



## A Phenomenology of Marijuana Use Among Graduate Students

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### Abstract

*Guided by a hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology, this study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the use of marijuana by graduate students, a population which does not fit the usual profile of marijuana users addressed in the field literature, by exploring the experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with seven marijuana users attending a graduate programme of study, with elaboration and clarification of their initial description of their respective experiences dialogically prompted by means of open-ended questions. Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis of the transcribed interviews, with the central finding indicating that the experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana involves a process of ongoing negotiation between, on the one hand, messages from society and academia, and, on the other, an inner sense of self and well-being.*

Marijuana has been identified as the most prevalently used illicit substance in the United States, with 8.1 million individuals aged 12 or older in 2013 reporting daily or almost daily use of it (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). In comparison with legal drugs, marijuana use in America is exceeded only by that of aspirin, alcohol and tobacco (Booth, 2003). While the self-reported use of marijuana among high school and college students ranges from 15 to 50 percent, the incidence of marijuana use among graduate students is rarely measured (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2013; Kann et al., 2014; SAMHSA, 2014). Even though the use of marijuana among college students and young adults has increased gradually over the past decade, the perceived risk associated with regular marijuana use has steadily declined among these cohorts since the early 1980s (Johnston et al., 2013).

Much of the literature addressing marijuana focuses on measuring detrimental effects in users, especially in relation to academic performance and achievement,

mental and physical health, and risky or deviant behaviours, with an emphasis on other drug use and dependency. Marijuana use is associated with lower academic performance and higher rates of truancy and drop-out among high school students, whereas its impact on academic performance among older users seeking higher education is less certain (Cox, Zhang, Johnson, & Bender, 2007; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 2003; Lynskey, Coffey, Degenhardt, Carlin, & Patton, 2003). Although it can be assumed that marijuana use exists in graduate school settings, given the high rates of reported use among undergraduates, relatively few studies have addressed marijuana use among this specific population (Boniatti et al., 2007; Lipp, Benson, & Taintor, 1971; Schaps & Sanders, 1970; Seiden, Tomlinson, & O'Carroll, 1975).

A review of the literature revealed a complexity of issues associated with truly understanding the impact of marijuana use on the individuals who use it, partly due to the influence of regulatory systems on its lawfulness. Specifically, while historically marijuana

had numerous uses in countries worldwide, this drug now tends largely to be addressed in relation to the legal systems limiting its use (Booth, 2003; Hermes & Galperin, 1992; Marshall, 1988). Today, marijuana is classified as a Schedule I drug in the United States, where its growth, importation, possession, sale and use are all regulated at the federal level, even though individual states such as Washington and Colorado have legalized its use by adults aged 21 and older (Healy, 2012). Essentially, any substance that is used illegally brings with it the negative associations of a stigma, thus diminishing a true understanding of the utility of its use based on classification. It would, therefore, be valuable to look through other lenses in order to gain a clearer understanding of the experiential reality of marijuana use.

For example, it is believed that early marijuana use may lead to an increased risk of adverse cognitive and neurological sequelae in adolescents, especially when necessary structural changes are occurring in the brain (Solowij et al., 2011; Yucel et al., 2010). While low academic achievement, depression and anxiety have all been associated with adolescent use, the directionality of this relationship is nevertheless called into question by the added consideration of social environment (Brook, Stimmel, Zhang, & Brook, 2008; Choo, Roh, & Robinson, 2008; Marmorstein et al., 2010; Ryan, 2010). Research has shown that family, community, and peer involvement serves to protect against adolescent use, such that youth with a sense of safety and purpose may be less likely to try marijuana or become heavy users (Dunn, Kitts, Lewis, Goodrow, & Scherzer, 2011; Fredricks & Eccles, 2010; Lac et al., 2011; Nalls, Mullis, & Mullis, 2009). It is thus important to consider the power of environmental factors and the impact these may have in the case of the individual, even while investigating either the incidence or the experience of using marijuana within specific age groups or populations.

Marijuana use among college students, for instance, often begins in adolescence by the age of 16 and is associated with leaving school at the undergraduate level, although including factors such as peers and family undermines this relationship (Fergusson et al., 2003; Gledhill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, & Wechsler, 2000). Patterns of use indicate that young adults with a family history of conflict, mental illness and substance abuse are more likely to use marijuana and to report psychological symptoms, since their motives for use may be more oriented toward coping (Bonn-Miller, Vujanovic, & Zvolensky, 2008; de Dios et al., 2010; Martinotti et al., 2011). While twin studies suggest that environmental factors moderate the role of gene expression among young adult users, other research highlights user attitudes and perceptions as highly influential in determining whether or not users may experience marijuana as harmful (Agrawal et al., 2010;

Haberstick et al., 2011; Palamar, Kiang, & Halkitis, 2012; Simons, Neal, & Gaher, 2006).

A relationship between mental illness and marijuana use has been shown to have no specific directionality, and studies investigating motives for marijuana use suggest that it may be a means of self-medicating rather than a catalyst for psychiatric symptoms (Latt et al., 2011; Machielsen, van der Sluis, & de Haan, 2010; Schofield et al., 2006; Simonetto, Oxentenko, Herman, & Szostek, 2012). As marijuana use in all age categories is highly associated with tobacco and alcohol use, it is difficult to isolate the root cause of any apparent psychological, relational, and/or academic dysfunction among users (Brook, Lee, Finch, & Brown, 2010; Lopez-Quintero et al., 2011; Reed, McCabe, Lange, Clapp, & Shillington, 2010). For example, while driving under the influence of marijuana may be more common than driving under the influence of alcohol, marijuana intoxication appears to engage compensatory neurological and psychological systems and is not associated causally with a higher rate of mortality (McGuire, Dawe, Shield, Rehm, & Fischer, 2011; Muhuri & Gfroerer, 2011; Schweinsburg, Schweinsburg, Nagel, Eyer, & Tapert, 2010).

A more recent trend in marijuana research involves the prospect of the substance as a viable means of treatment for various medical illnesses and mental health conditions. Marijuana as a treatment regimen is becoming more common as states approve its medical use for a wide range of psychiatric and physiological symptoms (Bowles, 2012; National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, 2015). Although it is very likely that new studies will begin to investigate marijuana's medicinal utility, it is worth noting that the medical use of marijuana has historically been recorded in various cultures.

There has been an absence of studies regarding the experiential aspects of marijuana use, which may be partially explained by the presence of stereotype and stigma. Historically, in the United States marijuana use has tended to be associated with minority groups, such as immigrants and people of colour, with the consequence of criminalizing, institutionalizing, and further marginalizing these individuals in mainstream society; research findings, however, point to marijuana use as apparently being higher among White youth and adults (Booth, 2003; Earleywine, 2002; Iversen, 2008; Marshall, 1988).

The focus of marijuana-related research has primarily been on appraising a multitude of dysfunctions in the user, often by measuring physical and mental health variables, and behavioural patterns and performance. Sample populations usually comprise high school and college students, or individuals identified with either psychiatric disorders or some other measurable form

of debilitation, and have rarely to date included or specified populations of graduate students. Most often, hypotheses relate to negative effects associated with marijuana use. For example, the gateway hypothesis holds that marijuana use leads to the use and abuse of other drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. Subsequent studies have, however, called the validity of this theory into question (Choo et al., 2008; Iversen, 2008; Zimmer & Morgan, 1997). In addition, the literature tends to associate marijuana use with deviance and dysfunction, especially among school-aged youth and adults with psychological symptoms (Finn, 2012; Legleye, Janssen, Beck, Chau, & Khlat, 2011; Machielsen, et al., 2010; Riehman, Stephens, & Schurig, 2009; Scholes-Balog & Martin-Iverson, 2011).

The majority of studies to date are quantitative investigations designed to test for the role different variables play in various dysfunctions among marijuana users. Qualitative studies probing the marijuana user's subjective experience have essentially been ignored (Hammersley & Leon, 2006; Lorencova, 2011; Osborne & Fogel, 2008). In looking to measure the effects of marijuana use, quantitative approaches often fail to target specific populations of users. If one were to assume, for example, that marijuana users only dropped out of school, broke the law, or were either incarcerated or institutionalized, graduate school would be an unlikely place to seek out study participants. As marijuana use continues to increase, it is necessary to diversify the research questions accordingly, to investigate whether marijuana users create a homogenous group, and to invite a rich self-report of how users understand and navigate their use as they live in the world. The study reported here thus set out to explore the lived experience of graduate students who use marijuana, allowing the meaning of this phenomenon to be revealed through the descriptive language of the participants.

Since the field of clinical psychology is frequently concerned with the implications of substance use for the individual, there is a need for diverse user profiles to be considered in order to move toward a more complete understanding of how a particular drug is experienced by a particular population group. Clinical psychologists have the ability to treat a wide range of individuals by appreciating the unique constellation whereby each person's life experiences are integrated. Reviewing relevant research enables them to inform their conceptualizations more fully. The current study adds to the existing research in the field by making the experience of a specific cohort of marijuana users available within the literature on this drug and its uses.

## Method

In order to capture as fully as possible the experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana, a

hermeneutic-phenomenological approach was chosen. Individual interviews were conducted with seven graduate students who identified themselves as users of marijuana, yielding qualitative data in the form of rich narrative descriptions of their experience. The method of the current study was *phenomenological* in that it sought to explicate the lived experience of individuals in a particular world situation or context, and *hermeneutic* in that it was primarily concerned with construing the meaning of life-text data.

## Procedures

In order to minimize any interpretative bias during the analysis, the researcher, prior to interviewing the participants, and by means of a rigorous process of bracketing, identified her own preconceptions and assumptions regarding the phenomenon of being a graduate student who uses marijuana. Holding these presuppositions in her awareness, the researcher met with all seven participants for individual, face-to-face, audio-taped interviews, with the length of each interview ranging from one to three hours. The meaning of the experience under study was pursued by means of collaborative and descriptive dialogue between the researcher and each participant, where open-ended questions invited disclosure of the participant's lived experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana. As part of this process, the researcher probed by means of open-ended questions for fuller descriptive clarification throughout the interviews, consistent with the hermeneutic approach described by von Eckartsberg (1986): "In hermeneutic work, we become engaged in an expanding network of meaning-enrichment that contributes new meanings to the ongoing dialogue" (p. 134).

Rather than implying an exclusion of biases, the process of presuppositional bracketing involves having a conscious awareness of them (Polkinghorne, 1989). Von Eckartsberg (1986) speaks to the significance of this in the context of hermeneutic-phenomenological research: "The hermeneutic stance acknowledges the perspectival nature and biographico-historical involvement of the researcher and makes the investigation of the implicit precomprehensions of the researcher part of the interpretative process" (p. 136). Whereas a phenomenologist may wish to silence his or her presuppositions, de Rivera's (1981) method purposefully engages what he calls "foreknowledge" by "using actual dialogal research partners in the process of re-conceptualization, where researcher and participant involve their separate presuppositions in a joint effort of clarification" (von Eckartsberg, 1986, p. 163).

## Data and Data Analysis

The data consisted of transcriptions of the participants' verbalized responses to the primary interview question

– *What is your experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana?* – as elaborated in response to a series of unstructured, open-ended follow-up questions designed to further draw out the essence of the focal experiential phenomenon.

According to de Rivera's (1981) hermeneutic method, data analysis begins at almost the same moment that the data is gathered, since the conceptualizations that emerge in dialogue are immediately focused on and clarified between the researcher and the participant. The steps of the data analysis which follow represent a fusion of the analytic steps offered by a number of influential research phenomenologists. Fundamentally, the phenomenological intent in data analysis is to "allow the data to speak for itself" (Stevick, 1971). With this in mind, the following steps were followed to analyze the interview transcripts:

1. Read and listen to the interview data, so that a general impression or gestalt of each participant's experience can begin to form within the researcher (Colaizzi, 1978; Hycner, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989).
2. Extract significant terms and statements from each interview transcript (Colaizzi, 1978; Stevick, 1971; van Kaam, 1959).
3. Identify units of meaning within the significant terms and statements, eliminating those that appear to depart from the research question; convert the meaning units to psychological language (Colaizzi, 1978; Hycner, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989; van Kaam, 1959; von Eckartsberg, 1986).
4. Group meaning units into general theme categories for each transcript, test their validity by applying categories to other transcripts at random, and expand the category descriptions accordingly (Colaizzi, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1989; van Kaam, 1959; von Eckartsberg, 1986).
5. Identify exclusive and recurring themes across transcripts and synthesize them into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Hycner, 1985; van Kaam, 1959).

These steps were designed to identify the essential meaning structure of the focal phenomenon. Giorgi (1986) reflects as follows on the spirit of examining linguistic data:

Descriptions contain words and sentences that are capable of depicting a situation as it exists for the experiencer. Words, or more accurately, sentences, are conveyers of meaning. Linguistic meaning, a mode of conscious expression, presupposes and extends the labour of consciousness begun by

prelinguistic presences ... . Generally speaking, it is the act of speech (writing) that expresses meaning and the act of hearing (reading) that detects it. (p. 19)

In steps 3 and 4 above, the researcher was mindful of Colaizzi's (1978) dictum that "the researcher must go beyond what is given in the original data and at the same time, stay with it" (p. 59). Ideally, this process of conversion to psychological language occurs as if the participants' words were simply being translated into another language, with the essential meaning and integrity of their experience preserved (Polkinghorne, 1989). The data analysis ended with the synthesis in step 5 of the common and unique themes identified into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon investigated. The findings that emerged are presented and discussed in the following sections.

## Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed five main themes essential to the experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana: (1) stereotype, stigma, and secrecy, (2) openness, acceptance, and community, (3) self-care and self-reflection, (4) reciprocal shaping, and (5) identity and persona. Summaries of the themes are first presented, followed by a further description and discussion of each.

### 1) *Stereotype, stigma, and secrecy*

- Being a graduate student who uses marijuana is an inherent contradiction due to opposing stereotypes and assumptions.
- Stereotype, stigma, and secrecy lead to a struggle with feelings of discomfort, resistance, and a sense of ownership in respect of marijuana use.
- Stereotype and stigma are mediated by comparing marijuana to alcohol.
- Secrecy is maintained due to legal stigma or risk of drug-testing.
- Stereotype and stigma lead to secrecy about marijuana use in order to avoid being judged or devalued as a graduate student.
- Stereotype, stigma, and secrecy are mediated by regional acceptance of marijuana.
- Personal stereotype and stigma align with societal assumptions.

### 2) *Openness, acceptance, and community*

- Feelings of surprise, relief, comfort, or friendship

result from discovering other graduate students who use marijuana.

- Openness, acceptance, and community lead to a general sense of validation and reinforcement.
- Openness about marijuana use among fellow graduate students, faculty, or at school in general leads to a sense of acceptance and community.
- Graduate students relate and look up to advanced students and mentors who also use marijuana.

### 3) *Self-care and self-reflection*

- Marijuana leads to states of altered consciousness, intuition, and self-reflection.
- Marijuana is used to facilitate relaxation and in order to cope with the anxiety and stress of graduate school.
- Marijuana facilitates creativity, recreation, and body-centred activities.
- Marijuana is used as medicine for physical self-care.

### 4) *Reciprocal shaping*

- Graduate student knowledge and experience shapes marijuana use.
- Graduate school schedule and workload shapes marijuana use.
- Marijuana use is kept separate from certain academic activities.
- Marijuana use enhances and complements academic performance and professional development.
- Graduate students who use marijuana are proud of their high academic performance.

### 5) *Identity and persona*

- Graduate students resist over-identification with persona in order to preserve marijuana use among other aspects of identity.
- Identity and persona must be divided as a graduate student who uses marijuana.
- A rigid separation of identity and persona is uncomfortable, impersonal, or impossible.

## **Stereotype, Stigma, and Secrecy**

Certainly the most prominent theme was the inter-relatedness of stereotype, stigma, and secrecy. It is significant that each participant dedicated a considerable portion of his or her narrative to describing and exploring stereotype, stigma, and secrecy as part of his or her experience. Sue and Sue (2008) defined stereotypes as “rigid preconceptions we hold about *all* people who are members of a particular group ... without regard for individual variations. The danger of stereotypes is that they are impervious to logic or experience” (p. 154). Stigma is defined as a “mark or sign of disgrace or discredit” (Swannell, 1980, p. 582), and stigmatization as “a negative social response to a perceived flaw that involves mechanisms such as labelling, stereotyping, separation, and discrimination” (Palamar et al., 2012, p. 243). In essence, these words embody the frustration, fear and defensiveness among the participants as they navigate the experience of being graduate students who use marijuana within the conceptual limitations imposed by not only society, but by academic institutions and fields of study, and, in many cases, by their own personal conventions. Examples of the participants’ words regarding each of seven sub-themes follow.

- **Being a graduate student who uses marijuana is an inherent contradiction due to opposing stereotypes and assumptions.**

*The assumption of marijuana using is you're lazy and you're unmotivated and you're never going to go anywhere. And I would say the assumptions for graduate students are [that] graduate students don't do drugs. They're focused ... marijuana using is for losers basically.*

*We're hitting a very interesting duplicity between the ... socially endorsed view of what it is to be a marijuana user and then the socially endorsed view of what it is to be a graduate student 'cause you're right, there is a straight-laced persona that people give to graduate students.*

- **Stereotype, stigma, and secrecy lead to a struggle with feelings of discomfort, resistance, and a sense of ownership in respect of marijuana use.**

*So it's that negotiation process between being like "Oh this is awkward. I'm trying to become a doctor and I shouldn't do these sorts of things". And then also being like "Oh I am who I am and my experiences helped inform how I can help". So, as a third-year student now ... I feel slightly more comfortable about who I am and that being an asset.*

*Part of my vocalizing of this is to minimize the extent of that secret life 'cause I don't like living with it ... I'm going to own the actions I do ... because it doesn't make sense that I should have to hide part of me for you.*

- **Stereotype and stigma are mediated by comparing marijuana to alcohol.**

*I've gone to so many talks and conferences where ... in order to keep people interested in your very esoteric kind of boring talk and also keep the pharmaceutical companies happy that you're mentioning their drug, you have to wine and dine 'em ... . And amongst other doctors, here we are having wine and going to these talks and sure, it probably is moderate use, but how many of these doctors are closet alcoholics that are just highly functioning?*

*One of the things that has kind of bothered me about grad school is that a lot of the social activities revolve around drinking ... some of the social events that are sponsored by the school will be like "First beer's on the school of public health!" ... on a broad scale alcohol consumers cause a lot more self-destruction and larger destruction than people that are smoking weed.*

- **Secrecy is maintained due to legal stigma or risk of drug-testing.**

*I do think about certain positions. Would I be drug-tested? Does it matter if I have a medical marijuana card? I worry about, I guess, just those kinds of things that are going to stop me, prevent me from doing something. It's not like I feel like I should stop smoking because that's the professional thing to do. ... I just feel like it is unfortunate that there are these constraints that will probably at some point make me have to not do this thing that helps me, you know.*

*There's always some stuff that people are private about or want to keep private or feel like they shouldn't share and I'm not really conscious of a lot of those things. The only one that's kind of obvious is the marijuana use because that's considered illegal.*

- **Stereotype and stigma lead to secrecy about marijuana use in order to avoid being judged or devalued as a graduate student.**

*Just as a graduate student in general I feel like it's something I have to hide. Um, I feel*

*like it's not something you could admit and talk about with anyone because there is this persona that I have to represent.*

*There is a certain barrier to entry in terms of telling someone, "Yeah, I smoke weed", because it's like you really (sigh) you can't go back ... no one's going to un-hear that ... because of a lot of stigmas that come with weed smoking.*

- **Stereotype, stigma, and secrecy are mediated by regional acceptance of marijuana.**

*It's not like we're in graduate school in Texas ... we're in the Bay area. We're in such a liberal place ... I think medical marijuana is really accepted in this area definitely and recreational usage is to some extent as well.*

- **Personal stereotype and stigma align with societal assumptions.**

*Busy people don't use marijuana every day, I think, is a value that's out there ... I probably harbour a little bit of that value judgment but I'm aware people function in different ways.*

### **Openness, Acceptance, and Community**

In contrast to the predominantly oppressive themes of stereotype, stigma, and secrecy, another important aspect of the participants' experience was the desire and search for openness, acceptance, and community as a graduate student who uses marijuana. A number discovered marijuana use among fellow students quite by surprise due to personal assumptions that marijuana had no place in graduate school, and others found faculty members who accepted or valued marijuana use. Participants also described a need to gain a sense of community by sharing marijuana use with other graduate students through either disclosure or practice, and many used humour and joy to animate stories about feeling a mutual sense of gratitude and connection with other users. Examples of the participants' words regarding each of three sub-themes follow.

- **Feelings of surprise, relief, comfort, or friendship result from discovering other graduate students who use marijuana.**

*I had a little gathering at my house ... one of the classmates, like, just asked me if I wanted to smoke and rolled up a joint and I was like "Wow, this is great", and he was one of the more conservative people that I had met and he really opened up and it was a really nice bonding experience ... so we all became really close as a class.*

*That's your support system in graduate school, your cohort. And feeling close to them, that's all you have. That's your mental sanity. So it's drastic, I think, to have good relationships with them and smoking with them has brought us together so much. Being open about it is so important.*

- **Openness, acceptance, and community lead to a general sense of validation and reinforcement.**

*I just feel like it's more acceptable here and it's changed the way I see professionals ... just that everyone's human and I use this as a tool. Why can't anyone else use this as a tool?*

- **Openness about marijuana use among fellow graduate students, faculty, or at school in general leads to a sense of acceptance and community.**

*I've had one professor that I've smoked marijuana with and that was really interesting and exciting ... I think everyone was inside smiling 'cause I think there's some aspect of wanting to associate with your professors beyond just the academic level ... once you've broken that barrier with marijuana then you can really be honest and talk about other things.*

*Being able to be open especially with professors about marijuana use changes really the entire aspect of the classroom ... Just to know that everyone supports you no matter if you use marijuana or not is just a really good feeling ... not constantly having to hide that part of myself.*

### Self-Care and Self-Reflection

A third theme featured the role of marijuana use in cultivating self-care and self-reflection as a graduate student. Participants spoke of the need for recreation, creativity and unstructured time in order to sustain the rigour and endurance required to meet the academic demands as graduate students. In a number of cases, marijuana was used to structure a separation from academic roles in order to nurture the extracurricular self and related activities. For others, self-reflection ultimately fuelled both academic performance and professional identity, which will be further addressed in the following section. Examples of the participants' words regarding each of three sub-themes follow.

- **Marijuana leads to states of altered consciousness, intuition, and self-reflection.**

*I think it's also helpful for me to think of using marijuana as a way to bring out different*

*ways of thinking or being ... especially using it as a tea, I've felt more in my body and I've felt more intuitive about certain things, or at least I'm operating more in that way than I am normally. So for me that underscores using marijuana as an experience of being myself.*

*What's really focused on this year is to understand who we are as people because we have to understand ourselves as therapists ... that way of thinking is, like I said, thinking outside of the box, revealing you to yourself ... . And when I smoke weed, that's what it does, it opens my mind to who I really am.*

- **Marijuana is used to facilitate relaxation and in order to cope with the anxiety and stress of graduate school.**

*And I think one of the main reasons why I've continued to use it is that I'm kind of a, I wouldn't say a Type A person, but I tend to work very long hours and kind of get very engrossed in my work and it's a nice way to kind of force myself to take a breather and relax and stop working for the night.*

- **Marijuana facilitates creativity, recreation, and body-centred activities.**

*I think it also kind of opens up another side of my mind and my heart that allows me to turn off the analytical brain and turn on the creative brain and get grounded. ... I feel like if I didn't use marijuana, you know, I'd just feel guilty looking at my guitar or I'd feel guilty looking at my paintbrushes. ... But the marijuana is just the first step toward allowing myself to do other things ... it's a very creative vehicle.*

*I write a lot academically now but I used to write so much more just for myself ... and that's one of the things I notice now when I smoke is I get hit with "OK, I want to write". So I write in my journal ... when I'm sober it's like "Well, if I'm going to write, I might as well be writing this essay!"*

### Reciprocal Shaping

Another theme central to the experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana was that of reciprocal shaping, an interactive dance of sorts in which, while graduate school informed and influenced marijuana use, marijuana use was simultaneously adapted and incorporated into being a graduate student. Participants explained how their understanding of marijuana use was influenced by knowledge attained

and demands met as graduate students, and in many cases the meaning and application of knowledge was informed or enriched by marijuana use. While most participants specified that they did not use marijuana before or during academic activities, some participants used marijuana with the deliberate intent to enhance academic performance while under the influence, or as a psychological exercise which could be referenced later in the classroom while sober. Several displayed a sense of pride in their personal ability to be a high-performing graduate student and still use marijuana. Overall, and in the case of each participant as an individual, marijuana was perceived as having enabled personal or professional development over time. Examples of the participants' words regarding each of five sub-themes follow.

- **Graduate student knowledge and experience shapes marijuana use.**

*And then as a graduate student, too, you start to learn about the diagnostic criteria for dependency and you're like "Well, I don't know ... I do spend a lot of time trying to access this", or you know, you have those questions.*

*The most interesting thing so far about being a graduate marijuana user is, um, is actually the self-discovery process of really, I'm still trying to figure out that limit of, like, how far I can push it ... as a graduate student ... new marijuana user meaning I'm still trying to figure out how this drug works.*

- **Graduate school schedule and workload shapes marijuana use.**

*My use is so different than it was before ... Part of that has to do with time, not wanting to be stoned during school and needing time to study and read.*

*So I do set limits for myself and boundaries for myself ... I know what's best for me. I know that I wouldn't do as well if I smoked twice as much, but I know the amount that I can smoke that would still enable me to do my work and hand it in on time and do well.*

- **Marijuana use is separate from certain academic activities.**

*I don't think the amount that I smoke now is going to change. Just like now I don't smoke before class, I'm not going to smoke before I see clients ... that's my personal choice.*

- **Marijuana use enhances and complements academic performance and professional development.**

*What's interesting is everybody says marijuana's a motivation-killer. When I am not motivated to write a paper or do something and I smoke, I will be much more able to do it ... I don't know if it just puts me in a better mood, puts me in a different mind. ... But it helps me in that way.*

*I think it's really important to have that reflective process ... You can't lose yourself. You're going to be seeing and getting deep with so many people. You have to constantly reflect on your life and your experiences ... my marijuana use has kind of weaved throughout within my classes because I'm [emphatically] so required to reflect and that is like a reflection-enhancement.*

- **Graduate students who use marijuana are proud of their high academic performance.**

*I feel like my results are good enough where it's like, yes I'm a stoner but I'm a stoner with a 4.0. And I'm a stoner who came out with a 3.99 in an honour's programme in undergrad so it's like .... Really, get back to me when this is numerically a problem.*

### Identity and Persona

The last theme was identity and persona. Participants were included in the current study based on the simple criterion of identifying themselves as graduate students who used marijuana, and yet, during the conceptual encounter, many spoke to the delicate process of deciding to what degree they would identify themselves with the academic world, and to what degree their marijuana use mediated this deliberation. When addressing professional identity development, the idea of, and often the word, *persona* was incorporated in considering to what extent they could reveal themselves while also assuming expert roles.

In many cases, participants felt that they had somehow to split the identity or expression of self in order to accommodate conflicting assumptions about graduate students and marijuana users. For others, the ability to preserve marijuana use during graduate school validated that two allegedly incompatible ways of being could indeed converge, and that they could continue learning and striving for excellence without allowing vital and treasured parts of their life and identity to fall away in order to fit a stereotypical persona. Examples of the participants' own words regarding each of three sub-themes follow.

- **Graduate students resist over-identification with persona in order to preserve marijuana use among other aspects of identity.**

*It's something about myself that I feel happy about ... so that fits into the idea of like "Oh I don't want to give up too much of myself. This is something I can hold on to".*

*I've tried to keep some perspective on who I was before and how that can fit into also being a student again ... there's an incredible amount of variation in how people are approaching school and how much they're allowing school to be their identity ... There are a lot of things that I gave up to be here and so I'm trying to find ways to incorporate some of those ... that's the balance that's hard to attain.*

- **Identity and persona must be divided as a graduate student who uses marijuana.**

*We have to learn or practise to make a distinction between asking people about their drug use and not talking about our own possible drug use 'cause it's not relevant or it's not professional ... the fact that I use marijuana is part of who I am as a person but it's not part of who I am as a medical student interviewing a patient.*

*I certainly wonder about having a private practice if word gets out that this is something I engage in. Are people going to be like "Oh, I'm not taking my child to that pot-smoking doctor", you know?*

- **A rigid separation of identity and persona is uncomfortable, impersonal, or impossible.**

*Do you ever turn off your professional self? Are you just yourself all the time? Like how we talked about earlier, the compartmentalization of a professional self and a personal life ... I honestly don't think it's possible to do that. I think inevitably they bleed into each other and you can only really truly be yourself.*

### Unique Themes

Certain themes emerged from the experience under study that were not characteristic of more than one participant. They are included here due to their both elaborate and central nature within their respective individual narratives. In the case of one participant, considerable energy during her interview was dedicated to the problem of how to define her marijuana use as a graduate student. Even though she provided a

medical rationale that her use effectively reduced physical and psychological symptoms and facilitated cognitive functions related to focusing and attention, there was also a sense of hesitation about her use of marijuana being regular. She explained that this was partially attributable to themes of stereotype, stigma, and secrecy, but largely because of critical messages within her field of study, given the use in clinical psychology of diagnostic criteria to classify symptoms of substance abuse and dependency. Throughout the interview, she vacillated between feeling shamed, pathologized, and uncertain as a marijuana user, and reminding herself of multiple ways in which the drug was both effective and essential to maintaining her functioning as a graduate student. The following excerpts are indicative of this unique theme:

*The majority of the time I'm thinking, "This is absolutely helping me. I would not be able to do what I do without this". You know, I do have some stomach issues that it really helps me with when nothing else does ... Also I don't really sleep without pot. I don't really eat without it ... I know it's starting to sound like a dependency. But ... it does help me with those things ... I feel like it helps me to be functional more than taking away from my functionality.*

*It sounds weird because of all the social norms. "Marijuana helps me to be who I am", you know, what does that mean ... it even sounds weird to say out loud because of what people's perspectives are. But that's true in my mind.*

Also, from the same participant came a unique sense of her marijuana use being legally protected due to her having a medical marijuana card, whereas for all the other participants legal issues were closely connected with feelings of caution and guardedness:

*This is great that I'm in the Bay area where this is so readily available and legal now that I have my card ... a few people were just telling me, "You shouldn't get your card. It's going to be on record". That doesn't bother me. It really doesn't, even in a job interview, if somebody asked me I would be honest at this point. You know, I have stomach issues. I've tried things. Nothing has ever helped me. This helps. You know, it doesn't bother me to talk about that ... it's unfortunate, yeah, that there's the stigma around it. But I mean, I'm always open to talk about it.*

Unique themes also arose in another participant's descriptions of his experience. While he referred to his awareness of the legal constraints surrounding mariju-

ana, and of discordance between assumptions about marijuana users and graduate students, he portrayed a philosophical resistance to investing in these systems, and animated this exploration with expressions ranging from harsh rebuke to bare matter-of-factness. At one point, this participant and the researcher identified the concurrence of his being newly acquainted with both graduate school and marijuana, and he acknowledged that this impacted on his experience, especially with regard to reciprocal shaping. Yet, his unapologetic and unrelenting nonconformity remained attributed to his pre-existing personality and character. The nature of this participant's differentiation is well-represented by the following:

*Materialistic-based judgment ... I've never understood it. I consider it a defect ... I only loosely anticipate people's judgment on the way I comport and present myself ... I've been sternly talked to so many times by so many different people about cursing in public all the time and being rough around the edges that, like, I don't know what's going to offend you first ... my general disposition ... or the fact that I smoke weed.*

*And I am completely, as far as I'm concerned, completely responsible, in fact, thoughtful about the way I use this illicit substance ... I'm not going to kowtow to the legally endorsed moral powers-that-be that throw such weight against something that's really f'-in' innocent.*

## Discussion

The experience of being a graduate student who uses marijuana is a dynamic, delicate and ongoing process of negotiation between messages from the academic community and larger society, and an inner sense of self and well-being. A rationale for marijuana use is often developed in order to promote understanding by both self and others as a graduate student. The experience is heavily influenced by the degree to which regional marijuana norms and the academic culture are mutually acknowledged or tolerant of one another, and activates a sense of uncertainty and secrecy in order to protect against judgment, disapproval, or legal consequences.

At the same time, the experience involves a search for meaning and validation as a significant individual, one with both lofty goals and everyday needs. Once the limits and assumptions of society and academia are denied, there is still a desire for discovering what is true, valid, and positive about being a graduate student who uses marijuana. This yearning is partly appeased by discovering a community of academic peers who can relate to, accept, or tolerate that experience. While a supportive social network enables further differentiation from stereotypes, how to incorporate

graduate school and marijuana use amidst a myriad of social messages is an open question and an ongoing search for existential homeostasis.

While the grouping of interrelated themes was part of the experience of each participant in some way, their articulation, expression, and description varied widely from individual to individual pursuant to the various topics of discussion. For example, while one participant exhibited a very calm and methodical manner while explaining that some level of privacy about marijuana use could be considered professional, another conveyed a vehement sense of disgust at the very idea that marijuana use or any other personal preference might be met with either judgment or intolerance. Yet other expressions suggested:

- that secrecy about marijuana use might add to the bonding process among fellow graduate student users;
- that inquiry about her personal use of marijuana led to feelings of shame and doubt, which were largely imposed by her family and society;
- a felt sense of being stereotyped while also sporting pride as a radical;
- marijuana use could be a highly social activity;
- marijuana was preferable for solitude;
- certain social activities could actually be awkward or strained under the influence.

Although not directly related to the main themes, other valuable disclosures were offered in the process of describing the experience. As marijuana users, the participants by no means formed a homogenous group. While some had used marijuana since adolescence, others had first tried it in college, and one participant emphasized that he was new to both marijuana use and graduate school as a young adult. Another participant shared that her marijuana use was regular and usually daily, while most participants admitted to using once or twice a week at most. Only one participant classified marijuana use as medication for both physical and psychological symptoms that, when allowed to flare, interfered with her performance as a graduate student and her overall well-being as an individual.

Many participants referred to their families of origin in discussing how marijuana use might be shared, shamed, or hidden. While three participants described family members who negatively judged their marijuana use, with these relationships having suffered as a consequence, two stated that they comfortably used marijuana with family members, and two felt that members of their family had either abused or become

dependent on marijuana. In all of these cases, family history and experiences were highly salient to the participants' own process of deciding how they would bring marijuana into their lives as graduate students.

### Relation of Findings with the Existing Literature

The findings of the current study are consistent with findings of previous studies reported in the literature. While discussing marijuana, several participants also mentioned their use of other substances such as hallucinogens, and although it is unclear whether the ordering of their use would align with the gateway hypothesis, the correlation of marijuana and other illegal drug use has been demonstrated (Choo et al., 2008; Kandel & Faust, 1975; Lessem et al., 2006). Patterns of marijuana use varied greatly between the participants, although a number referred to having initiated marijuana use during adolescence, which is in line with data from the Harvard surveys (Gledhill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, & Wechsler, 2000).

Participants highlighted the influence of stereotype and stigma in deciding whether to disclose marijuana use, which is congruent with the reports that have validated the role of social norms in self-reported use among youth (Keyes et al., 2011). Whereas marijuana use over time has been associated with negative educational outcomes such as lower academic performance and achievement (Fergusson et al., 2003; Lynskey et al., 2003), participants' use may or may not in fact have had an impact in these regards, especially given, in the case of the present study, the participants' acceptance and enrolment in graduate school.

Most participants in the current study advocated a rigid separation between marijuana use and certain academic activities. This is consistent with Rosenberg et al.'s (2008) report that school-related abstinence from marijuana has been observed among university students. A number of the participants referred to the facilitative role of marijuana in creativity, relaxation, and self-reflection, these factors being among other positive experiences of marijuana use previously identified among university students and other adults (Hammersley & Leon, 2006; Osborne & Fogel, 2008).

A majority of participants described how they used marijuana to reduce academic or other stressors. In this regard, coping-oriented motives for marijuana use have been suggested and demonstrated among youth and adult populations (Bonn-Miller et al., 2008; de Dios et al., 2010; Marmorstein et al., 2010). Three participants specified that they used marijuana to target anxiety or post-traumatic stress symptoms. This is consistent with previous reports of both recreational and medical marijuana use for anxiety and/or PTSD (Bonn-Miller, Vujanovic, Boden, & Gross, 2011; Bowles, 2012).

Two participants specified that, in their experience, marijuana had proven preferable to other medications for effectively treating physical symptoms while also having fewer unwanted side effects. This preference is congruent with the finding of the extensive study by Reinerman, Nunberg, Lanthier, and Heddleston (2011) that a high number of medical marijuana patients had resorted to marijuana after having tried other medications without relief.

Participants also described an expectation that marijuana use would lead to relaxed and altered states of consciousness. The role of user expectations has been explored by others (Metrik, Kahler, McGeary, Monti, & Rohsenow, 2011; Simons et al., 2006). All the participants discussed marijuana's illicit status, and several provided a rationale for the legalization of this drug. The literature has shown support among both users and non-users for the legalization and destigmatization of marijuana (Lipp et al., 1971; Palamar et al., 2012; Seiden et al., 1975; Trevino & Richard, 2002). Participants also identified their hesitation to be open about their marijuana use as motivated by the drug's illegal status; secretiveness about marijuana use has been demonstrated among university students since the mid-1960s (Schaps & Sanders, 1970).

Statements of the participants also mirrored previous findings that targeted graduate student populations. Most indicated caution regarding possible overuse of marijuana, usually in service of academic performance or overall health and well-being, and disapproval of regular marijuana use has been shown among medical students (Boniatti et al., 2007). Four participants highlighted financial concerns as a source of stress affecting their decision to purchase and use marijuana, which is in line with Stallman's (2010) identification of the role of finances as influential in overall psychological distress reported by graduate students. Consistent with the views of several participants who discussed the social and spiritual aspects of being open about marijuana use and feeling supported by those in their immediate academic community, the protective role of cohort socialization and an overall supportive social network among graduate students has been emphasized by Calicchia and Graham (2006) and Longfield, Romas, and Irwin (2006).

### Research Implications

Although there are many studies that focus on the negative impact of marijuana use, in comparison there are few studies reported in the literature that have investigated the experience, identity, or other unique characteristics of marijuana users. Given the socio-political aspects of marijuana's history in the United States, it is arguable that researchers may also be influenced to some degree by contemporary negative social constructs with regard to the use of marijuana.

The findings of the current study indicate that a number of protective, prosocial and functional aspects of marijuana may motivate its use among graduate students. Future investigations focusing on selected populations of marijuana users might illuminate other nonpathological, healing, and helping qualities of this drug when it is not abused. While research studies have most often favoured topics involving measurable dysfunction and maladjustment, researchers have to date neglected to look at marijuana use within populations where functionality, performance and achievement are relatively high. This may in part be because the response rate for studies of this kind is low given that marijuana use is illegal in most states. Additional research questions regarding the role of stereotype, stigma, and secrecy, and the relationship of these factors to issues of legality and social tolerance, are ripe for the asking with regard to marijuana use and other “closeted” behaviours and practices. Researchers might investigate how disapproval leads not only to certain behaviours, which has often guided topics in social psychology, but also to certain feelings and experiences, such as shame, isolation, paranoia, and marginalization.

Future research questions related to the graduate student population might seek to understand how academic goals inform and influence other aspects of their identity and well-being, whether and to what degree they identify with their programme of study, and how graduate school may have otherwise altered the way they live. Other studies might address the prevalence and patterns of marijuana use, the effects

of academic stress, or the incidence of either anxiety or more complex psychiatric symptoms among graduate students.

### Clinical Implications

The psychological impact of suppressed or forfeited experiences may be a focal point for clinicians as they work with individuals who struggle with feeling unacceptable, isolated, or invisible, especially while under pressure or expectation to perform at a high level. Given the symbolic and facilitative role that marijuana played for many participants in respect of their identity, extracurricular enjoyment, and self-care, clinicians may also wish to explore the meaning of marijuana use as part of their case formulation before deciding whether such use is pathological or to what extent it will be a focus of treatment. Given the collaborative and co-creative nature of conceptual encounter within the framework of the hermeneutic-phenomenological research method, clinical psychologists might consider a similar approach to using the psychotherapy session as a meaning-making space, especially toward building a therapeutic alliance. More broadly, the current study revealed the presence of stereotype and assumption, even among the participants themselves, and how this influenced both the individual and his or her collegial relationships and professional identity development. This finding is of use to the field of clinical psychology, insofar as personal bias and presuppositions among professionals may influence their relationships with organizations, colleagues, and their clientele.

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