (R4)

Conclusion

In relation to the psychedelic trance subculture, we can speak of the normalization of drug use in the party environment. It is a kind of a world in itself, distinct from the world “outside the party” where people do not use drugs. The party world is free of prejudice

and drug pathologization. In the world outside the party people still care about what others say about drug use. There is a difference between the type of drugs and the methods used in psychedelic trance and in other subcultures. Drugs are a means of self-definition for the subculture, setting it apart from other subcultures.

Hallucinogens (especially LSD) occupy a dominant place in the psychedelic trance subculture. Hallucinogens helped create its culture and there is therefore a preference for the use of hallucinogens—to ensure a good atmosphere. The use of LSD in the subculture creates a sense of exclusivity as its specific effects bring personal growth and a mystical experience.

The subculture distinguishes between tolerated and non-tolerated drugs, as rooted in the history and values of the subculture. In defining non-tolerated drugs, Parker et al. (1998) refer to abnormality in relation to opioids, especially heroin. This is primarily because of a fear that they will not fit into the preferred behavior of psychedelic trance partygoers rather than a reflection on the negative health effects of heroin use. Yet, the subculture lacks the means with which to discipline members who use non-tolerated drugs.

In its early days, psychedelic trance was associated exclusively with the use of hallucinogens. With the commercialization of the subculture, new members arrived, often recruited from other dance subcultures, who used a wider range of drugs typically found in other scenes. Currently, there are various commercially available drugs at psychedelic trance parties. The founding members of the Czech scene have observed changes in the drug use and fear the scene's exclusivity will be lost.

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[†] Department of Humanities, Faculty of Corporate Strategy,
Institute of Technology and Business in České Budějovice
Okružní 517/10,
370 01 České Budějovice, Czech Republic
Email: ali.kajanova@email.cz

^{††} Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, Faculty of Pedagogy,
South Bohemian University,
Jeronýmova 200/10,
370 01 České Budějovice, Czech Republic
Email: tmrhalek@pf.jcu.cz