

Spring 2014

"Don't call me a pothead!" A qualitative study of high achieving marijuana users

Katrina Chanel Miles
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019>

Recommended Citation

Miles, Katrina Chanel, "'Don't call me a pothead!' A qualitative study of high achieving marijuana users" (2014). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 449.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/449>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

“Don’t Call me a Pothead!” A Qualitative Study of High Achieving Marijuana Users

A Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letter
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Science

by Katrina Chanel Miles

May 2014

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Project Advisor: Kerry Dobransky, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor, Sociology

Reader: Matthew B. Ezzell, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor, Sociology

Reader: Amy Paugh, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Anthropology

HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

Barry Falk, Ph.D.,
Director, Honors Program

Contents

Acknowledgement Page	3
Introduction	4
Research Question	6
Literature Review	7
Methods	14
Findings	15
Achievement	15
Judgment and Justification	16
Maintaining Secrecy	18
Management of Disclosure	21
Identification As A “Pothead” or “Stoner”	23
Reasons Why Users Smoke	26
Acceptable and Unacceptable Smoking	29
Reference List	35

Acknowledgement Page

I would like to take a moment to thank Dr. Amy Paugh and Dr. Matt Ezzell for their support as committee members during my research project.

I would also like to send a great amount of gratitude towards my project advisor Dr. Kerry Dobransky for his continued support and advice throughout this experience. Your faith in me and desire to see me do well has been an inspiration and a push for me to continue. Thank you.

Introduction

There are 4.6 million people in the US who use marijuana on a daily or almost daily basis (NSDUH, 2010). Yet, marijuana is still considered an illicit drug and its users carry the negative stigma that is attached to its illegality and being a “drug.” Often, marijuana users are attributed certain characteristics by others: that they are under-achievers in school, spend more time partying and socializing, and less time on religious or community service activities (Bell et al 1997). I will argue that the problem with this characterization is that there are marijuana users who do not conform to the stereotype. They do well in school, are active in clubs/organizations, and participate in internships. The question, then, is how do these high-achieving marijuana users maintain “face” (Goffman 1995) when they “account” for their marijuana use (Scott and Lyman 1968).

There is plenty of research that posits that marijuana use in high school affects educational attainment (Lynskey and Hall 2000; Chatterji 2006; Register et al 2001; Ellickson et al 2004; Ryan 2010; Jeynes 2002; Fergusson and Boden 2008; Horwood 2010; Fergusson et al 2003), specifically that there is a negative correlation between frequency of use and educational achievement (Fergusson et al 2003; Horwood 2010; Ryan 2010). Also, increasing marijuana use has been found to have a negative effect on occupational success (Schuster et al 2001). A study done by Lynskey and Hall (2000) acknowledges that there may not be a direct correlation between marijuana usage and lack of educational achievement, but instead the marijuana user may be within a social context that encourages those who participate to engage in an “anti-conventional life-style characterized by decreased participation in education” (page 1626). Other studies also acknowledge that the social context of marijuana users may have more effect on educational achievement than marijuana itself (Ellickson et al, 2004; Horwood, 2010). There

have been relatively few studies that have been conducted in order to ascertain the ways in which marijuana users confront stigmatization in their lives. Becker (1963) studied the ways in which the marijuana user deals with the social controls placed upon them. He uses three categories – supply, secrecy, and morality – to determine how users must rationalize their usage. Hathaway (2004) studied the ways in which users create a system of informal rules for themselves that they use to manage stigma and risk.

The vast majority of these studies focus on high school consumption of marijuana and whether those students then proceed to higher education institutions. They tend to ignore the achievement of users who have moved on to college. They also tend to conflate types of users, with typically no focus on high users who manage to do well both academically and socially. Also, none of the studies focus on the social context of those high achieving marijuana users, ignoring factors that could influence their achievement.

This study of high achieving marijuana users will give insight into the ways that they confront the stereotype of being a marijuana user. It applies Goffman's (1955) face-work and Scott and Lyman's (1968) account theory to an otherwise ignored group of individuals. In addition, it showcases the exceptions to the rule of marijuana usage having a negative impact on educational achievement. The study also sheds light onto the social contexts surrounding marijuana users who are high achieving, noting how they manage and view their use and how they navigate the social world that stigmatizes their activity.

Research Question

How do high achieving marijuana users (HAMUs) react to the stigma of being a marijuana user? What strategies, if any, do they employ to keep their usage secret? Do they use their high achievement and social success to “account” for their marijuana use? What systems do they have in place in maintain their high achievement? How do they feel about the terms “pothead” and “stoner”?

Literature Review

It is not difficult to find a study that supports the notion that marijuana use has a negative correlation to educational attainment and achievement (Jeynes 2002; Horwood 2010; Fergusson and Boden 2003). One study suggests that drug use, including marijuana, reduces the eventual educational attainment by one year (Register et al 2001) while another suggests that users are more likely to drop out of high school (Chatterji 2006). While increased usage tends to correlate with lack of educational achievement, there seem to be specific thresholds that are determined by start and frequency of use. Ellickson et al (2004) divided adolescents who used marijuana into four categories: thirteen year olds who started early with high usage and decreased usage over time, thirteen year olds who remained stable in their light usage, thirteen to fifteen year old occasional light users, and thirteen to fifteen year olds who steadily increased usage. Those adolescents who were early high users and stable light users did worse in educational attainment compared with the other two groups with no difference between themselves. In addition, steady increasers fared better than their early user counterparts but did not do as well when compared with the occasional light user. The study done by Ryan (2010), however, found that while any marijuana use led to less educational achievement, those users who were adolescent limited users did better than the life persistent ones. The more marijuana that is consumed the less likely the user will finish school, continue with his or her education, or obtain a degree at a university (Fergusson et al 2003).

Often it is unclear as to whether marijuana leads to lack of educational achievement or lack of educational achievement leads to marijuana use. Bell et al (1997) found that college students who participated in high risk behaviors, focusing more on the social than the studious aspects of college, and who overall had lower grades were seen as being more at risk to begin

marijuana use; the study questions if these are predictors or consequences of marijuana use. Lynskey and Hall (2000) prepared three hypotheses that could explain the link between use and achievement: “adverse effects of cannabis use on cognitive functioning, which could in turn lead to increased risks of educational failure and under-achievement, heavy cannabis use may lead to an ‘amotivational syndrome’ that may encourage decreased participation in education, and that the social context in which cannabis is acquired and used may encourage young people to engage in an ‘anti-conventional life-style’ characterized by decreased participation in education” (page 1626). The social context hypothesis of marijuana use is the leading hypothesis in regards to why marijuana users lack in educational achievement (Horwood 2010; Fergusson et al 2003). In one case, however, the factors of this social context were statistically controlled for and the negative effect of marijuana use was still statistically significant (Ryan 2010).

The combination of marijuana and tobacco use has been found to have the worse effect on academics, social relationships, and extracurricular activity when compared to solely marijuana use. Those who were cannabis-only users did better academically, had better relationships with their parents, and were more likely to participate in sports than cannabis and tobacco users. Even compared with abstainers, cannabis-only users were more socially driven leading to better relationships with their peers, more actively involved in sports, and had the same level of good grades. Here there did not seem to be a link between those students who only used cannabis and their academic achievement (Suris 2007). Although dated, Miranne (1979) found that when testing for six factors of achievement—materialistic achievement orientation, achievement values, occupational primacy, educational aspirations, occupational aspirations, or grade point average—there was no correlation between those and cannabis use. He found that

there was no difference between users and non-users in actual achievement or in their desire to achieve.

There are certain characteristics that are alleged to accompany the lifestyle of a marijuana user, including that they “received little/inconsistent supervision as children, are members of fewer social clubs/organizations, are more likely to skip class, smoke, party with friends, get drunk more often, and get drunk in public” (Ehrhard 2004:157). Having a mother who was employed full time, having a tendency to skip class, or placing a high value on the social “partying” scene of college are all posited to make one more likely to become a marijuana user who would spend more time sleeping in class and less time studying for it. Those with a higher level of involvement in student clubs and organizations would be at less risk of becoming a marijuana user because they would be more committed to the academic lifestyle (Ehrhardt and Tewksbury 2004).

These are all stereotypes that are attributed to a person when he/she admits to the identification of being a marijuana user. Most regular users, on the other hand, do not view marijuana as a drug and consider it to be something that has beneficial qualities. In addition, regular users believe that it is “an inoffensive pleasure” and could be used as “an anti-stress strategy” (Plancherel et al 2005:137).

It is my intention to see the ways in which HAMUs, defined as marijuana users who do well both academically and/or socially, confront the negative connotations that being a marijuana user holds. In Goffman’s “On Face-Work” (1955), face is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” Goffman speaks to the idea of “maintaining face” which is the idea that a person must

continually work to keep up the appearance that they are trying to promote. Finally, when a person becomes inconsistent with their presentation of face they are then considered to be in the “wrong face”. It may be that high achieving marijuana users actively use a particular face in order to maintain a specific persona, more than likely not that of a marijuana user, so that they cannot be accused of being in the wrong face.

Once in the “wrong face” it is logical that the user must draw on their personal account, “a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry” in order to explain why their inconsistencies exist (Scott and Lyman 1968:46). These accounts are used to maintain the social order of our daily interactions; they allow us to reconcile between what is “expected” and the actual. In this study it would be the “expected” low-achieving marijuana user attempting to be reconciled with the actual high-achieving marijuana user. Scott and Lyman (1968) found two types of accounts that people are apt to use when they are accused of being in the wrong, excuses and justifications. Both excuses and justifications deal with what the user is willing to admit to and take responsibility for. In the case of excuses they admit to the act being wrong but do not take responsibility for the act, while in justifications they take responsibility for the act but do not admit to the act being wrong. Scott and Lyman (1968) further break down the justification aspect into three parts—denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, and self-fulfillment. Denial of injury is engaged when people admit to the act but claim that their actions do not hurt anyone, including themselves. Condemnation of the condemners is when, again, a person admits to a deviant act but turns it on those who would try to make them feel ashamed by their actions. They cite that those who are condemning their behaviors are actually the ones with the larger problem, not those who do the initial act. Finally, self-fulfillment is when the person who is committing the deviant act claims that their actions help them in some way.

In a more general sense, Ezzell 2009, studied the ways in which female rugby players manage their identity. He argues that part of the way in which players deflect stigma is by normative identification, which he describes as “identifying with the normative values prescribed by dominants for subordinated group members” (112). Being a member of a subordinate group can lead to defensive othering, where the members of the subordinate group attempt to deflect the stigma of being a part of that group (Schwalbe et al 2000; Ezzell 2009). This could also be used to explain the condition of a high achieving marijuana user.

Becker (1963) breaks down the ways in which marijuana users deal with the social controls and the stigma that is associated with being a marijuana user. There are three main factors that the user must deal with as their usage progresses: supply, secrecy, and morality. Each factor must be confronted as the user proceeds from being a beginner, to occasional user, to a regular user. With supply the user must be in a group that uses marijuana and then be able to find it on their own. The need for secrecy in users is based on “the fact or belief that if nonusers discover that one uses the drug, sanctions of some important kind will be applied” (66). In order to keep relationships intact the marijuana user makes the decision that other nonusers need not find out about their use. Morality, in regards to the user, is the distinction between what society believes of marijuana users and the loss of that ideology as they become a marijuana user. Becker (1963) uses these factors to describe how individuals begin to take on the identity of a marijuana user. Just as any other marijuana user those who are high achieving must also confront these factors, however, the ways in which they do so may be different due to their success.

Hathaway (2004) describes the social conditions of marijuana use within the Canadian society where use, while still illegal in most parts, is not seen as deviant as it once was. He talks

about the “normalization” of marijuana use, that the combination of “drug prevalence, availability, a tolerant culture, and accommodating attitudes of non-using peers” is what is leading to this “normalization” (560). It was found that users create a system of rules that they use to help “normalize” their behavior. Some of the rules involve the aversion of hard drugs and the situations and people that they should not talk about their use with or use in front of. Another study focused on the etiquette that was required when using marijuana and the actions taken in order to avoid detection. Ream (2010) focused on the etiquette that was required when using marijuana and the actions taken in order to avoid detection; it was found that many users had specific rules that they would follow in order to avoid being recognized as a user, including hiding all evidence, even if family and friends knew, keeping work/school in a position of priority, and choosing to partake in the activity only when the time was appropriate. While this study provides insight into the ways that marijuana users attempt to keep their habit in check to maintain their image as a functioning member of society, it does not explicitly look at those who do not just do the minimum requirements, but in fact go above and beyond to excel in their life as is the case with high achieving marijuana users.

Individuals who used marijuana more also tended to approve of their own usage, and they also perceived higher levels of approval from their close friends and parents. It is interesting to note that they had a lower perception of approval of usage from the typical student however (LaBri, 2011). In another study, Kosviner (1977) found that those who were heavy or regular users, those who had used within the previous two months, often had marijuana playing a more important role in their lives than their less frequently using counterparts. A vast majority of heavy users, and to a lesser extent regular users, believed that they would continue marijuana usage within the next ten years; however only 38% of heavy users and 16% of regular users

actively thought of themselves as a “pot head” (44). The Kosviner (1977) study also looked into the social context of usage, finding that 80% of heavy users’ friends were also marijuana users themselves, and that they would smoke “nearly every time” when together with these friends (44). Warner (1999), found that there were gendered social contexts, with females being more discrete with their usage and males more open and braggart about theirs. Females would often be more discrete to avoid being punished and also because of the negative social status of being labeled a female user.

Kosviner (1977) broke down the reasons for marijuana usage into four distinct categories: relaxation/enhancement, expanding and exploring consciousness, the social nature of the drug, and help with psychological problems. Heavier users were more likely to use expanding and exploring consciousness and those who saw themselves as continuing the use of marijuana into later years of life were more likely to pick relaxation/enhancement and the social nature of the drugs as the reasoning. This study also found that there were three categories into which users would put their reservations about marijuana use: the fear of developing an ‘amotivational’ nature, unknown side effects and fear of dependence, and the “expense, parents worry, and fear of arrest” (47-49).

It is the interaction between the two aspects, “face” and “accounts”, which I believe the high achieving marijuana user must balance in order to navigate through a society that views marijuana usage as deviant. It is also important to look at the reasoning of usage, the way the user perceives themselves, how the user perceives how others look at them, and the social contexts in which the high achieving marijuana user places themselves into to grasp the ways in which the user uses “face” and “accounts”.

Methods

A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was used for this research. These interviews were semi-structured with questions based on marijuana use, educational achievement, and self-perception of being a marijuana user. The participants in this study were six high achieving marijuana users, HAMU, from a rural college campus. The interviews were 45 minutes to an hour each. In order to maintain confidentiality many protections were put in place to guarantee, as much as possible, the subjects anonymity. This included using only a verbal consent form and changing any identifiable information to generic information. It also included that after the interviews were complete a three day window in which to transcribe the interviews and then permanently delete them using a computer program that guarantees total erasure. All files were kept within another encrypted program on a password locked computer which was kept in a locked case. There are both advantages and disadvantages to using this approach. The advantages of this approach is that detailed information about how HAMUs see themselves and what they feel is important in their depiction of self can be gathered. The disadvantages of this approach was finding HAMUs that would be willing to share their story. Reliability of their information was also a factor with self-reporting. It was also a small sample size so generalizability is also a factor. In order to find the high achieving marijuana users a snow ball sample was used.

Findings

Achievement

Unlike Lysnkey and Hall's (2000) study that found marijuana users to suffer from "amotivational syndrome", which encouraged a decreased participation in education, the users in this study took their education seriously. While their cumulative GPAs ranged from 3.3 -3.9 many of them admitted to having a higher GPA in their major classes because they focused on that material. In addition, these students were in academically rigorous majors, four of them double majoring, having a minor, or being in a pre-professional program. These students, even though they are marijuana users, do not lack motivation and take pride in the work that they do. One student mentioned, "I'm particularly proud of my work, I work really hard in my classes. I work really hard in learning the material and I think that's a big reason as to why I do well" (Interview 5). Another student mentioned that even with their "senioritis" that they are still able to motivate themselves in order to do the work that needs to be done (Interview 1).

These users were also highly involved outside of the strictly academic setting. Besides keeping their grades up they spent time volunteering, working, tutoring, and being involved in other social and academic groups. Two of the HAMU's were leaders in their respective organizations, taking on even more responsibilities. One HAMU not only worked at two separate places as a tutor but volunteered their time as a tutor as well, all the while keeping up with work from their internship, making time for the sports club they were involved in and the international aid organization that they were passionate about. The idea that those in student clubs and organizations would be less likely to become marijuana users is irrelevant to HAMU's

whose increased usage started after they had arrived at college and entered into many of their organizations.

The fact that these users have kept a high GPA in their majors and have been involved with a multitude of organizations is counter to what previous studies have found in regards to other marijuana users. It begins to discredit the notion that all marijuana users have a certain set of characteristics and behaviors, all of which are negative.

Judgment and Justification

Five of the users spoke about the judgment that they felt gets placed on them when people find out that they smoke. Each echoed many of the sentiments that were discussed earlier about the stereotypes held about marijuana users, that they would be seen as unmotivated, addicted, expected to not achieve anything or do well in school.

“Yeah, definitely, I think that people think that I’m unmotivated if I tell them”

(Interview 5).

“I think that people think that I’m addicted, or that I’m going to do other drugs because I smoke” (Interview 3).

“It’s as if they think that I won’t do well in school, that I’m not going to graduate, or achieve anything” (Interview 4).

While this negative connotation was upsetting for some, a few of them noted that even though they are being judged, they do not let it bother them too much. This was mainly because they felt that it wasn’t their problem what other people thought, and they enjoyed doing what they were doing. so they should not have to stop.

“If people are going to judge based on stuff that you do like that then it’s their problem” (Interview 4).

“Maybe [it bothers me] a little, but again I try not to let that bother me because I really enjoy it” (Interview 1).

Indeed, once the subject of judgment was brought up all of the users began to speak about why they should not be judged for their actions. Specifically, they began to justify why they decided to smoke and how the negative stereotypes did not apply to them in particular. The HAMU’s studied overwhelming drew on their personal accounts to justify how their actions should not be considered deviant, even though the act of smoking is. They denied injury caused by their smoking, claiming that their grades and involvement proved that their smoking did not cause harm to anyone involved.

“It has not affected my work. I’m still getting everything done” (Interview 2)

“I gauge myself based on my academic performance and my relationships with those I feel close to and are important to me, and as long as those aren’t jeopardized I don’t think it’s affecting me too much” (Interview 1)

“All I have to do is pull out a resume or something to be honest, let’s just be real, and I’d be able to show that I’m not just a stoner” (Interview 3)

HAMU’S did not often use Scott and Lyman’s (1968) condemnation of the condemner as a justification; however, one user did respond that they didn’t mind being called a pothead because they knew that they were a “productive pothead”, thereby personally alleviating the stigma that others tried to place upon them. Admitting that their actions may be considered deviant and that they are still successfully fulfilling their role as a student, thereby condemning those who condemn them. Finally, HAMU’s often brought up the fact that smoking is beneficial

for them in various ways (which will be discussed more later in the text) which illustrates the self-fulfillment aspect of Scott and Lyman's (1968) justification model. One user managed to touch on every aspect of justification by saying,

“I would tell them [someone who has found out about their smoking]

basically two things: One, you've known me and you've seen me, you know how I am and how stressed out I am all the time about everything, it helps me to not feel so anxious about everything and look at all the things that I'm doing, that's number two. Look at all the things that I'm doing with my life, this isn't my life, smoking is a part of it but it's not my life. So, if you want to pass judgment on what I choose to do with my free time, that's fine, but it's my *free* time and it's not like I have that much of it. If this was affecting how I was handling the rest of my agenda, I would understand you being upset about it and being mad about it, but I just want to show you that it's okay to be a smoker. To me, for me, it's okay to be a smoker if you're doing other things, just don't make it your whole life.”

Maintaining Secrecy

HAMU's spend a decent amount of time ensuring that they are managing the impression that they make to other people. This includes making sure that all their paraphernalia is kept away from public gaze, that they themselves look presentable after smoking, and restricting use when important events are upcoming. Specifically, users spoke how part of their smoking routine is that once they have finished smoking, all of the accoutrements associated will immediately go away.

“Oh, and right after I smoke I always put my stuff away, I don’t want to leave any of it out” (Interview 5).

“I don’t like it all sitting there just in case, god forbid, someone comes in who doesn’t approve of it or we have to go somewhere really fast, it’s just not good to leave a trail” (Interview 2).

“I’ll make sure I’ll always hide my things, like I’ll hide my pieces and I’ll hide my weed” (Interview 3).

If this doesn’t happen immediately after smoking then definitely before they leave the house. As one user said, “You never know who might be dropping by.” If the decision to go into public has been made after smoking, all users spoke of taking steps to eliminate the evidence of their usage: changing clothes, spraying themselves with fragrance, chewing gum, and using eye drops.

“I mean I always try and make sure I don’t smell like weed, because I don’t think it’s a good smell and I don’t want that to be someone’s first impression of me. So, I’ll make sure that I smell nice” (Interview 3)

“Yeah, if you get high and go to public places you obviously are going to want to try and hide that” (Interview 6).

“I might chew gum” (Interview 1)

Finally, HAMU’s restrict their usage if they know that they need to be at their most alert for an event. They won’t smoke if they have class, an interview, if they are meeting someone important, or any other major event. These users kept the mentality that if you would not show up drunk, then you should not be showing up high.

“My friends it’s okay, but professionals, meaning people I work with, tutor, who are in my classes, professors, things like that I don’t want to be high around them because you know, I’m in a setting where they want to see me a certain way and I don’t want to show them another side of myself that they don’t need to see” (Interview 2).

“I wanna make sure I can compose myself and present myself in the best way possible, and if I just smoked, and I’m way out of it, that’s not a good representation of who I am. So, if I’m meeting someone, like a friends parents, or something I wanna at least be an accurate representation of myself” (Interview 1).

“No, I never smoke before class. I take smoking with the same seriousness that I would take drinking” (Interview 4).

“I don’t like being out in public with people who expect something from me [when I smoke]. I don’t want to have to try to impress anyone when I’m high” (Interview 3).

This constant monitoring of self helps to maintain what Goffman (1955) calls “face” when around others so that they are not initially perceived as a pothead. Each user spoke to how while they are not ashamed of their usage, they are conscious of the way that others perceive marijuana use and strive to not allow that to be someone’s first impression of them. This managing of impression ties directly into the management of disclosure.

Management of Disclosure

HAMU's have a specific standard on who they choose to disclose the fact that they are marijuana users. As previously discussed, they know that many people will place judgments upon them when confronted with this information so many users decide not to tell. As seen above there are a definite few that they would never dare to approach the subject including, "professionals", professors, family, or people who have an issue with smoking.

"People I work with [to whom they don't want to disclose], because you never know who you can trust with that and that includes my bosses and people like that, even if they ask me, [I say] 'nope, nope don't even know about it.'" (Interview 2).

"Like generally, if I have a feeling someone's not okay with marijuana and stuff then I won't bring it up" (Interview 1).

"Yeah, if I'm with people who I, maybe I don't know that well or who have voiced that they don't like smoking I'll probably not talk about it" (Interview 3).

One user describes a little "test" that they would use to decipher whether or not they could tell another person about their usage. They would jokingly bring up the subject to get a vibe about the other person. If they felt positive about it then they would then go ahead and disclose.

"It all depends on the person, but if I decide to tell someone it's because I figured out, I do a test, a little kind of test on people. They either have to kind of let me know in some way that they smoke as well or maybe I'll bring up how my friends smoke sometimes. I have to figure that out whether it's

that, you know, through asking them directly because we're in some kind of conversation about it or telling by their behaviors too, I think some of that is a good indicator for that."

Still others had the mindset that they did not really care who found out, some drawing back to the justifications that were discussed earlier and some actively using their usage as a way to help destigmatize marijuana use as a whole. A few even stated that within this college setting that they didn't really care if their peers were to discover their usage.

"Um, at this point in college I don't really care as long as it's not something official. Like for a job or something like that, so yeah pretty much I don't really care much about who knows" (Interview 4).

"Um, if it was just like a peer I wouldn't care, you know someone our age. But if it was like an adult or something then I might get a little annoyed otherwise I don't think it would be a big deal" (Interview 5).

"Um, I personally, because of the fact that I know that my academics are set and their solidified and that I know I am a good student. I know that I'm not afraid to tell people that I smoke" (Interview 6).

"If I trust someone enough to not turn me into the cops, I think, is the only stipulation I have now because I think that smoking is stigmatized and I don't like that. I like to try and reduce that stigma by telling people that I smoke because I think that I don't fit the typical personality" (Interview 3).

That last user goes on to state that they actually like holding off on their disclosure, just for a little while, so that they can use it as a tool to help diminish the negative stereotypes of marijuana users:

“I don’t want someone’s initial reaction to me be, ‘Oh, you’re a stoner’

because then I don’t want them to think like all the other things that you think of when you think of stoners. So, I enjoy being able to wait and say, ‘Okay, now that you know me, also know that I smoke weed, but I’m still the person that you knew.’” (Interview 2).

HAMU’s use varying levels of disclosure to deal with the negative connotations that would be placed upon them if they were to openly admit to their marijuana usage. Some have people that they would never tell, choosing to preserve a relationship and/or keeping their professional/academic life away from their social life, smoking being a part of that persona. For those who are more inclined to share their smoking information they still want to make sure that the person they will tell will be okay with their actions and not judge them too harshly upon discovery. Finally, there are plenty of users who draw upon their accounts to show that what others believe about marijuana usage is incorrect and these HAMU’s actively attempt to persuade those around them that who they are is not affected by their smoking.

Identification As A “Pothead” or “Stoner”

There was an interesting effect when the HAMU’s were asked if they identified as a “pothead” or “stoner” and how they would feel if another person used that term to describe them. There were users who just laughed it off because they knew that they were a “productive pothead” and others who did not care because “if someone wants to label me that way then they have every right to do it, if they want. I’m not going to try and change their mind” (Interview 4). These two statements speak to the idea that HAMU’s know that they are smokers, but because

they also know that they are what many would consider contributing members to society, they do not need to worry about how others are looking at them. One user felt that they couldn't identify with the term at all because of the negative stereotypes associated. It was the idea that those characteristics do not that user and even though they smoke, they should not take on the label because they do not fit the other criteria.

“I believe that ‘stoner’ ‘pothead’ are the same thing where as they’re kind of leaning more toward, to the idea that they are kind of burnouts. As well where they’ll kind of prioritize smoking weed and kind of just doing nothing to their work, and I definitely don’t see myself as that because I’m very active in my organization and I’m active in my schooling” (Interview 6).

Users described that the offense taken to the term or the use of the term as self-labeling depends on who is in the conversation. If a friend, or someone who is okay with smoking, makes a comment then users do not feel as if they are being discredited. However, if it is someone outside of their own social circle they have more issues with the term. When outsiders use the term HAMU’s cannot help but feel that there are so many negative aspects being placed upon them many of which have no foundation, which is why one user rejects the term. Yet, these users acknowledge that yes they do smoke and they enjoy it they accept the term on that level. Though through their lived experiences they have to reject the stereotypes wishing that they could supplant society’s definition and interject their own, a person who enjoys smoking weed. The following statements show that most users are uncomfortable with the term “pothead” and/or “stoner” because of the negativity:

“I’ve done so jokingly [called themselves a “pothead”], I don’t know if I would identify that way. I guess I do because I like reclaiming the term. I do in some company, but not in others because I think there definitely is sometimes if I called myself a stoner I would expect some people to think that stoner means that you never brush your hair, and you don’t take showers, and you don’t clean your room, and you don’t do your homework, and you don’t call your parents, and you’re not a responsible person. Whereas I take it to mean I am stoned a lot, but I still, but that doesn’t mean all these stigmas that I live up to all of these stereotypes. I like to call myself a stoner but I also don’t like the way it feels sometimes when I tell people” (Interview 3).

“But they’re joking [their friends] because they know that I’m doing a lot of other stuff, so they don’t feel like, it feels like when they’re saying that and they’re joking they really don’t think I actually am. But the other day one friend said, ‘If there is anything you are it’s a stoner.’ I laughed at first because I thought it was kind of funny, but then I also started thinking about it more and there is an image that comes with that and I don’t know if I really want to be associated with it. When you think stoner there are certain things you come up with and when people joke about it I laugh, because it is true, I do like it, a lot, but at the same time I think there is a connotation that comes with stoner and pothead that you need it, that you have this addiction to it, where I don’t feel that I’m addicted. So, for the most part I just kind of laugh it off when people call me that because...look at all the stuff I do! But also other times I

guess if it's someone that doesn't smoke and they call me that it bothers me a lot because they have their, I think a different idea of what they would call that kind of person than someone that does smoke, the people that don't smoke don't understand. So yeah, it bothers me when someone who doesn't smoke calls me that, but when someone does that does I just laugh"

(Interview 2).

"I can't decide that [if they would label themselves as a pothead] because I have my own idea of what that is, I would then say, 'Yes, I am.' I would don that hat because my idea is that I enjoy it, I enjoy the ritual, being with people and doing something together like that that makes everyone happy. And I like the smell, the taste, so I like that act and all that, I enjoy it. But, as far as the personality traits, and the whole I guess the stereotypes that you see associated with it, no, I am not that at all. And I just wish, I wish that more people would understand that, but not just with me, but in general, there are a lot of highly functional weed smokers out there. I think that we are a rare breed, but we do exist" (Interview 1).

Reasons Why Users Smoke

There are a vast number of reasons HAMU's choose to use marijuana. There were some themes that occurred: use for stress/anxiety, use for creativity purposes, use as a something to do/social bonding, and use as consciousness-raising. While not all users spoke to each aspect of this marijuana use they did fall under these four categories. There were a few of HAMU's who

stated that they smoked because it helped them to relax and alleviate some of the stress and anxiety that plagues their everyday lives:

“I like how it makes me feel, I’m a very uptight stressed out all the time kind of person. I always have what I have to do running through my head all the time. I just like how it makes me feel relaxed and not overanxious”
(Interview 2).

“It’s like a stress reliever” (Interview 4).

“It relaxes me especially because my brain tends to overthink and stress out about stuff a lot and that helps with anxiety and stuff too. So, it’s a therapeutic thing” (Interview 1).

Other users just talked about smoking as something to do with their friends, if they had nothing else to do, or it helped lessen the mundaneness of specific tasks. It was not that each user absolutely needed to smoke in order to get by with their day-to-day lives, but a “Why not?” mentality, especially in the company of friends.

“It’s something that, it’s either you would have just gone to bed and would have slept or you smoke beforehand and then you go to bed, so it’s pretty much the same thing” (Interview 6).

“I don’t know, it just makes mundane activities more fun, so if I have something that I don’t want to do, like clean my room, I might smoke first and then it will be fun” (Interview 3).

“When I’m smoking with other people I like the vibes that are in the room, everyone is relaxed, everyone’s happy, but it’s just that everyone is in the geeky happy, you know, place. So everyone feels more open that

way too, the communication is a lot more honest and open definitely”

(Interview 2).

Other users smoked more to help them be more creative. The focus was not just to smoke, but to become more open to new ideas and concepts, allowing them to develop ideas that they may not have otherwise. Smoking becomes a device to jump a mind hurdle that they are currently facing.

“It makes music more vivid, it makes creating music more intense”

(Interview 1).

“And like creativity wise, it really does help me, there will be times when I’m just having a creative block when I’m sitting there. I’m just sitting there and I’m like what am I supposed to do, I’m supposed to make this different and unique and stuff but I don’t know how to do this and then I smoke and it’s like (sigh) actually, okay, now I can picture the kind of stuff I want to include” (Interview 2).

“I’ve had a lot of good ideas come from it so I consider it creativity juice”

(Interview 6).

Only one user talked about the psychedelic aspect of the drug, “I think about things in a way I wouldn’t have normally thought about them” (Interview 3). This user also mentions the overlap of the psychedelic aspect with the social bonding, “We do end up talking about a lot of social problems and the bigger picture. I actually do find I have trouble seeing the bigger picture, but when I’m high I’m better at it, and a lot of times the things we talk about when high I retain later which I really appreciate” (Interview 3).

Acceptable and Unacceptable Smoking

It is important to note that part of what allows HAMU's to be the academically focused and involved students that they are, they have set ground rules for themselves that outlines acceptable and unacceptable marijuana usage, both academically and socially. The fact that they do not smoke before class, as discussed previously, is an aspect of these restrictions. However, those are not the only ones for a HAMU to allow themselves to smoke. They must have allocated time to the activity making sure that all of their work has been completed.

“So there's a lot of like planning involved but mostly the stipulations are that I have to have nothing to do for a couple of hours. I have to have enough time to dedicate to being able to come down in time for doing things” (Interview 2).

“If I've finished all my school work or if I have nothing to do for the next day, then I'll probably smoke” (Interview 1).

“We never like do work or something after [smoking] I never mixed doing schoolwork with smoking. I try to do all my schoolwork before that. (Interview 6).

“Just I found as long as I could control myself and keep up with things I had to do school wise, socially, like whatever, that it wasn't an issue” (Interview 3).

Academics are not the only major restriction to the marijuana use of a HAMU, they also need to feel that their social obligations are remaining intact throughout their smoking career. This involves respecting those around them and taking care of their own emotional needs.

“Yeah, if I'm really upset I won't. So, if I'm having a bad day or I'm feeling

depressed then I'm not going to smoke because I don't, I find that whatever feeling I have when I'm sober I'll have when I'm high and it will keep coming back" (Interview 1).

"And I think that a lot of people that whether misperceived or not they don't like it when people, if they're sober and the people they're trying to interact with are high, I feel like it's being very disrespectful" (Interview 2).

"I try not to use it as a crutch. Like if I'm having a bad day like emotionally or something, or if like something happens, I will make a point of not [smoking]." (Interview 3).

HAMU's are acutely aware of the things that are important to them and expected of them. This understanding allows the users to apply their own discretion if suddenly their smoking has become a problem expressing itself in other facets of the person's life. One user comments, "I don't want it to affect the things that are important to me" (Interview 1). This self-awareness allows users to monitor their behavior, pulling back on smoking if it was ever to interfere with their academics or social lives. This also expands the idea that smoking is a recreational activity and should be used in the instances as described above rather than an escape.

"If it did that is when I would definitely cut down like a lot if I started to notice a drop in my grades or something like that" (Interview 6).

"If it was starting to affect my attendance to things, if I was deciding to not attend something and instead smoke that's when I would start feeling like I had a problem" (Interview 3).

“And if it affects my grades, oh that’s definitely where things would need to change, definitely” (Interview 2).

Conclusion

High achieving marijuana users do not fit into the preconceived stereotypes that society has placed upon the average marijuana smoker. These users manage to do extremely well in school, are involved in multiple activities—including on/off campus organizations and on/off campus jobs, all while smoking multiple times a week. Unlike previous research done on marijuana users these HAMU's are not socially withdrawn nor do they lack respect for their own education. For all intents and purposes they are ideal college students they just happen to smoke marijuana.

These users are constantly confronted with judgment about their marijuana use, outsiders expecting them to fall into the common perceptions. These HAMU's often have to justify their usage because it is seen as so unexpected for these types of people to be smoking. It is through that process of justification that they attempt to maintain the image that they had before outsiders were aware of their usage. They attempt to explain that marijuana not affect their academic or social lives nor would they continue smoking if it did. They also explain that they use marijuana as a relaxation tool and find it as a tool to boost creativity.

The judgment that gets placed on HAMU's requires them to often keep their usage secret not just for the illegality of the act, but also because they do not want others to think of them in a negative way. HAMU's go through an extensive process to try and guarantee that those they did not want to disclose their usage to do not find out. The process includes making sure that evidence of usage cannot be found and limiting their usage when important events are going to occur.

HAMU's are split on whether they define themselves as "potheads" or "stoners" and if they are bothered when other people use that terminology. There were those who are not offended by the term because they know they are still productive members of society and why should they be bothered about someone else using that word. However, others were only okay with the term if they could supplant their own connotations with the word being weary of the ones that typically follow. One user rejected the words and identity because of those connotations and the fact that they just did not fit.

High achieving marijuana users smoke for the typical reasons it is a stress reliever, a creativity booster, an activity to do "just because", and even as a way to enhance thinking. While their reasoning may not be extraordinary the fact that even with the reasoning they are still able to be high achieving is---these users are not typical. They align themselves with the same reasoning that other users make, but they manage to escape the pitfalls that seem to be attached.

These pitfalls seem to be avoided because of the rules that HAMU's have set in place for themselves and their smoking. They have each determined when smoking is acceptable and when it is unacceptable following these rules for their own betterment. They have priorities which include being a responsible student and an active member of society. These users know that if their smoking were to ever affect any of the things that were important to them—family, friends, academics, activities, work---then their usage must immediately become restricted and/or stop completely.

HAMU's know how to balance their lives as a student and marijuana user. They know that society views their usage as deviant; they know that there are specific beliefs about potheads, and they know that they don't fill that category. These HAMU's understand that there

are certain expectations that they need to fill as a student before fulfilling their role as a pothead. Though limited this study begins to shed light on the small group that is known as high achieving marijuana users. It would be beneficial to do this study on a larger scale to understand further the characteristics of these users, and hopefully begin to develop a societal understanding that all users are not the same. With the increasing legalization of marijuana it is advantageous to know that there are those who do not allow the activity to prevent them from being constructive members of society. For these users the term “pothead” only works if you can dismantle the beliefs that you have about most marijuana users.

Reference List

- Becker, H. S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Bell, Rick, Henry Wechsler and Lloyd D. Johnston. 1997. "Correlates of College Student Marijuana use: Results of a US National Survey." *Addiction* 92(5):571-581
- Chatterji, Pinka. 2006. "Illicit drug use and educational attainment." *Health Economics* 15(5):489-511
- Ehrhardt Mustaine, Elizabeth and Richard Tewksbury. 2004. "Profiling the Druggie Lifestyle: Characteristics Related to Southern College Students use of Illicit Drugs". *Sociological Spectrum*. 24: 157-189
- Ellickson et al, Phyllis, L., Steven C. Martion, Rebecca L. Collins. 2004. "Marijuana Use From Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Multiple Developmental Trajectories and Their Associated Outcomes." *Health Psychology* 23(3):299-307
- Ezzell, Matthew,B. 2009. "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Womens Rugby." *Social Problems* 56(1):111-131
- Fergusson, David M. and Joseph M. Boden. 2008. "Cannabis use and Later Life Outcomes." *Addiction* 103(6):969-976
- Fergusson, David M. D. M., L. J. Horwood and Annette L. A. L. Beautrais. 2003. "Cannabis and Educational Achievement." *Addiction (Abingdon, England)* 98(12):1681-1692
- Goffman, Erving. 1955. "On Face-Work." *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*. 338-342

Hathaway, Andrew D. (2004). "Cannabis Users' Informal Rules for Managing Stigma and Risk."
Deviant Behavior 25(6):559-577

Horwood, L. J., David M. Fergusson, Mohammad R. Hayatbakhsh, Jake M. Najman, Carolyn Coffey, George C. Patton, Edmund Silins and Delyse M. Hutchinson. 2010. "Cannabis use and Educational Achievement: Findings from Three Australasian Cohort Studies." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 110(3):247-253

Jeynes, William H. 2002. "The Relationship between the Consumption of various Drugs by Adolescents and their Academic Achievement." *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* 28(1):15-35

Kosviner A, Hawks D. Cannabis Use amongst British University Students: II. Patterns of Use and Attitudes to Use. *British Journal Of Addiction (To Alcohol & Other Drugs)* [serial online]. March 1977;72(1):41-57.

Lynskey, Michael and Wayne Hall. 2000. "The Effects of Adolescent Cannabis use on Educational Attainment: A Review." *Addiction* 95(11):1621-1630

Miranne, Alfred C. 1979. "Marihuana use and Achievement Orientations of College Students." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 20(2):194-199

National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2010

Plancherel, Bernard, Monique Bolognini, Philippe Stephan, Jacques Laget, Leonie Chinet, Mathieu Bernard, Oliver Halfon. 2005. "Adolescents' Beliefs About Marijuana Use: A Comparison of Regular Users, Past Users, and Never/Occasional Users." *J. Drug Education* 35(3):131-146

- Ream G, Johnson B, Dunlap E, Benoit E. 2010. "The role of marijuana use etiquette in avoiding targeted police enforcement. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*." 17(6):689-706.
- Register, Charles A., Donald R. Willaims, and Paul W. Grimes. 2001. "Adolescent Drug Use and Educational Attainment." *Education Economics* 9(1):1-18
- Ryan, Andrea K. 2010. "The Lasting Effects of Marijuana use on Educational Attainment in Midlife." *Substance use & Misuse*45(4):554-597
- Schuster, Christof, Patrick OMalley M., Jerald G. Bachman, Lloyd D. Johnston and John Schulenberg. 2001. "Adolescent Marijuana use and Adult Occupational Attainment: A Longitudinal Study from Age 18 to 28." *Substance use & Misuse*36(8):997-1014
- Schwalbe, Michael, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson and Michele Wolkomir. 2000. "Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis." *Social Forces* 79(2):419-452
- Suris, J. C. J., Christina C. Akre, André A. Berchtold, André A. Jeannin and Pierre-André P. A. Michaud. 2007. "Some Go without a Cigarette: Characteristics of Cannabis Users Who have Never Smoked Tobacco." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 161(11):1042-1047
- Warner J, Weber T. "Girls Are Retarded When They're Stoned." *Marijuana and the Construction of Gender Roles Among Adolescent Females. Sex Roles [serial online].* January 1999;40 (1/2):25-43.