Getting Stoned: Marijuana Use among University Students

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Leah C. Butler

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by
LEAH C. BUTLER

has been approved for
the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Thomas Vander Ven
Professor of Sociology

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Abstract

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Getting Stoned: Marijuana Use Among University Students

Director of Thesis: Thomas Vander Ven

While previous scholarly research on marijuana use among university students has done well to estimate how many college students use marijuana and to identify the potential harms of use, nothing is known about the ways in which college marijuana users define their use and manage these potential harms. The present study replicates Vander Ven’s (2011) study of the college drinking scene with the focus now turned to marijuana. Using survey and interview data, this study investigates college marijuana use as a social process with special attention to the manner in which users and co-users work together to accomplish marijuana use and to manage its effects. The data suggest student marijuana users do not perceive law enforcement detection as a significant risk. The data also reveal patterns in students’ descriptions of the etiquette rules of sharing marijuana with co-users. Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are discussed.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Leon and Tamara Butler, who fostered my desire to learn and who have supported each endeavor of my academic career. Thank you for your constant love and encouragement.
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Introduction

Studies have estimated that nearly one-third of college students have used marijuana at least once (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, 2010; Mohler-Kuo, Lee, Wechsler, 2003). Given that marijuana possession and trafficking is illegal in many parts of the United States and is against the code of conduct at many U.S. universities, students who use marijuana face various legal, educational, and social risks. However, the social and political context of marijuana use has undergone some change in recent years. As of January 2016, four U.S. states (Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Alaska) and the District of Columbia have legalized recreational marijuana (Norml.org). Several other states have decriminalized marijuana or legalized medical marijuana (Norml.org, 2016). These major changes in the legal status of marijuana have nearly all occurred in the last twenty years (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016; Norml.org, 2016). The states that have legalized recreational marijuana have all done so in the last five years (Norml.org, 2016). These changes, as well as ongoing efforts to legalize medical or recreational marijuana in other states, suggest a shift in public perception of marijuana use and of how marijuana users should be treated under the law.

While previous research on this topic has done well to estimate how many college students use marijuana and the possible harms of marijuana use, little is known about the ways in which college marijuana users define their experiences and how they perceive the consequences (positive or negative) of using marijuana. One of the major tenets of the constructionist perspective is that to fully understand a social problem researchers must
A constructionist analysis of campus marijuana use requires special attention to the manner in which users and co-users work together to accomplish marijuana use and to manage its effects. This involves examining how students work together to obtain marijuana, how they choose to use marijuana, and the process through which they use marijuana. Along with understanding the process of campus marijuana use, the following questions arise: 1) What are the perceived emotional and social benefits of marijuana use? 2) What are some of the prominent symbols in marijuana culture among college students (i.e., jargon, behaviors, gestures, etc.)? 3) How does marijuana use relate to social harms (i.e., fights, arrest, excessive alcohol consumption, sexual assault, etc.)? and, 4) How do students work together to manage these social harms? In order to begin to answer these questions, it is important to first unpack what is already known on the topic and what is missing from existing research.
Literature Review

Though research has consistently reported that campus marijuana use is clearly widespread among university students (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, 2010; Mohler-Kuo, Lee, Wechsler, 2003), much of the literature on marijuana use among young people is focused on adolescents, particularly high school students. The bulk of the literature on marijuana use at the college level focuses on identifying and measuring the risk factors for becoming a marijuana user and the consequential risks of using marijuana. Additionally, some studies make continued efforts to measure campus marijuana use and to suggest causes for the variation in levels of use. A third significant portion of the literature seeks to assess the disparities between students who use marijuana and between students who are subjected to the negative effects of marijuana use. These three subsets of the literature—measuring use, measuring risks of use, and identifying disparities between users—provide a largely quantitative profile of campus marijuana use.

Prevalence of Marijuana Use on Campus

While the general consensus of researchers over the past three decades has been that approximately one in three college students have tried marijuana at least once (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, 2010; Mohler-Kuo, Lee, Wechsler. 2003, Goode, 1970), there are significant variations in levels of use. For example, a study that collected data from 119 colleges, reported that the percent of students who had used marijuana in the past thirty days “ranged in 1999 from 0% at the lowest use college to 46% at the highest” (Glendill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, and Wechsler, 2000, p. 1659). A more recent study from Monitoring the Future (MTF) reported that the percentage of college
students who had used marijuana has risen from 30% in 2006 to 36% in 2013 (Monitoring the Future Press Release, 2014). The 2014 press release from MTF also stated that “marijuana has remained the most widely used illicit drug over the 34 years that MTF has tracked substance abuse by college students” (Monitoring the Future Press Release, 2014, p. 1). Hammersly and Leon (2006) echo this sentiment in regard to global marijuana use, stating,

Amongst adolescents and young adults, lifetime cannabis use across a range of countries... may be more prevalent than tobacco use (although not tobacco trying) and approaching half the prevalence of alcohol use; a minimum of approximately twice the prevalence of any other controlled drug. (p. 190).

Notably, these studies show that the prevalence of marijuana use on campus has varied over time (Monitoring the Future Press Release, 2014) and space (Glendill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, and Wechsler, 2000).

The scope of marijuana use is especially prevalent among students who use other drugs. Allen and Holder (2013) cite the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)) stating, “Marijuana use is particularly high among drug users; 76.6 % of drug users report using marijuana in the past month, and 56 % of illicit drug users report exclusive marijuana use” (Allen and Holder, 2013, p. 302; SAMHSA, 2011). It is not surprising that the measurement of marijuana use has been a significant focus of researchers given that the illegality of the drug results in clandestine use that is difficult to observe and challenging to measure.
Risks and Harms of Marijuana Use

Based on the data that show the widespread use of marijuana on college campuses, many researchers seek to identify the risk factors for students to use marijuana in college and the consequential risks of college marijuana use. Some of these researchers have sought to measure specific risky behaviors or risks that pertain to a certain subset of marijuana users. For example, one study found that “marijuana use with established romantic partners may increase risk of unprotected sex” among college women (Walsh, Fielder, Carey, and Carey, 2014, p. 145). Another study examining the link between marijuana use and sex-related risks found that “Treatment-seeking polysubstance abusers with current or past marijuana use histories may be at greater risk of HIV infection than their counterparts who do not use marijuana.” (Andrade, Carrol, and Petry, 2013, p. 255)

Other studies focus on more general social harms associated with marijuana use. One study found that “Overall, marijuana use was the greatest contributor to negative consequences” in comparison to “hallucinogens, cocaine, ecstasy, MDMA, ketamine, OxyContin, and prescription stimulants” (Allen and Holder, 2013, p. 301). These negative consequences included “examples such as having an argument with a friend or family member, or not being able to do homework or study for a test” (Allen and Holder, 2013, p. 304). College marijuana users may also suffer cognitive impairments (Black, Farnham, Braverman, Noyes, and Ghoneim, 1990). These myriad risks, while troublesome considering any population of drug users, may have unique effects on college students given the additional academic and social strain of collegiate life.
Differential Effects of Marijuana Use across Social Groups

Interestingly, the literature also suggests that marijuana use impacts different groups within the college student population differently. This area of literature seeks to identify the students who are more likely to use marijuana or more likely to face negative consequences as a result of marijuana use. For example, one study found that “minorities may be at an increased risk for substance use due to their perception that the typical student is using more than they actually are” (Javier, Belgrave, Vatalaro Hill, and Richardson, 2013, p. 228). However, Javier et al. note that other data show, “Black (women 18.7%; men 33.5%) and Asian (women 20.0%; men 22.4%) students used marijuana less than White students (women 38.2%; men 41.5%)” (Javier et al., 2013, p. 231; McCabe et al., 2007). These studies highlight the significant differences between white students and minority students both in their actual marijuana use and in their perception of how their peers use marijuana. Racial differences (and differences in other demographic variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location) in marijuana use may be rooted in deeper social factors that require the use of qualitative measures to unearth and explore.

While these studies lay the ground for a broad understanding of campus marijuana use, there has been little qualitative research on the topic. Given that campus marijuana use is most often a social process (Mohammed and Fritsvold, 2012) it is necessary to examine this process as it is described by the social actors involved. The social constructionist perspective emphasizes the importance of collecting data on how individuals construct a social phenomenon in specific words and phrases and how this
construction affects the perceived reality of that phenomenon (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987). This perspective is rooted in symbolic interactionism, which can allow for a better understanding of how marijuana users develop a shared understanding of the symbols and behaviors related to marijuana use through using marijuana together. Vander Ven’s (2011) study used the constructionist perspective to guide his theoretical framework and managed to shed light on the social process of campus alcohol consumption through the use of intensive interviews that allowed students to describe their alcohol use in their own words. In order to better understand the social process by which college students use marijuana, and the strategies they use to avoid and to minimize the harms of marijuana use, it is necessary to collect this type of qualitative data. A comprehensive review of the literature on campus marijuana use reveals the need for qualitative inquiry on the topic.

In this context, the present study seeks to better understand how and why college students use marijuana and the social processes by which students collectively work to ameliorate the risks and consequences of marijuana use. In other words, this study seeks to trace the process by which college students obtain marijuana, choose to use marijuana, use marijuana, and manage the effects of marijuana as students describe this process themselves. This research goal departs from the quantitative nature of the extant literature on campus marijuana use, and will provide greater context to the aforementioned studies. This unique focus is rooted in the theoretical background of this study, which allows for a deeper analysis of how and why the process of campus marijuana use exists in its current state.
The present study takes a grounded theory approach guided by the social constructionist perspective. The data collection and analysis methods used in this study will be described in greater detail in the following section as it is necessary to first discuss the constructionist perspective and how it guides the theoretical approach to this study. In their book, Constructing Social Problems, Spector and Kitsuse argue that “definitions of conditions as social problems are constructed by members of a society who attempt to call attention to situations they find repugnant and who try to mobilize the institutions to do something about them.” (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987, p. 78). As is clear in the extant literature, sociological researchers have established marijuana as highly prevalent on college campuses; and they have identified some potential risks and consequences of marijuana use among college students. While the study at hand does not intend to make claims as to whether campus marijuana use is or is not a social problem, it is rooted in the perspective that reality is constructed through social interaction. According to Charmaz, constructionists ask “What do people assume is real? How do they construct and act on their view of reality?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 127). The constructionist perspective is concerned with the way individuals construct their understanding of their own experiences through the process of interacting with others. This focus of the constructionist perspective is rooted in symbolic interactionist theory. The proposed idea that campus marijuana users collectively define their environment and the rules that govern a smoking session draws on Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy. Dramaturgy, the idea that all social interaction is a performance in which
social actors work together to present themselves in a particular way while achieving a common goal (Goffman, 1959), clearly applies to collective drug use. When using marijuana as a group, participants must play certain roles that allow for the success of the smoking session. In Goffman’s perspective, members of a dramaturgical performance rely on “reciprocal dependence” and “reciprocal familiarity” (Goffman, 1959, p. 82-83). In other words, when individuals interact, they rely on one another to act according to their shared understanding of how their roles should be played and of the common goal to be accomplished by the interaction. Goffman argued that individuals develop their sense of self as they act out these roles for their audience. He called the process by which individuals carefully adjust their appearance and behaviors to portray a certain image of themselves to their audience, impression management (Goffman 1959). This means that individuals use specific words, tone of voice, gestures, and other behavioral adjustments to make their audience believe they are a certain kind of person.

In the context of marijuana use, this means marijuana co-users rely on each other to have a shared understanding of the mechanisms by which they can achieve marijuana use in order to do so successfully. Applying Goffman’s idea of impression management suggests that marijuana users seek to give off the impression of being a certain type of person, holding particular values, and that the “performance” of marijuana use allows them to do so. Therefore, the present study seeks to identify the ways co-users establish a shared understanding of these mechanisms through the process of collective marijuana use. Additionally, this study seeks to examine the ways collective marijuana use allows students to construct the impression of their “self” that is perceived by co-users. In order
to better understand campus marijuana use, it is important to allow the key social actors in this phenomenon—students who use marijuana—to describe their experiences in their own words. This is not an entirely new approach to studying marijuana use or to studying substance use among college students. Tracing back to its roots, this study is largely an attempt to replicate Vander Ven’s study of campus alcohol use (2011), which drew on the theory of Howard Becker’s study of marijuana use in *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963).

In the third chapter of this book, titled “Becoming a Marihuana User,” Becker argues that in order to become a frequent marijuana user one must complete three steps. He writes, “No one becomes a user without (1) learning to smoke the drug in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use… and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations he perceives” (Becker, 1963, p. 58). Becker goes on to explain that the marijuana users typically complete these three steps by interacting with and learning from other marijuana users. For example, he found the first step was often completed when a novice learned how to correctly smoke through “direct teaching” from an experienced user, or through “observation and imitation” of an experienced user (Becker, 1963, p. 47-48). In the second step, he found that marijuana users sometimes did not perceive that they were experiencing the effects of marijuana unless a more experienced smoker told them they were; they would need a co-smoker to say that they were acting high (e.g., laughing frequently, staring off into space, expressing feelings of paranoia, etc.) (Becker 1963). Becker’s theory is grounded in his in-depth interviews with fifty marijuana users. Each user described his own experiences
with marijuana use and the process by which he became a frequent user. Becker found this trend (the three step process) in the descriptions each user gave of his marijuana use. These findings provide a unique perspective. Rather than focus on how an individual’s personality traits or life experiences led to his drug use, Becker illuminates the ways in which drug use often involves and requires social interaction. This perspective is particularly important to the study of substance use on college campuses, as research indicates students often use drugs and alcohol in social settings (Mohammed and Fritsvold, 2012; Vander Ven, 2011). Therefore Becker’s model translates well to research on campus substance use, even five decades later. This is evident in Vander Ven’s application of Becker’s theory in his research on campus alcohol use in his book *Getting Wasted* (2011).

Vander Ven cites Becker’s research on marijuana use as a “lens through which to see the process of getting wasted” (Vander Ven, 2011, p. 8). He further states that this perspective is particularly useful because “instead of seeing intoxication as just an individual experience, we must see college drinking as a collective, social process” (Vander Ven, 2011, p. 8). In *Getting Wasted*, Vander Ven analyzes the social process of campus alcohol use through in-depth interviews, surveys, and extensive fieldwork. Using this method, he is able to paint a detailed picture of campus drinking culture as students describe it in their own words. The students described drinking games, alcohol-fueled hookups, and, as Vander Ven refers to it, “the shit show…a chaotic drinking episode characterized by dramatic drunkenness, human wreckage, and primitive behavior” (Vander Ven, 2011, p. 1-2). Just as Vander Ven was able to provide an in-depth analysis
of “the shit show,” this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the atmosphere of campus marijuana use.

The present study draws its two main research goals from Becker’s (1963) and Vander Ven’s (2011) research. As in Becker’s research, this study seeks to identify the process by which students use marijuana on campus as students describe this process in their own words. As in Vander Ven’s research, this study seeks to identify the ways in which students work together to accomplish marijuana use and to mitigate the risks and negative consequences of use. To connect these four contributions to the theoretical framework of this study (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Becker, 1963; Vander Ven, 2011), the core focus of this research is to examine how marijuana users construct their perspective on their experiences with marijuana—and their perception of themselves as users—through the process of acting out certain roles during the smoking session. The methods used in this study allow for students to provide detailed portraits of their experiences with marijuana use that not only fill the gap in knowledge of how and why college students use marijuana, but also give unique insight into how students see themselves as marijuana users.
Methodology

In order to answer the question of how marijuana users and co-users work together to accomplish marijuana use and to manage its effects, this study uses a grounded theory methodology. According to Charmaz, “grounded theory methods consist of systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories grounded in the data themselves.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Following the grounded theory approach, the typical process by which college students use marijuana, and manage the effects of use, that is proposed in this study, will be grounded in the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and surveys. In addition to contributing to the sparse body of qualitative data-based literature on this topic, the survey data collected in this study also contributes to quantitative measurements of the prevalence of marijuana use on campus.

The surveys were completed by undergraduate students (eighteen years of age and older) in sociology classes from introductory to senior level courses. Prior to the completion of the survey all students received and read a consent form, which stated that return of the completed survey implied consent. This method of informed consent protected the anonymity of the students as they were not required to sign their names on the consent form.

The survey was modeled after both the questions used in Vander Ven’s Getting Wasted survey, and the survey used to measure youth drug use by Monitoring the Future (Vander Ven, 2011; Johnston et al., 2010). While the questions the present study includes in its survey are nearly identical to those used in Vander Ven’s study, it was necessary to
adjust the list of possible responses to fit the context of marijuana use. When asking students to report their history of marijuana use, the questions and responses were drawn from the Monitoring the Future (2009) survey.

The survey also asked students to write personal stories about the last time they used marijuana, or “smoking stories.” Respondents were asked to describe: how and why they decided to use marijuana, how they obtained the marijuana, the use process, and an account of the aftermath. The prompt for the anecdotes used in the survey was modeled after the prompt Vander Ven used in Getting Wasted (2011). Vander Ven refers to the “drinking stories” he collected as “a gold mine of data” (Vander Ven, 2011, p. 17). Thus, this study sought to strike gold again, this time with a wealth of stories of campus smoking sessions. In an earlier article based on their college drinking data, Vander Ven and Beck write that asking respondents to write the story of “the most recent time” that alcohol was used to the point of intoxication… [avoids] having informants recount stories relating to the ‘best time,’ ‘worst time,’ or ‘drunkest time’ that respondents had encountered while intoxicated” (Vander Ven and Beck, 2009, p. 633). Thus the present study also aimed to provide a cross-section of marijuana use experiences, rather than only respondents’ best, worst, or “highest” times using the drug.

In addition to the surveys, this study used in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Interview participants were then recruited through chain referrals and through a field contact. Students who completed in-class surveys were asked to provide the researcher’s name and contact information to potential interview participants. Three interview participants were recruited through this process and contacted the researcher
for an interview. The remaining six interview participants were recruited by an undergraduate student who served as a field contact. The field contact learned of the study through a sociology course and was put in contact with the researcher by a professor at the University. This field contact proved to be immensely helpful in recruiting participants as they had close personal relationships with undergraduate students who he knew to be marijuana users.

The use of a street contact to recruit interview participants has worked well in other studies on illegal activity for which identifying research participants was challenging. In their book, *Burglars on the Job*, Wright and Decker used ex-offenders to identify individuals presently involved in burglarizing homes (1994). They argue that this method is useful because “such a person has established contacts and trust in the criminal subculture and can vouch for the legitimacy of the research” (Wright and Decker, 1994, p. 18). Similarly, in studying street crack cocaine dealers, Jacobs found that “Collecting data from drug dealers, particularly active ones, is likely to be difficult and dangerous unless one can construct friendships within a dealing community.” (Jacobs, 1999, p. 12). While the research subjects for the present study were likely not hardened criminals, and none had reported engaging in large-scale marijuana buying or selling, it was clear that some were suspicious of the study. In fact, the field contact reported to the researcher that some of the participants thought the interview was “weird” and some individuals he tried to recruit were concerned with getting in trouble as a result of participating in an interview.
Nevertheless, the field contact was much more successful at recruiting interview participants than the researcher. In all, the field contact recruited six of the nine interviewees. In order to protect all participants, no names were recorded or made apparent to the researcher at any point in the research process. All names used in the findings section of this paper are pseudonyms created by the author. The field contact’s name will remain confidential and will not be used in any reports on this data.

The one-on-one interviews lasted between twenty and sixty minutes. At the beginning of each interview, informants were given a consent form and were then asked to give verbal consent to the interviewer. Again, this method of informed consent allowed for the researcher to maintain the anonymity of the informants. Each interview was audio recorded. These interviews allowed the researcher to ask students questions to follow up the smoking stories that provided greater context and texture to the picture of the marijuana use process.

In total, 169 surveys and nine interviews were conducted with university students at a large Midwestern public university. This study aimed to draw participants from each academic class; thus, the sample (including interview and survey participants) was composed of 31% freshmen, 27% sophomores, 21% juniors, and 21% seniors. 60% of respondents were female, the mean age was twenty years, and the median annual family income was $100,000. The gender makeup of this sample is close to that of the national university student population. According to a National Center for Education Statistics 2015 report, 56% of undergraduate students are female. Similar to Vander Ven’s survey on college alcohol use, the average annual family income of this sample is higher than the
national average. However, as Vander Ven explains, “The UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program reported that 2005 College Freshmen held median family incomes that were 60% higher than the national average (see Marklein 2007)” (Vander Ven and Beck, 2009). Seventy-five percent of the sample had tried marijuana at least once. Data were analyzed for all survey respondents and interview participants, regardless of whether they had used marijuana or not. The data analysis process is described in the following section.
Data Analysis

The in-class surveys provided 124 smoking stories and 42 stories or statements regarding abstention from marijuana (three participants did not provide a written response). The audio recordings of the nine interviews were transcribed for analysis. The analytical approach of this study used both deductive and inductive coding. The written statements from the surveys and the transcripts of the interviews were systematically coded using a three step process described below.

The first step of this process is deductive coding. Pugh, Ningard, Vander Ven, and Butler (2016) used this analytical method for their interview data. They state, “Layder (1998) suggested that existing sociological theories can inform or initiate the entire coding process” (Pugh et al., 2016, p. 6; Layder, 1998). Therefore, in the present study, the author identified coding terms related to the theoretical framework of the study. The initial coding terms were guided by the steps in alcohol use outlined in Vander Ven’s (2011) study and by the steps to “Becoming a Marijuana User” outlined in Becker’s (1963) study. These coding terms included, “deciding to get stoned,” “getting stoned,” “being stoned,” and “the aftermath.” Several subthemes were also identified including, “avoiding detection,” “using marijuana,” “social effects,” “mental effects,” “physical effects,” and “consequences.” A list of keywords was then developed to use as a guide to identify content related to the aforementioned themes and subthemes. For example, key words related to “getting stoned” included, “offered,” “obtained,” and “bought;” key words related to “being stoned” included, “felt good,” “relaxed,” “helped,” and “altered.”
The survey smoking stories and interview transcripts were then coded line-by-line for the keywords related to each of the aforementioned coding terms.

As the data were deductively coded, two new sub themes became apparent—“abstinence and desistance,” and “rules and rituals.” Thus, in the second step of the coding process, the author used inductive coding. Pugh, Ningard, Vander Ven, and Butler (2016) refer to inductive codes as “codes related to an idea, belief, or concept that was identified consistently throughout the [data]” (Pugh et al., 2016, p. 6). In the present study, reasons for abstinence and desistance were consistently identified during the initial coding process, as were rules and rituals related to marijuana use. Therefore the author determined these to be important themes in the data. The author developed a list of keywords to use as a guide to identify content related to each of these new coding terms in another round of line-by-line coding.

In the third step of this process, once all of the data were coded for all of the deductive and inductive coding terms, the quotes identified for each theme and subtheme were compiled in a quote log for each theme. The quote logs were used to identify the trends in each of the aforementioned themes. These trends are described in the following section.
Findings

In the smoking stories provided during the surveys and interviews, students described the process by which they last used marijuana. Each story typically followed the same four steps: 1) deciding to use marijuana, 2) using marijuana, 3) being under the influence of marijuana, and 4) the aftermath of marijuana use. This section will discuss the different ways students completed each of these four steps and highlight the trends in this process. Unless explicitly identified as present in only the survey data or in only the interview data, all findings refer to trends in the entire sample (including both the written responses of the surveys and the in-depth interviews). The large majority of respondents (93%) had last used marijuana in a social setting, therefore the process of using marijuana is largely dependent upon the social dynamics of the atmosphere in which marijuana was used. This was especially true for steps two and three of the process. However, many respondents used marijuana simply because it was present in their social setting; this was the most prevalent reason that students decided to “get stoned.”

Deciding to Get Stoned

The first step in the process of getting stoned is to decide to use marijuana. Students in this sample decided to use marijuana for various reasons. Most decided to use marijuana simply because the opportunity presented itself. In some cases, someone asked the student to smoke at some point in the near future. For example, several students said that they decided to smoke because a friend called, texted, or otherwise contacted them asking them if they wanted to smoke. Elena (again, all names used are pseudonyms), a twenty-one year old female, described the most recent time she smoked marijuana as
follows: “It was this past December, my friend had been hanging out with her boyfriend and his friends so she invited me over. She had been smoking before I got there and knew I wanted to try it so they offered.” In other cases, students were asked to smoke while they were already in the presence of others who were smoking. For example, several students’ smoking stories stated that they were at a party and someone was smoking and offered them “a hit.” Emily, an eighteen year old freshman, provided an example of this: “The most recent experience I had with marijuana was a few weeks ago with a few of my friends at a frat house where we are friends with several of the brothers/pledges. We were not planning on doing it that particular evening, but one of the guys offered, we all thought, ‘why not?’” The expression “why not?” was echoed by multiple other respondents. Jackie, a nineteen year old sophomore, told the interviewer that while at a party, “my friend smokes and um she lit up and she was like ‘do you wanna try it?’ and I was like ‘yeah might as well.’ I had done it before.” In nearly the same words as Emily, Allie, a twenty year old sophomore, stated, “It was kind of in the moment…I never go out like planning to do it. It’s kind of like one of my friends’ll be like ‘hey you wanna smoke?’ and we’ll be like ‘yeah why not?’ Like it’s a social thing more than a smoke to just smoke thing.” For many respondents, like the three mentioned above, they were either provided all of the marijuana for free, or they “threw on” marijuana, or, they added their own marijuana to the marijuana that had been offered to them.

For most of those who were offered marijuana, the decision to accept was made quickly and happily. Others, however, chose to accept the offer due to peer pressure. The majority of the students who described being pressured to use marijuana were first-time
users. While there was near consensus among the interview participants that people were typically not pressured into using marijuana, this exact practice did emerge as a theme in the smoking stories from the surveys. In some cases, the respondents specifically identified their friend’s behavior as “pressure,” other respondents described their friends trying to encourage them or convince them to use marijuana. Take the following examples: Zach, a nineteen year old freshman, wrote, “I decided to use it because I was under constant pressure from both of my roommates and friends, all who smoke every day. They provided it…I just went with them.” Rachel, a twenty year old sophomore, wrote, “I decided to use marijuana because all my friends wanted me to and I decided why not just give it a try.” A twenty year old sophomore named Sarah’s statement read, “Last time I smoked was in Columbus with one of my friends…he asked me to take a hit from the bong. I had smoked a couple times before that and had never gotten high but everyone kept saying how great it was. He got it ready for me and I did it.” In these three examples, the students clearly express varying degrees of disdain for those who pressured them. Rachel and Sarah describe their friends having to convince them to use marijuana. Zach, on the other hand, described being under “constant pressure” and the rest of his statement explained that smoking marijuana “was not fun…” and he “did not see the point at all” and “will never smoke again.” The smoking stories in which respondents describe using marijuana due to peer pressure suggest that this social circumstance use may have some impact on the outcomes on marijuana use. It may be the case that when a person is pressured into using marijuana (or any drug for that matter) they may be less likely to enjoy the effects of the drug.
Other students decided to use marijuana due to their own desire to produce the effects of marijuana. For some, this desire was driven by stress or anxiety. Liz, a twenty-year-old junior, said, “I know for me like after a long day I’m just like ‘I would love to roll a blunt…’ especially if I’m feeling anxious or just really worked up after a long day if I can just sit down and just like take a puff I’m already like okay.” Similarly, Jacob, a twenty-two-year-old senior, explained the last time he smoked, “I had class and then I had to work and then I got off work and I thought it was time to relax so that’s what I did.”

Others claimed they decided to use marijuana because they wanted to “have a good time.” Katherine, a twenty-two-year-old junior, wrote, “My roommates and I decided to use marijuana on this particular occasion because we had taken another drug and wanted to heighten the high.” Using marijuana in tandem with another substance was common among respondents. Fifteen percent of respondents had been using another substance (drugs or alcohol) during the last time they used marijuana. Eighty-five percent of those who used marijuana while using another substance had combined marijuana use with alcohol use. Chase, a twenty-one-year-old junior, said the last time he used marijuana was at 5 o’clock the morning of the interview and he had been up all night drinking to celebrate his twenty-first birthday. But for Chase and other respondents, combining marijuana and alcohol was not necessarily reserved for special occasions; of the students in this sample who had used marijuana, 13% stated they were using alcohol during their most recent use, which was typically in a casual social setting. These responses, in which the student had decided to use marijuana because they wanted to achieve the mental, physical, or social effects of use, came mostly from students who had used marijuana at
least once, but more likely several times, in the past. However, one outlier, a one-time user named Evan, wrote, “My friend and I decided that we wanted to try marijuana to see what it was like. We contacted a friend that we know used marijuana from time to time and he went about setting it up.” Evan’s story was not the norm among this sample. Few students reported they sought out (e.g., asked a known marijuana user or dealer to provide them with and/or help them smoke) marijuana for their first use because they were curious about the effects of marijuana. Most respondents who stated that the last time they used marijuana was their first time had been offered marijuana, rather than seeking it themselves.

Given that social benefits to using marijuana were among the most commonly cited “rewards” of use, it stands to reason that students would identify these benefits as the reason they chose to use marijuana. Regardless of whether they were using alcohol at the time or not, many respondents stated they decided to use marijuana because they were socializing with friends. Some of these respondents chose to use marijuana because they believed it would allow them to socialize more easily. These social benefits will be detailed in the “Being Stoned” section of these findings. While many respondents chose to use marijuana because they perceived the effects as positive, there were also some who abstained or desisted from use due to their perception of the effects of the drug.

**Abstinence and desistance.**

While the majority (75%) of the students had tried marijuana at least once, 25% of the students who provided written responses to the in-class surveys wrote statements explaining their abstinence (all of the interview participants had used marijuana). The
most prevalent reason for abstaining from marijuana was that marijuana is illegal or risky—51% of respondents who abstained reported this as a reason for their abstinence. Another large portion of those who had never used marijuana (39%) said they believed the effects of marijuana were undesirable. Thirty-seven percent of respondents who abstained simply said marijuana did not appeal to them or they had no desire to use it. Thirty-two percent of those who abstained stated they had never used marijuana because they did not want to risk losing a current or future career opportunity. Twelve percent of those who had never used marijuana stated that they did not use marijuana because their parents had told them not to use drugs (or, as some more vaguely put it, “because of how they were raised”) or because a significant other disapproved of marijuana use. Another 12% reported they had abstained from marijuana because they believed marijuana (or substance use in general) was unhealthy. Note, some abstinence statements gave multiple reasons for not using marijuana. It is worth acknowledging that many of the reasons why students abstained from marijuana were related to the perceptions of marijuana use held by other people (e.g., a future employer, a parent, a law enforcement officer, etc.).

Twenty-one percent of the respondents in this sample who had tried marijuana reported desistance. In this study, desistance is defined as when an individual had used marijuana at least once, but had not used marijuana in the last six months. Six months was chosen as the threshold for desistance because this is the longest time period for which respondents were asked to report the number of times they had used marijuana (other than the question that asked how many times in their life they had use marijuana). Thirty-seven percent of those who had desisted had done so after trying marijuana only
one or two times in their lifetime. For this, the reasons were similar to the reasons for abstinence. Many said they stopped using marijuana because they did not want to risk getting caught by law enforcement or family members (typically parents). Others desisted because they did not want to risk failing a drug test for a future job. Nearly all of those who had desisted were survey respondents. All but one of the interview participants had used marijuana in the past thirty days. However, of those interview participants who were current marijuana users, nearly all said they planned on desisting from marijuana (or decreasing their use) in the future. As Allie said, smoking marijuana is “college fun right now and that’s it.”

**Getting Stoned**

Once a student decided they wanted to use marijuana, the next step was to obtain the marijuana. As described above, deciding to use marijuana and obtaining marijuana often occurred simultaneously. Most of the students reported that they obtained the marijuana from a friend. Others reported that they purchased the marijuana themselves from a known dealer. In other cases, respondents did not report how they obtained the marijuana, rather they explained that they just already had it. It was not entirely clear from the written responses whether students were purchasing the marijuana or receiving the marijuana for free because most students used the phrases like “I obtained it from” or “I got it from.” Similarly, whether the student said they got the marijuana from a friend or a dealer, it was clear that these two roles are often not mutually exclusive. In other words, students may have referred to their dealer as their “friend” and vice-versa. Overall, the process of obtaining marijuana was described as simplistic and easy. Furthermore, the
majority (54%) of the respondents who abstained from marijuana reported they had the opportunity to use marijuana in the past or had friends who currently used marijuana. This suggests that students do not face significant barriers to obtaining marijuana, however, further surveying is needed to confirm this. While it is unclear whether the students in the sample faced significant barriers to obtaining marijuana, it was evident that most respondents saw little to no difficulty in avoiding detection by agents of social control.

**Avoiding detection.**

Most respondents expressed confidence that they would not get caught using marijuana by law enforcement or resident assistants (RAs). When asked what they do to avoid detection, most respondents said using marijuana in an off-campus house or apartment guaranteed they would not be detected. Natalie said,

> Apartments are like never really a big deal cause like even if you have a smoke alarm and your smoke alarm goes off…it’s not like your RA is notified or like the you know head of the apartments like come and knock on your door like ‘what did you burn?’ Like no one cares.

Allie had the same sense of security the most recent time she smoked marijuana, despite the fact that earlier that day the police had shut down a party at the house where she was smoking. She said, “I felt more protected because we were like inside like I was in a private house…So it just, I didn’t like take any steps [to avoid detection] it just kinda happened in the moment.” Most students felt that being in an off-campus apartment provided enough security from agents of social control. Chase told the interviewer he had
last smoked marijuana at an off campus apartment complex and when asked if he had to
“take any steps to avoid people noticing?” he said, “Nah. Not at all. We were playing
loud just chilling doing our thing.” However, a few respondents did report feeling some
concern about getting caught even while smoking in an off campus residence. For
example, Jackie said that while smoking on the back porch of an off-campus house, she
would “hit it [the blunt] and run back inside real quick.” Jenna, a nineteen year old
sophomore, had the same fear of getting caught while smoking outside an off-campus
house. She wrote in her smoking story, “We went outside on our friend’s porch and took
a few hits I got paranoid and told them that we should go out back instead so the cops
couldn’t see us.” Although these two students had some discomfort smoking outside,
other respondents wrote that they felt hidden from law enforcement even if they were
outside an off campus residence. Some respondents said they even felt safe from getting
caught while smoking on-campus.

Students who did not use marijuana in off-campus private residences said they
used marijuana in low-traffic areas of campus or in dorm rooms. The students who used
marijuana in dorm rooms mostly used the same “tricks” for avoiding detection by RAs or
other residents—putting “towels under the door,” “blow[ing] smoke out the window,”
spraying Febreze or cologne, or blowing the smoke through dryer sheets. The primary
goal of most of these tricks was to prevent agents of social control from detecting the
smell of marijuana. Another way to manage the smell of the marijuana was to use a
vaporizer. A vaporizer is a “[version] of [an] e-cigarette” which has “a battery-powered
heating element…optimized to vaporize the active molecules in marijuana oils…and just
as with e-cigs, there’s no fire or smoke.” (Bryan, 2014) Sydney, a nineteen year old sophomore said, “using a vape you can’t smell it unless you’re right beside the person.” To prevent police or RAs from *seeing* the marijuana (or instruments used to smoke it), students mainly reported smoking in areas where they believed those people would be unlikely to go (e.g., parking garages, driving on back roads, etc.).

The various tricks respondents used to avoid detection were typically easy to orchestrate (e.g., most students would likely have a towel that they could place under a door). However, what is interesting about these tricks is the way some students describe working together with their co-users to use them. This included smoking in a friend’s off-campus residence, in a friend’s car, or in a friend’s dorm where the RAs are notorious for “not caring” if the residents smoke marijuana. This also included using a friend’s vaporizer or a handmade instrument that could be thrown away (to prevent being caught with paraphernalia). One respondent even wrote in his smoking story that he and his friends exhaled the smoke from the marijuana “into a Gatorade bottle with dryer sheets in it” that “at the end of the bottle” had “tubes that run outside the window so it doesn’t ever smell.” These methods of avoiding detection by coordinating with friends and relying on friend’s resources relates to Vander Ven’s (2011) finding that students work together to manage the risks and negative consequences of binge drinking. This coordination did not only appear when respondents discussed obtaining marijuana and avoiding detection, but also in the process of using marijuana itself.
**Using marijuana.**

Once a student obtained marijuana and took the necessary steps to avoid detection, the next step in the process is to actually use the marijuana. The large majority of the sample (85%) had inhaled marijuana in the flower form the most recent time they used it; 7% had consumed an edible form of marijuana; and 2% had used “dabs,” a concentrated form of the drug (the remaining respondents did not specify the method by which they used marijuana). Students used various instruments to smoke marijuana in its plant form, including glass “pieces” (e.g., bowls, pipes, bongs, bubblers), blunts (a cigar emptied of tobacco and filled with marijuana), joints (marijuana rolled in a cigarette paper), and instruments handmade from household objects. For example, Liz described smoking from one of these handmade instruments the first time she used marijuana at age 14: “The first time I ever smoked um like I said I was fourteen and I had no idea what was going on you know I was like ‘oh my god’ like ‘I’m so cool’ and we literally smoked out of like a water bottle with a like a little socket in it. You know it was homemade and jank.” This method of using marijuana was not exclusive to first time use or juvenile use; Jenna wrote in her smoking story, “Some friends and I were at a party and one of them had weed on him. We wanted to smoke it but no one had a pipe or bowl on them so this guy made a bong out of an apple.” In another smoking story, Seth, a twenty-one year old junior wrote, “The last time I used marijuana was the summer after freshman year, I don’t remember where I got it. My friend and I were going to smoke it, we smoked it behind my house. I smoked it through a Gatorade bottle homemade bowl.” Some of these homemade instruments for smoking were called “gravity bongs.” Jackie described the
gravity bong she used as “a spray bottle and it was filled with water and then there was like a hole in it and you light it or something and then you put it over, like they put it over their porch and the water rushes out and the smoke comes up.” Most of the respondents who had used a gravity bong described the process in a similar way—usually admitting that, as Jackie put it, “I don’t really know how it works.” For the respondents who had used marijuana from these homemade instruments, most did not make the instrument themselves. Therefore it was unclear how exactly students construct these unique methods of smoking marijuana.

Much more common were glass instruments that respondents had purchased or had been offered to use by a friend. David, a twenty-one year old senior, explained the process of smoking from a bowl: “you put your finger on—I think they call it a choke” which is a “hole on the side of the piece [that closes off] all airways except the one that’s holding the marijuana.” Then, David continued, “as you’re inhaling um when your finger is still on the choke as you’re inhaling you’re lighting it and then you can take the lighter off, uh take your finger off the choke and inhale all the smoke through the piece.” The process for using a bong is similar as a bong is a typically a larger version of a bowl. Glass pieces—bongs, bowls, and pipes, were the most commonly used instrument in the sample. Forty-one percent of the respondents who had used marijuana had used a glass piece the last time they used the drug. However, nearly all of the interview participants said they preferred smoking marijuana in the blunt form.

Thirty-three percent of respondents who had used marijuana at least once reported using a blunt or joint the most recent time they used the drug. The process of smoking
from a blunt or joint students described was much more straightforward than the process of smoking from a glass piece. Smoking from a blunt or joint involves putting the end of the object in your mouth inhaling, removing the object from your mouth, and exhaling the smoke—essentially the same steps for smoking a cigarette.

Only a handful of respondents described smoking “dabs.” Seupel (2014) describes dabs as “Hash oil concentrate, a powerful distillation of marijuana’s essential active ingredients.” A more vivid description of dabs came from Kyle, a twenty year old sophomore, who explained that “after a long day of drinking” he and his friends “decided to go back to [their] dorm and blow down on some fat gooey boogers.” Autumn, a nineteen year old freshman similarly described the process of smoking dabs. She wrote in her smoking story, “we went to [my friend’s] room and he got out this little sticky glob of something and put it in a big pipe. He lit the big pipe and told me to suck in really hard. I did this like three times and just went back to my room.” Another respondent, an eighteen year old sophomore, used dabs in an edible form. She explained,

It was just on a random weeknight and my friend had recently gotten a dab brownie from someone she knew. She knew I had never gotten high before so she offered me a small little nugget of what was left of the brownie. At first I was hesitant to eat it because I honestly had no clue what would happen, but after contemplating it for hours I finally ate the piece.

Though this was not nearly as common as inhaling marijuana in the plant form, some responses suggest that students may choose to use marijuana in the form of dabs if they want to achieve a more intense high. Chase explained,
I honestly have no idea how [dabs] are even made. But it’s like, it’s different than a bong. Like it is a bong but it’s called a rig, and you heat it up with a blow torch and you put it on the end and it’s a little ball, it’s real small. Like a bb size, even smaller. Maybe like half the size of a bb. One of [those] hits you like a whole blunt…it is pretty strong…A dab it’s just one hit you are done. Sometimes it’s quick and easy and also sometimes you get really high really quick.

In Chase’s statement, and in other statements regarding respondent’s instrument of choice for using marijuana, it appears that students may choose what instrument they want to use depending on the effects of marijuana they want to produce. Chase says he would “rather just smoke regular weed than dabs…6/10 times.” As mentioned above, the majority of the interview participants (seven out of nine) said their preferred instrument for using marijuana is a blunt (one other respondent said he preferred joints and the other did not indicate a preference).

The different types of effects students experience after using marijuana in these various forms is discussed in further detail in the “Being Stoned” section. In addition to the perceived differences in effects produced by each instrument, the type of instrument used also required varied rules and rituals respondents abided by. Each of these instruments requires the user to hold the object, light the marijuana, and inhale the smoke in different ways. Because of this, some students described helping friends (or having friends help them) properly use the instrument. For example, Jessica, a twenty year old sophomore, wrote the following smoking story:
A large group of people sit in a circle, all of their eye[s] on me. The blunt was just handed to me and it was my turn to take a hit. I was the last in the group to go and honestly had no idea what I was doing. Do I breath[e] in then let it out, do I hold it in? …I put the blunt to my mouth and took a short breath in. As I let out the smoke everyone laughed and told me to try again. This time they told me to inhale more and hold it for longer. I tried this and quickly began coughing. I passed it over and it went around again.

Jessica was not alone in her confusion. Michelle, a twenty-two year old senior, wrote, “The last time I used pot was the only time… [My friend] did everything for me. He held the “bubbler,” lit it for me, and told me exactly what to do.” Even respondents who were not first-time smokers expressed uncertainty with how to use different instruments or how exactly certain instruments worked. Jackie, who had smoked marijuana at least four times before, said when her friend offered to let her smoke from his new bong, she said “absolutely not…I don’t know how to smoke out of that thing.” Just as Becker found in his (1963) study, the marijuana users in this study relied on friends to help them learn how to correctly smoke marijuana. The respondents in this study did not only have to learn how to use marijuana properly, however, they had to learn the various rules and rituals of marijuana use in order to fit the social norms of smoking in a group.

**Rules and rituals of getting stoned.**

Given that most of the students were using marijuana in groups, it is unsurprising that these groups had social norms that governed their use. All of the interview respondents were able to name specific rules for social marijuana use, and there was a
great deal of overlap in these lists of rules. The most prevalent “rules” respondents
discussed were all related to sharing marijuana. One such rule is, as Liz explains, “to
throw weed it just kind of means like if you know people have their own weed in
possession and somebody’s about to roll a blunt they might say, ‘hey do you want to
throw on it?’ and that way everybody’s pitching something.” The act of “throwing in” on
a blunt (or any other instrument that is to be used to smoke marijuana) was discussed in
nearly every interview. While many respondents—both in the interviews and in the
survey smoking stories—had been offered marijuana without being asked to contribute
any of their own, it was clear that throwing in is an important etiquette rule. When asked
what would happen if one of his friends never brought his own weed to contribute, Jacob
responded, “[We] couldn’t be friends…sike jk we can be friends but we definitely
couldn’t like, couldn’t smoke together all the time. Because I don’t feel like it’s fair for
me to buy it all the time.” Jacob said that in his friend group, “you just have to find it
[marijuana] and if you find it then we all just talk to each other and just combine.” Liz
also stressed the importance of this rule, and the norms related to sharing. She stated,

If you hit somebody up like ‘hey can I come over and smoke?’ or whatever, then
it’s expected for you to have your own weed…and it might be that when you
come over we’ll throw on a blunt together or whatever…I think for the most part
people understand…if you wanna smoke you need to buy your own damn weed.

However, these respondents and others acknowledge that under certain circumstances a
person does not have to throw in. Liz explained, “If I hit you up and say ‘hey you wanna
smoke?’ it’s not expected that you need to have weed.” This rule also may differ
depending on the relationships between the co-smokers. When asked if she would still be able to participate in smoking with her friends if she didn’t bring marijuana to throw in, Natalie said, Yeah, I mean I don’t think anyone’s gonna be like ‘oh well you didn’t bring anything. Like ‘you can’t smoke with us.’ This isn’t Mean Girls.” Chase offered one way to make up for not having marijuana to throw in: “if someone is smoking you out for free if they need like a shell or a [blunt] wrap it’s on you to go grab it. They will ask if anyone wants to smoke, and if you say yes they will usually say okay I need a wrap.” Most respondents who discussed the etiquette of throwing in suggested that the violation of this rule wouldn’t be a problem if it happened every once in a while. However, the rules respondents discussed were more complex than this.

Co-smokers were expected to know a paradoxical rule regarding sharing: If you are smoking marijuana, it is rude not to offer it to others; but if someone who is smoking does not offer to share with you, it is rude to ask them to share. The first part of this rule may explain why so many of the smoking stories involved the respondent being offered marijuana (rather than smoking marijuana they themselves possessed). Liz explained, “I think it’s like a considerate thing to do is that if you’re in a room with enough people that everyone’s conversing with each other and you, let’s say you roll a blunt or pack a bowl…[you say to everyone] you know ‘hey do you wanna hit this?’” Jackie agreed that there is a general expectation that you should share your marijuana with others around you, and drew the comparison,

If you have a keg at your house are you gonna tell everyone ‘you can’t drink?’…I would say sometimes [not offering to share marijuana] can come off like kind of
rude…people get over it kinda fast if you like say ‘no,’ but at the jump you’re kinda like ‘wow that’s kind of like shitty.’

Though it may be a breach of etiquette not to offer to share marijuana with those nearby, it is also a breach of etiquette to ask someone to share with you.

Jackie explained, “instead of asking to smoke you wait for someone to hand you something to smoke.” She then told a story of when someone broke this rule: “I’ve been smoking with friends and like prior to this time and it was more of a social gathering again where I didn’t know as many people. And someone had come out where we were smoking and was like ‘who has the reefer? Who has the reefer?’ and like my friend immediately put their blunt out and like hid…like it’s annoying. So I can understand why they did that.” Nick, a twenty-one year old senior, echoed Jackie’s statement. He said, “I don’t do that. I don’t go up to people and ask if I can hit their blunt unless I know them for sure.”

All of the etiquette rules regarding sharing were generally about showing respect to whoever provided the marijuana. As Allie explained, this can be as simple as saying “thank you” when someone shares marijuana. Another way to show respect to allow the person (or people) who provided the weed to take the first hit(s). Liz called this “throwers rights,” meaning that whoever threw on the blunt gets the first hit. However, Chase said that his friends follow the rule “rollers rights,” meaning “whoever rolls the blunt gets to light it and gets to hit it first. Like it doesn’t matter whose weed it is.” Both rules require those who are participating in the smoking session to momentarily defer their use to the person deemed more deserving.
Six of the nine interview respondents stated that one rule of social marijuana use was to only take a certain number of “hits” before passing the marijuana to the next user. Some respondents said this rule was in place to make sure each co-smoker gets their fair share of the marijuana. Natalie said, “It’s the same thing as if you’re having dinner with your family and you’re eating, you pass everything around, everyone takes some. You don’t take a crap ton so no one else gets some.” According to these respondents, the maximum number of hits a person should take before passing is three. However, respondents stated that this number changes depending on what instrument is being used to smoke the marijuana. For example, if smoking from a blunt or a joint, the smoker can take two hits before passing. Or, in the words of Andrew, a twenty year old junior, “puff, puff, pass.” On the other hand, if smoking from a glass piece—a pipe, bowl, or bong—a smoker can take one hit before passing. Multiple respondents explained that this is because more total hits can typically be taken from one joint or blunt than from one bowl, pipe, or bong.

All of the respondents who discussed this rule said that while someone may say something to correct the person who takes too many hits, this usually is not done in a confrontational or angry way. Chase said, “Some people will be like, ‘yo man three hits, pass the blunt,’ but that he would only say this if it were “one of his homies” and “if [he] didn’t know them [he] probably wouldn’t say anything.” Nick and Natalie both said friends would draw attention to this rule violation in a joking matter. Nick said, “I mean it’s not confrontational but it’ll be funny like ‘aw you hoggin’ the blunt’ or ‘you’re holding it too long.’” Natalie said of her friends who are “frat guys:’”
They’ll always like give each other shit between them like one will hit it like twice or something and he’ll be like ‘dude what are you doing like pass that!’ and stuff like that but I mean that’s just cause they’re like really close and they like to mess with each other.

This manner of lighthearted sanctioning was used to police other rule-breaking as well.

Nick said that while smoking marijuana, “it’s less confrontation than if everybody’s drunk or something.” The logic behind the rules respondents followed, and the sanctions they described being used to enforce them are particularly clear upon examining the fourth step of the process of marijuana use: being stoned. This is because these rules were largely described as efforts to achieve and maintain the desired social benefits of using marijuana with others.

**Being Stoned**

Respondents reported marijuana having various effects on their psychological state, physiological state, and social atmosphere. While a handful of smoking stories did tell of the respondent using marijuana alone, the majority of them were about students using marijuana in social settings. Therefore it was not surprising that many of the respondents discussed the effects marijuana had on their ability to socialize and interact with others. Respondents did not report engaging in a wide range of activities while being under the influence of marijuana. Most respondents spent their time under the influence hanging out with friends talking, drinking alcohol, or playing games. The findings below suggest that the social, mental, and physical effects of marijuana intermingle to produce the respondent’s perception of the experience.
Social effects.

The most prevalent reason respondents said they used marijuana and the most valued effect of marijuana use, was that it was an enjoyable social activity. Just as students drink alcohol to loosen up and have a good time (Vander Ven, 2011), many respondents stated that marijuana allowed them to relax, laugh, and have good conversations with those around them. The social atmosphere in which respondents used marijuana appears to have a strong impact on all other effects of marijuana use, including the mental and physical effects felt by the individual user. For example, Liz strongly expressed the value of socializing with friends while using marijuana: “if you’re in a really good atmosphere and you’re getting high you’re gonna get even like happier and everything will seem to like vibe with each other more… it helps people to get their conversation flowing.” And later Liz went on to say,

I really like having intellectual conversations with my friends and…again like I said before not like we can’t without smoking… it’s not like an addiction or anything, but it does enhance, um, it helps me, my words come quicker…[it] lets you talk more clearly about like whatever you’re talking about.

Other respondents expressed similar attitudes. David explained, “people seem to kinda loosen up when they do it.” This is similar to Vander Ven’s (2011) finding that students particularly valued the way alcohol helped them feel more comfortable and outgoing.

The most common activity respondents engaged in while high was “hanging out,” sitting and talking with their co-smokers. Jacob said this is typical of his smoking experiences. He said, “Me and my friends wanna smoke sometimes we just smoke and
hang out, listen to music, talk, just bond basically.” Simon, a twenty year old junior, said that after smoking a bowl in his friend’s backyard, “we all just sat outside and talked about stuff going on in our lives, good and bad.” Hannah, an eighteen year old freshman, said while she and her friends were “high” the “first and only time [she] used marijuana… [they] sat in a circle talking and laughing, and ended up ordering takeout food then falling asleep.”

Some respondents engaged in other activities while hanging out with friends after using marijuana. For example, Hannah explained that she during her smoking session, “One of the highlights was watching Kanye West videos and other trippy music videos.” Vanessa, a twenty-two year old senior said she and her friend who shared marijuana with her “mostly talked politics and read news articles.” Alex wrote that when he and his friends smoke marijuana together they normally “just sit and talk about life or play video games.” Nick and Chase also said they liked to play video games after smoking marijuana. Another respondent wrote that he last smoked marijuana while playing a role-playing game called “Dungeons and Dragons” with a group of friends. Ultimately, students reported mainly engaging in social activities that do not necessarily require marijuana use. Several students explained that marijuana made these social activities more fun or more relaxing.

**Mental effects.**

Most respondents discussed the effects of marijuana on their thought process and perceptions of their surroundings. These mental effects were both positive and negative. However, the majority of students who used marijuana said they experienced positive
psychological feelings. For example, Natalie said “I guess your mind’s kind of cloudy…you’re kinda cloudy and you’re kinda slowed down. Like if you’re a person whose mind like thinks fast like you’re always thinking, you’re kind of slowed down like thinking one thing at a time.” Others reported feeling similarly. Nick said smoking marijuana made him feel “more laid back.” Likewise, Jacob said being under the influence of marijuana “feels great, you kinda just relaxed and you feel like there’s no worries.” Feeling relaxed was the most prevalent positive mental effect respondents reported experiencing.

Other respondents more specifically discussed the effect marijuana had on their ability to think, talk, or focus on processing information. Liz said she doesn’t smoke marijuana before doing homework or going to class because when she is high,

I just wanna talk about everything…but like once I sit down to like do homework and like try to focus on something…I think it’s harder…like once I get to class even if I am participating in what’s going on in class, I get like off topic or I’ll just be you know just too, too out there and that’s not appropriate for a class setting.

This mental effect marijuana Liz experienced could be positive or negative depending on the social roles she had to fulfil—when acting as a student, this effect was negative, but when her work for the day was done, this effect was enjoyable. Marijuana had varying effects on other respondents’ abilities to think and concentrate. Alex, a twenty-two year old junior said, “I think it helps me think and concentrate better.” Thomas, a nineteen
year old sophomore, wrote in his smoking story that marijuana “makes [him] think deeper.” The mental effects of marijuana, however, were not always positive.

Three of the participants who had smoked marijuana at least once said that marijuana had a negative effect on their short term memory. For example, Andrew told the interviewer,

When I was in my main stage of using I experienced short term memory loss…it was happening gradually over time. It was the little things like ‘where are my sunglasses?’ or ‘where is my pen?’…Like for example when I’m high I come back from some place with a bag that I have every day and I put it in a weird spot thinking I will remember and I wake up thinking it is [in] one spot and I couldn’t find it. I am looking in one spot and it is in another and for the life of me I could not remember what I did with it. And then I found it and it’s like ‘oh my god.’

It is unclear whether students experienced permanent short term memory loss or if this was just a symptom of being under the influence of marijuana. Another one of the respondents who said they experienced short term memory loss said “The only negatives I’ve come across are short term memory problems if you smoke [too] much. But, thankfully, it does come back.” Therefore, this mental effect, like the others, manifests differently across users.

One negative mental effect that deterred respondents from using marijuana again was an inability to “tell between reality and fiction.” However, only two respondents said they experienced this the last time they used marijuana. Others experienced paranoia.

Andrea, a twenty-one year old junior, stated, “It was funny at first but then I got overly
paranoid. I hated the high it gave me and could not wait for it to end. I guess I was paranoid that I would get caught by some authority.” For some, the negative experiences deterred them from using marijuana again. Others said they were current smokers who only occasionally (or in some cases only once) experienced paranoia or anxiety. Kayla, a twenty-year-old sophomore, wrote the following in her smoking story: “Smoking marijuana sometimes makes me paranoid and I do not like it. Other times it is the best feeling.” The type of mental effects the user experiences may be dependent upon myriad factors, and therefore may differ from one session of use to the next.

Clearly, respondents experienced many of the same mental effects of using marijuana. However, some respondents perceived these effects as positive while others perceived them as negative. Furthermore, in some cases, respondents perceived a mental effect of marijuana differently depending upon the social setting in which they were experiencing the high and the role they had to play in that setting. Often these mental effects, and whether the respondent perceived them as positive or negative, also depended upon the accompanying physical effect of marijuana use.

Physical effects.

The physical effects students reported varied in positivity, negativity, or neutrality. Some of the positive physical effects of marijuana use were tied to the positive mental effects discussed above. For example, in addition to feeling mentally relaxed, Liz said that while using marijuana “my heart stops beating so fast.” Many other respondents said they used marijuana to help them fall asleep, often because marijuana relieved their psychological feelings of anxiety or stress. For example, Eli, a twenty-two-year-old
senior, wrote in his smoking story, “I used marijuana last night before I went to sleep. I had 2 exams today and I know that stress would keep me awake…When I got home I smoke[d] a joint and felt at ease. I then fell asleep no problem 30-60 minutes later.” Similarly, Matthew, a nineteen year old freshman wrote, “[I smoked] because it was the weekend, I didn’t have class until later in the day the next day, and I needed help falling asleep.” While for some marijuana served as a sleep aid, others reported that marijuana made it more difficult for them to fall asleep. Both of the respondents who said they could not tell the difference between reality and fiction while under the influence of marijuana had difficulty sleeping. One of them wrote “I thought it was never going to end.” However, there were more students who said marijuana helped them sleep than there were who said marijuana precluded sleep.

Another common physical effect was hunger, which was usually reported as neither positive nor negative. Kelly, a nineteen year old freshman, wrote that after smoking she “really wanted a hot dog.” Another respondent wrote that after smoking from a blunt, “I went to my room… [and] ate flamin’ hot Cheetos because I always crave them when I’m high.” Other respondents did not report feeling hungry as a direct effect of marijuana use, but they did state that they ate during the smoking session. Jenna wrote that after smoking from her friend’s homemade apple core bowl she went home and “ate a ton of wheat bread and apple juice.” Another respondent said she and her friends “ate an entire box of granolas.” One respondent wrote the following regarding his role when smoking with friends: “They smoke regularly, but I only smoke on occasion, so if I bring snacks they let me smoke for free.” This theme suggests the stereotype that marijuana
gives smokers “the munchies” may have some basis in reality, whether marijuana actually makes the smoker feel physically hungry or if eating snacks is just part of the ritual of smoking marijuana.

Perhaps the most potentially harmful physical effect respondents discussed was “the spins.” Natalie described the spins as, “when you’re super dizzy and…it just feels like you’re spinning but you’re not.” Chase provided another definition: “your head just kind of reels, kind of nauseous.” Respondents reported getting the spins almost exclusively when they were under the influence of alcohol and marijuana simultaneously. Chase went on to say, “That only happens when I drink and smoke too much, like together.” However, the responses suggest that one would need to drink several alcoholic beverages in order to experience the spins while smoking weed. When asked how much he would have to drink and smoke to start getting the spins, Chase said “probably like thirty plus drinks over the night plus like five or six blunts.” While this may be an exaggeration, it does exemplify Chase’s claim that the spins only happen rarely, when he consumes alcohol and marijuana in large quantities. Natalie said she may get the spins only from drinking alcohol, and estimated that if she had “two or three shots, maybe like four drinks” and then smoked marijuana she would get the spins and “it’s really bad.” It was unclear whether these negative physical effects were produced when someone smoked marijuana after drinking alcohol or vice-versa. Nick explained, “if I know I’m going to drink I’m not going to smoke too… you kinda get like your head starts to spin…I don’t know if you should smoke first and then drink… [Or] drink and then smoke.” While respondents reported both smoking before drinking and vice-versa, most
respondents stated that they smoked marijuana while drinking or after. For some this had no negative consequence, for others this resulted in feeling nauseated.

Whether produced by the spins or as its own unique symptom, some respondents reported feeling nauseated and even vomiting in a few cases. For example, Anna, a nineteen year old freshman, wrote,

I was on vacation with a group of friends and had been drinking. Two of us decided to smoke…After smoking I felt more intoxicated than I had ten minutes ago. We then went up to the hotel room with our other friends and I had about two more beers. Then, I got really dizzy, threw up, and decided to go to bed. I believe smoking and drinking at the same time was a bad idea and made me feel worse than I would have if I had just [been] drinking.

Similarly, Lynn, a nineteen year old freshman, said she “threw up then fell asleep” after smoking a dab while “very very drunk.” In addition to smoking a dab, this student said she was also “convinced to do a line of coke.” Vomiting after smoking weed virtually always happened when the respondent had been drinking alcohol or using another drug. These responses suggest marijuana may potentiate the actual or perceived effects of alcohol and other drugs.

The physical effects students reported appear to be dependent upon the way marijuana is used, the other substances marijuana is used with, and the amount of marijuana used. Furthermore, as stated at the beginning of this section, the physical effects were often as related to the mental effects of marijuana use. Therefore, while marijuana may produce physiological symptoms, these symptoms may be in part
dependent upon the user’s perception of their use. These perceptions may be related to the rules and rituals of being under the influence of marijuana.

**Rules and rituals of being stoned.**

The rules and rituals related to being stoned were far less clear and specific than the rules and rituals related to the process of using marijuana itself. The “rituals” are best understood as the activities students typically engage in after they use marijuana. The most common of these activities are detailed in the “social effects” section above. The rules of being stoned largely related to the social experience respondents aimed to achieve by using marijuana. For example, Jackie claimed that “usually if you’re like smoking…like in a little circle or anything you don’t like turn around and talk to someone else.” She went on to say that this is a sign of respect and that by doing this, “a person knows you’re respectful and like they can sit there and have an actual conversation with you.” Similarly, Allie said that while she and her friends are “high,” we’re less likely to be like on our phones messing around for some reason…so we just talk to each other more so it’s like better conversation ‘cause it’s not like I’m like trying to sit here and text and like have a conversation at the same time. Allie went on to say that while spending time with friends “hanging out like watching a movie or something” and *not* using marijuana, “you’re just kinda bored” and that in this social situation it is more likely for her and her friends to being using their cell phones. This statement is particularly interesting because it suggests that when students use marijuana together, they are expected to engage with each other more than if they were not using marijuana.
Given that many of the respondents said they enjoyed using marijuana because it fostered a relaxed social environment, it is possible that one rule about being stoned is that you shouldn’t cause tension or conflict among co-smokers. While this could be inferred from some statements, no respondent outright made this claim. For example, Jenna wrote in her smoking story, “Our one friends kept talking about [how] we are basically in an episode of That 70s Show so we kicked him out of the circle.” This suggests that Jenna and her friends kicked someone out of the smoking circle because he was being annoying or cliché. This type policing of conversations is also reflected in Natalie’s explanation of why her boyfriend doesn’t like being around her friend who is a heavy marijuana user. Natalie stated her boyfriend has “made comments about that before like, ‘oh I don’t care if people smoke but it’s annoying when that’s all they talk about.’” However, Natalie—who, unlike her boyfriend, does use marijuana—said it “doesn’t really bother her” when people only talk about smoking marijuana. Therefore it is unclear how prevalent the sanctioning of unwanted conversation topics is while students are under the influence of marijuana together.

While this theme may become more prevalent in future research, it is possible that the rules of being stoned are looser than the rules of getting stoned precisely because marijuana makes the students more relaxed and therefore less concerned with following and enforcing social norms. Furthermore, the ritual of “just hanging out” may explain why students did not report experiencing many serious negative consequences in the aftermath of smoking marijuana. This suggests that college students who use marijuana
may perceive the consequences they face as less serious because they see their behaviors and actions while under the influence as typically low-risk.

**The Aftermath**

Just as Vander Ven (2011) sought to identify the consequences of heavy alcohol use and the ways students manage these consequences, the present study aimed to identify the same characteristics of student marijuana use. While not all of the respondents discussed next-day or long-term effects marijuana had on their lives, some themes did emerge on this topic. Of the interview participants in particular, most said they enjoyed using marijuana because of its effects on their social atmosphere and interactions. However, marijuana use was not without consequence for the students in this sample. The impact marijuana use had on respondents’ lives, both positive and negative, are discussed below.

**Social effects.**

In addition to affecting the social atmosphere and social interactions while getting stoned and being stoned, some respondents reported that marijuana also had some impact on their long-term social relationships. There were some negative consequences of marijuana use on respondent’s social relationships that will be detailed in the following section. Conversely, these social effects on the aftermath of marijuana use also included meeting new people and strengthening existing friendships.

Though shared use of marijuana with strangers did not always result in a lasting friendship, many respondents did say that they met new people in the process of using marijuana. For example, Mike, an eighteen year old freshman, wrote, “I didn’t have any
consequences during the 2 times I [used marijuana], I only made [a] new friend and felt amazing.” Allie stated “it’s definitely introduced me to a lot of people and although I wouldn’t consider myself like an avid user um I would say I’ve definitely gained a lot of friends who are avid users through smoking.” Jackie suggested that people make friends while smoking marijuana with strangers because the etiquette rules of sharing marijuana require co-users to spend time together. She explained, “If you wanna smoke with somebody you have to sit with them and like have a conversation with them and share until like you’re done and you say thanks…it’s more of like showing you’re appreciative of them I think.” Jackie went on to say, “if someone hands you a beer you’re not gonna like necessarily remember like ‘hey you’re the person I gave that beer to’ you know” but if you smoke with someone, she said, “it leads to a foundation where it’s like if you see them out again you’re like ‘hey bro we should smoke sometime.’” Liz echoed this claim that marijuana is a way to meet new people, and added that sometimes the friendship “becomes deeper [and] it’s not just about the weed.” However, other respondents said they did not form lasting friendships with strangers they used marijuana with, or that they did not use marijuana with strangers. Jacob said, “I don’t do strangers…cause I just don’t know how they’re gonna look about it so I just stay with my close friends.” Therefore, the social effects of marijuana may depend on how naturally outgoing the user is or how comfortable they are using marijuana with strangers.

Since he almost exclusively used marijuana with people he knew, Jacob said that marijuana use allowed him to bond with his close friends. Many other respondents said marijuana strengthened existing friendships because it allowed them to bond with their
friends who were co-users. Liz said, “something in common to bond over helps a lot too I think um so, personally you know I prefer smoking with the people I’m really tight with.” However, some respondents emphasized that they had friendships with co-users that were built upon more than just marijuana use. Liz especially wanted to make this point clear to the interviewer. She stated that while she enjoys the conversations she has with friends while smoking marijuana is not “needed in order to do that with my friends.” Still, there was general consensus that marijuana typically has a positive effect on the relationships between co-users.

This theme was less prevalent in relation to the social effects on the social atmosphere during the smoking session. However, this theme does parallel Vander Ven’s (2011) finding that students often saw alcohol use as a way to make new friends and to bond with the friends they already had. This also parallels Vander Ven’s (2011) findings on the ways alcohol use can damage social relationships, though perhaps not as significantly. While Vander Ven’s subjects reported having serious arguments and physical fights with co-drinkers, the respondents in this study typically did not claim that marijuana had a strong negative impact on their social relationships. As Nick put it, “if [smoking weed] is breaking up friendships that’s something deeper…it’s probably beyond smoking at that point.” Nevertheless, these negative consequences are important to discuss in order to provide a comprehensive profile of marijuana use among university students.
Consequences.

While most of the respondents said marijuana use did not have any negative consequences, this was certainly not the case for all of the respondents who had used marijuana. As previously mentioned, approximately one-fifth of those who had used marijuana had desisted; and while many of them desisted because they did not want to risk certain negative consequences, some desisted because they had already experienced a negative consequence of marijuana use. One respondent even stated that he experienced a negative consequence because he chose not to use marijuana again after his first try. This student wrote, “now I can say that I’ve [tried] it, didn’t like it and people stopped offering it and wanting to hang out because I didn’t want to smoke with them. I have become alienated.” One student who desisted due to the negative aftermath of marijuana use explained that after panicking while under the influence, “I embarrassed myself completely. Apologized for days. This is why I haven’t smoked weed ever again.”

Similarly, Lynn, the student who “threw up then fell asleep” after using marijuana, alcohol, and cocaine in one night wrote, “I was very embarrassed and haven’t smoked since.” These statements suggest that not only do negative mental or physical effects of marijuana result in desistance, but the shame or embarrassment students feel after having a bad high may also lead them to stop using marijuana. This supports Becker’s theory that whether or not a person becomes a regular marijuana user can largely depend on the interactions with their co-users (1963).

Some respondents who currently use marijuana did report continued use despite experiencing a “bad high” or a negative consequence. These students, however, typically
said that the bad experience was just “one time”—an outlier in their experiences with marijuana. The vast majority of the negative effects of marijuana took place while the respondent was under the influence of marijuana. In addition to these, a handful of respondents did discuss negative consequences in the aftermath of marijuana use. Some of these included short term memory loss, trouble sleeping without marijuana (it is unclear whether this was a direct consequence of using marijuana), and disapproval from a friend, family member, or boyfriend/girlfriend. The physiological aftermath of marijuana use was not widely discussed among participants. Though one smoking story suggested that the respondent was dependent upon marijuana as a sleep aid, this was not a common theme. And while another student said that they were “kind of sleepy the next day” that student also said “there were not any other negative effects.” Among this sample, negative physical or mental effects of marijuana use were typically felt while the user was under the influence of marijuana, not the day after marijuana use or in the long-term aftermath. Negative effects on social relationships, however, (though still not abundantly prevalent) were more apparent than negative effects on the individual smoker.

In some cases, disapproval from a family member or partner manifested in verbal statements that discouraged the user from future use. For example, Natalie said that she had recently decreased her marijuana use because her boyfriend, a student athlete “isn’t a big fan of smoking.” Liz explained that her marijuana use while in high school caused her to get into arguments with her mother. She said her mom “would look up all these articles and be like ‘oh my god it’s gonna turn you into this and this, and you’re gonna start doing heroin.” However, Liz explained that now her mom is her best friend and she has learned
to respect her mom’s rule not to bring marijuana into her house. Like Liz, David also said his mom is his best friend though she does not support his marijuana use. He said, “I mean she understands. As long as I’m getting my own business taken care of.” Though the dissent of a significant other may result in some tension in the user’s relationship, no respondent reported that a relationship ended because they used marijuana.

In other cases, the respondent prevented a potentially disapproving person from finding out they used marijuana because they did not want to face the turmoil they believed this would cause in the relationship. For example, Allie, whose parents are both police officers, said that her mother knows she has smoked marijuana, but her father doesn’t. When asked how she thought her dad would react if he found out she used marijuana, Allie said, “he’s very conservative so I’m sure he wouldn’t be okay with it but I don’t know. I try to avoid that thought.” This desire to keep certain people from knowing they used marijuana may be another component of a student’s decision to use marijuana. Thus, the process of marijuana use may be more accurately described as a cycle—with the process and aftermath of each session of use affecting the student’s future marijuana use.
Conclusion

Just as Vander Ven found that most students use alcohol due to perceived social benefits (2011), the present study also found that students in this sample use marijuana primarily for the same reason. However, the findings of these two studies diverge on one major point. Vander Ven (2011) found that students used a wide range of supportive actions to mitigate the risks and consequences of heavy drinking. However, the respondents in this study largely reported that they took minimal and easy steps to avoid detection and negative consequences of marijuana use. Arguably, the potential legal consequences of marijuana use and alcohol use may not be congruent under the law. However, in the context of the social constructionist framework of this study, student’s perceptions of the laws regarding marijuana use and regarding underage alcohol use are perhaps more significant than the laws themselves. In other words, marijuana use and alcohol use among college students are comparable phenomena given that they are both widely prevalent despite the fact that students perceive there to be potential legal consequences to both. Interestingly, the findings discussed above suggest that although students in this sample had some understanding of the potential consequences of their marijuana use, the way students worked to avoid facing such consequences were much different than the ways students avoided the legal consequences of alcohol use in Vander Ven’s (2011) study. Most interview respondents reported that they were not very worried about getting caught using marijuana as long as they were in an off-campus residence. Furthermore, while Vander Ven (2011) found that students continued to drink heavily
Despite negative consequences, the most of the students in the present study argued that they did not face negative consequences as a result of their last session of marijuana use.

While some students in this sample experienced negative consequences as a result of using marijuana, most of those students reported that they had adjusted their marijuana use to prevent experiencing this consequence again. For example, multiple interview respondents said as a rule they did not use marijuana until they were done with class, work, or other responsibilities for the day. These adjustments were typically described as individual changes in behavior. No student reported that they regularly smoked marijuana despite experiencing frequent negative consequences as the students in Vander Ven’s (2011) study reported doing when they experienced negative consequences from heavy drinking. This may be because whether or not students described their consequences as negative often depended on how the student perceived the effects of marijuana—whereas the consequences of heavy alcohol use that students reported in Getting Wasted (2011) were more clearly negative (e.g., throwing up, fighting with friends, missing classes, etc.). More research is needed to determine whether student marijuana use has fewer negative consequences than student alcohol use, or whether students perceive the consequences as less serious (or some variation of these factors and others).

One of the most significant similarities between the present study on campus marijuana use and Vander Ven’s (2011) study on campus alcohol use is the finding that students work together to achieve the desired effects of their substance use and to mitigate risk. The respondents in the present study discussed several common rules for sharing marijuana that effectively ensured the “success” of the episode. Most of these
rules suggest that while students are sharing marijuana, they are expected to share the values of fairness and respect. Therefore despite many respondents’ descriptions of marijuana use as casual and laid back, these rules suggest marijuana use is also, in a way, ceremonial. Those who provide must be fair and generous to those around them; those who receive must show deference and gratefulness. To not abide by these rules may, in some cases and among some smokers, be grounds for exclusion from future smoking episodes.

The rules of collective marijuana use may be in part shaped by the illegality of marijuana. If any student were able to legally and easily purchase marijuana themselves, they may rely less on fellow students and, in turn, may not find it as important to show deference and respect to fellow marijuana users. Respondents in this study often smoked marijuana when a friend or acquaintance offered it to them. It is possible that because the person who is offered the marijuana has assumed the additional risk of being in possession of marijuana and, presumably, of purchasing marijuana, they are owed some extra respect from those they share with. This suggests that the collective engagement in illegal activity shapes how individuals perform their roles in the smoking session and how they construct their performance with co-actors.

This theory supports Goffman’s classic theories of dramaturgy, reciprocal dependence, and reciprocal familiarity (Goffman, 1959). In the context of the present study, collective marijuana use involves specific “performance” expectations, and students in this sample relied on shared understanding of the roles each co-smoker played in the smoking episode in order to produce the desired social, mental, and physical
benefits of marijuana use. Furthermore, these findings support the idea that marijuana users use the smoking session as a platform for impression management—that they are able to construct an image of the type of person they are as they “perform” marijuana use with others. As mentioned above, most of the rules and rituals discussed by participants in this study involved showing that the smoker valued fairness, respect, and generosity. Marijuana users may both manage the way they portray their “self” and form their impression of the type of person their co-smokers are by performing the roles (and the rules assigned to those roles) during the smoking session.

This finding also expands upon Becker’s (1963) theory on “Becoming a Marijuana User.” Many of the reasons why students desisted from marijuana use aligned with Becker’s theory—they desisted because marijuana did not produce any effects or because they perceived the effects of marijuana use as unpleasant. To add another component to this theory, this study’s findings suggest that students who significantly violate the rules of collective marijuana use may also be denied opportunities to use marijuana in the future (because their co-smokers have formed an unfavorable impression of who that smoker is and the values they hold). This denial of opportunities could influence an individual’s ability to become a marijuana user if they are unable to access the social networks that will help them through the process Becker identifies. Again, this process involves, “(1) learning to smoke the drug in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use… and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations he perceives” (Becker, 1963, p. 58). However, it appears that it is more typical for students to correct co-users when they violate rules. Therefore in
addition to needing a co-user to help them learn how to produce the effects of marijuana, users may also need help learning and internalizing the rules and rituals of marijuana use in order to become a frequent user.

To connect this theory with the Goffman’s ideas of impression management and impression formation, this study can ultimately theorize the following: a person must learn, abide by, and participate in the construction of the rules and rituals of collective marijuana use in order to maintain the impression that they hold the values other users expect of a co-smoker; and to continue to be defined (by others and by themselves) as a marijuana user, a person must do this throughout every session of use, no matter how experienced they are. Therefore one does not simply become a marijuana user and then forever hold this status, rather the marijuana user must continually prove themselves as a capable user by abiding by the rules and rituals set by the group. More research should be done to explore this idea further, as well as to examine the issues identified in the following section.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

As this was an exploratory study constrained by time and resources, it is necessary for more research to be done to further examine the findings discussed here. The main limitation of this study is its small sample size. Given that students were sampled from several Sociology courses at one public university, this cannot be considered a random sample. Thus, the results discussed here cannot be generalized to the entire population of college students. However, these findings are in line with the theoretical framework that guided the study. Further grounded theory research guided by
the constructionist perspective should be done to examine whether these findings are representative of campus marijuana users in general. Students from multiple universities should be sampled to capture the experiences of students from a broader range of academic programs and demographic backgrounds.

Another limitation of this study is that interview participants were mainly drawn from the pool of friends and acquaintances of one field contact. Though these respondents provided rich data, some students’ experiences may have been omitted. However, the use of a field contact did provide insights to the theoretical questions of this study. Future research should continue to use the method of chain-referral sampling with contacts from multiple pools. This method has worked well in other studies on illegal behavior. Wright and Decker, in their study on residential burglaries stated,

In constructing our sample we sought primarily to encompass, insofar as possible, the diversity of perspectives on residential burglaries found among the population of active offenders. To do so, we initiated the sampling through ten different street contacts, thereby reducing the chances of tapping into just one or two criminal networks consisting of like-minded offenders. (1994, p. 21)

Use of this method in future research may capture diverse perspectives on campus marijuana use that vary between groups of students on one campus, across different universities, or across regions of the United States. Therefore, in future research (with greater resources and fewer time constraints than the present study) sampling should be a primary focus.
Finally, this research examined campus marijuana use broadly. Over the course of this data collection and analysis, interesting themes arose that warrant a more in-depth examination. First, these findings suggest that there may be some gendered differences in the ways men and women obtain and use marijuana. One interviewee claimed that men are more likely to share their marijuana if a woman asks them to share than they are if a man asks them to share. Though he did not discuss this at length, this claim suggested that men are willing to use marijuana to establish relationships with women. Though prior research has explored the use of alcohol to foster sexual encounters, there is no research (to the author’s knowledge) that explores how marijuana maybe be similarly used to “get laid.” Given that many of these students used marijuana in combination with alcohol, and that some respondents stated that marijuana potentiates the effects of alcohol, it is worth looking further at marijuana use in the context of the campus “hookup” culture.

In addition to a closer look at gender and marijuana use among college students, other demographic variables should be considered. While the survey used for this study did include a measure of social class, the relationship between social class and the process of marijuana use is not analyzed here. Given Mohammed and Fritsvold’s theory that wealthy college students who dealt drugs were able to “exist freely as anti-targets in the US drug war and to maintain a nondeviant public status despite their flagrantly illegal behavior” it stands to reason that there may be some differences in the process by which college students from different social class backgrounds use marijuana (Mohammed and Fritsvold, 2012, p. 7).
Mohammed and Fritsvold (2012) also attribute their findings that their subjects were “anti-targets” of the police to the subjects being predominately Caucasian. Like Vander Ven’s (2011) study, the present study did not measure race. Given that it was possible for the researcher to collect a survey from a class with only one minority student, measuring race on the surveys may have been a threat to the confidentiality of survey participants. This reasoning is drawn from the ethical decision Vander Ven (2011) made not to measure race. However, there may be interesting differences in the ways in which students from different racial groups use marijuana. Future research should take steps to measure race while still ensuring the confidentiality of participants in order to explore these potential differences.

Despite these limitations, the present study has begun to examine marijuana use among university students through a lens not yet used by researchers. The grounded theory approach, guided by the constructionist theoretical perspective, allows researchers to better understand the intricacies of the social process of marijuana use. This knowledge can help researchers, campus administrators, and policy makers consider the ways in which students use social support to achieve marijuana use and manage its effects. This is of particular import considering the current social and political context of marijuana use as states have begun to legalize recreational marijuana.

The findings discussed above also contribute to sociological theory as the study may expand upon Becker’s idea that novice marijuana users rely on co-users to help them correctly use marijuana and to help them understand and appreciate the effects of marijuana use. This study contributes the idea that students (and not only those who are
new to using marijuana) also rely on their co-users to follow the rules and rituals that allow marijuana use to create a relaxing and fun social atmosphere. Therefore, there may be expectations for social interaction that are requirements for both “becoming a marijuana user” and for *being* a marijuana user.
References


Appendix A: In-Class Survey

In-Class Survey

1) Sex
   Female _____ Male ______

2) Age in Years
   _______

3) Academic Class
   Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____ Senior _____

4) Socioeconomic Class: Please estimate your parents’ or guardians’ annual family income in dollars.
   ______________

5) Have you ever used marijuana in any way (inhalation, consumption, hemp oil, etc.)?
   Yes _____ No _______

6) About how old were you the first time you used marijuana?
   Age in years the first time you used marijuana: ___________

7) Approximately how many times in your life have you used marijuana?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-5
   d. 6-9
   e. 10-19
   f. 20-39
   g. 40 or more

8) How many times have you used marijuana in the last six months?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-5
   d. 6-9
   e. 10-19
   f. 20-39
   g. 40 or more
9) How many times have you used marijuana in the last month?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-5
   d. 10-19
   e. 20-39
   f. 40 or more

10) How many times have you used marijuana in past two weeks?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 6-9
    d. 10-19
    e. 20-39
    f. 40 or more

11) How many times have you had 5 or more alcoholic beverages in the past two weeks?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-4
    d. 5 or more

12) In the past two weeks, how many times have you used marijuana and alcohol at the same time?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-4
    d. 5 or more
On the pages provided, please provide a true anecdote or story about the most recent time that you used marijuana. **DO NOT** use the names of yourself, your friends, or any other individuals involved in the story, please refer to them by their role title: friend, classmate, police officer, etc. Providing as much detail as possible, describe the entire process including:

1.) How you decided to use marijuana on this particular occasion
2.) How you obtained the marijuana
3.) Where you consumed the marijuana, how you used, and with whom you used it. Describe the marijuana use process in as much detail as possible.
4.) How you consumed it (e.g., in joint form, a pipe, ingesting it, etc.)
5.) How you avoided being detected by the agents of social control (e.g., law enforcement, residence hall personnel).
6.) How it felt to be under the influence. What were the rewards of using marijuana? If it was fun, how so? If it was a negative experience, please explain. In rich detail, describe what ensued during and after the marijuana use episode.
7.) What were the consequences of this marijuana use episode? Did marijuana use have a significant effect on your social relations, academic responsibilities, or ability to fulfill social role obligations (e.g., school, work, family, friends)?
8.) Please add any other details that you would care to provide.

If you have never used marijuana but would still like to take the survey, please write a statement on why you have chosen not to use marijuana and describe (if there are any) an experience in which you have been offered marijuana or you have felt pressured to use marijuana.
Appendix B: Intensive Interview Instrument

Intensive Interview Instrument

1) Sex
   Female _____ Male ______

2) Age in Years
   _______

3) Academic Class
   Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior ______
   Senior _____

4) Socioeconomic Class: Please estimate your parents’ or guardians’ annual family income in dollars.
   ______________

5) Have you ever used marijuana in any way (inhalation, consumption, hemp oil, etc.)?
   Yes _____ No ______

6) About how old were you the first time you used marijuana?
   Age in years the first time you used marijuana: __________

7) Approximately how many times in your life have you used marijuana?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-5
   d. 6-9
   e. 10-19
   f. 20-39
   g. 40 or more

8) How many times have you used marijuana in the last six months?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 3-5
   d. 6-9
   e. 10-19
   f. 20-39
   g. 40 or more
9) How many times have you used marijuana in the last month?
   a. 0
   b. 1-2
   c. 6-9
   d. 10-19
   e. 20-39
   f. 40 or more

10) How many times have you used marijuana in past two weeks?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-5
    d. 6-9
    e. 10-19
    f. 20-39
    g. 40 or more

11) How many times have you had 5 or more alcoholic beverages in the past two weeks?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-4
    d. 5 or more

12) In the past two weeks, how many times have you used marijuana and alcohol at the same time?
    a. 0
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-4
    d. 5 or more

13) Please describe the most recent time that you used marijuana. DO NOT use the names of yourself, your friends, or any other individuals involved in the story, please refer to them by their role title: friend, classmate, police officer, etc. Providing as much detail as possible, describe the entire process including:

   - How you decided to use marijuana on this particular occasion
   - How you obtained the marijuana
   - Where you consumed the marijuana, how you used, and with whom you used it. Describe the marijuana use process in as much detail as possible.
   - How you avoided being detected by the agents of social control (e.g., law enforcement, residence hall personnel).
   - How it felt to be under the influence. What were the rewards of using
marijuana? If it was fun, how so? If it was a negative experience, please explain. In rich detail, describe what ensued during and after the marijuana use episode.

- What were the consequences of this marijuana use episode? Did marijuana use have a significant effect on your social relations, academic responsibilities, or ability to fulfill social role obligations (e.g., school, work, family, friends)?
- Please add any other details that you would care to provide.

If you have never used marijuana but would still like to participate in this interview, please discuss why you have chosen not to use marijuana and describe (if there are any) an experience in which you have been offered marijuana or you have felt pressured to use marijuana.

**Potential follow-up/probe questions for intensive interviews:**

14) How do your friends/fellow users influence your decision to use marijuana?

15) Is this typically the way you decide to use marijuana? What other discussions/activities prompt marijuana use?

16) Is this typically where you use marijuana? Do you use marijuana in a wide variety of places? Do you only use marijuana with people you know well?

17) Where did you obtain the “instrument” (e.g. pipe, joint, etc.)? Do you ever struggle to find one of these instruments to use marijuana? In what ways do you have to work together with fellow users to find an instrument to use marijuana?

18) At what points, or during what circumstances during the use process do you consider strategies for avoiding detection?

19) What different types of rewards are there for using marijuana? Physical? Social? Mental/Psychological? Spiritual?

20) What do you believe your fellow marijuana users experience while using marijuana?

21) What different types of negative consequences are there to using marijuana during the use session? Physical? Social? Mental/Psychological? Spiritual?

22) In what ways do the experiences of the people you use marijuana with influence your experience with using marijuana?

24) Do you feel comfortable with others knowing that you use marijuana? Why or why not?

25) Do you feel that marijuana use is socially acceptable among college students?

26) What groups/clubs/sports are you involved with on campus?

27) Do you believe that your involvement in these groups influences your use of marijuana (encourages you to use marijuana more/less often, provides/limits physical spaces where you can use marijuana)?

28) Do you think that you will continue to use marijuana for the next year? Two years? Five years? Ten years?

29) Do you know anyone who uses marijuana who is not a college student? If so, how is this person related to you? Have you ever used marijuana with this person?

30) Where do you use marijuana when you are away from college (e.g. in your hometown, on vacation, with family, etc.)?

31) How often do you consume alcohol or other drugs while using marijuana?

32) How often do you use marijuana alone?

33) On what days of the week do you typically use marijuana? During what times of the day do you typically use marijuana?

34) What social role obligations do you have? How does marijuana use facilitate or inhibit your ability to fulfill these obligations?

35) What negative sanctions from others have you received for using marijuana?

36) How often do you receive negative sanctions from others for using marijuana?

37) What positive sanctions from others have you received for using marijuana?

38) How often do you receive positive sanctions from others for using marijuana?

If participant has never used marijuana:

39) Do you plan to ever use marijuana in the future?

40) Who do you know who uses marijuana?
41) How often are you present where marijuana is being used?

42) Have any of your experiences witnessing others use marijuana deterred you from using marijuana?

43) Have any of your experiences witnessing others use marijuana made you feel inclined to use marijuana?

44) What social roles are you obligated to fulfil?

45) Do you believe that marijuana use would facilitate or inhibit your ability to fulfil social role obligations?