

High Times: The evolution of the stigma on marijuana and attempts to tear it down

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Natural hallucinogens have been utilized for various purposes in different cultures across the globe for millennia. Usage of hallucinogenic drugs in ancient societies was typically associated with religion, magic, and medicine (Schultes et al., 1984). Despite the existence of cultures that continue to use hallucinogenic drugs for religious and spiritual purposes, contemporary culture has taken a far different approach. Recreational use, especially amongst college students, has become common practice. A drastic shift in the societal perception of hallucinogenic drugs has occurred, but little about them is known, especially regarding their medicinal uses. The medicinal use of hallucinogenic plants by indigenous peoples dates back to ancient times when hunters brought 'shamanism' to the Americas from Northeast Asia (Armijos et al., 2014). Such plants played a significant role in the daily lives of ancient groups. However hallucinogens have become heavily stigmatized by society.

One of the most widely used, naturally growing hallucinogens today is marijuana. Personal experience has demonstrated how commonplace the usage of this drug has become. Unlike the negative stigma associated with most hallucinogens, the negative opinions regarding marijuana are beginning to shift as states have begun to legalize both its medicinal and recreational usage. Marijuana use is known to date back to 4000 BCE in Ancient China and it was considered an important analgesic, antidepressant, and sedative (Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). Far before scientific research was established as a discipline, cannabis was extensively used to treat various medical conditions. Prior to the era of Christianity, cannabis was known to have anticonvulsant, hypnotic, and antibiotic properties (Zuardi, 2006). In essence, this psychoactive plant had quite the extensive range of medicinal uses. Currently, scientific research continues to explore the medicinal properties of marijuana. However, this was not always the case. In the Westernized world, medicinal use and studies of marijuana had greatly declined at the start of the 20th century as a result of failure to establish consistency of the chemical components of marijuana and its potency (Zuardi, 2006). Beginning in the early 90s, far more knowledge about the drug became available and curiosity about new potential medicinal uses increased.

Beginning with its cultivation in Ancient Asia, cannabis eventually made its way to many parts of the world, including the United States. According to historians and archaeologists, cannabis plants are thought to have first evolved in the areas today known as Mongolia and Southern Siberia (Blaszczak-Boxer, 2014). In comparison to modern day, trade across the globe was a far more difficult practice. However, it was not long before the crop began to spread to parts of Europe. Originally, the cannabis plants began to branch out as an agricultural crop and slowly became more widespread (Potter et al., 2011). Marijuana's cultivation on a global scale further advanced the known uses for the psychoactive plant. Aside from advances of its medicinal and spiritual purposes, marijuana ultimately became known for its role as a recreational drug. Around the early 20th century, the drug reached the United States (Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). Primarily, the plant maintained its role as an agricultural crop. It was not until more than a half century later in which the drug became a major crop for cultivation. Fueling the cultivation in the developing world was the ongoing US counterculture (Potter et al., 2011). The 'Hippie Culture' was gaining popularity beginning in the early 60s and this triggered increased recreational use of psychoactive drugs (i.e. peyote, cannabis, LSD, psilocybin, ayahuasca).

Upon its arrival to the United States, an early stigma arose from racism and prejudiced views of users. Due to the psychoactive properties of the drug, propaganda was centered on the adverse health effects cannabis. Typically, recreational users of the drug were perceived as criminals that would perform deviant acts in society such as steal, rape, and murder (Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). Undeterred by lack of scientific evidence, opponents of the drug continued to push for stricter laws. The notion that deviance occurs as a result of marijuana use was perhaps one that was most widely accepted throughout the nation. Though no laws restricting marijuana use were in place, it was soon evident that the country was

headed towards criminalizing its sale and use. Harry Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics became one of the first high-ranking officials to raise concern about the drug and push for strict federal regulation of cannabis (Sloman, 1979). With Anslinger in charge of the anti marijuana movement, people began to listen. Further campaigns continued to promote and exaggerate the adverse side effects of cannabis, but the nation began to listen. In 1937, the Marijuana Tax Act was passed and it criminalized marijuana and allowed the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to strictly regulate its production and distribution (Sloman, 1979). Official passing of a law prohibiting the use of marijuana further built the stigma around it. Politicians used and to this day continue to use established marijuana laws to gain campaign support (Carter et al., 2015). Aware that a majority of people viewed marijuana use as shameful, there was no slowing down high-ranking officials from further molding the stigma. Today, albeit the abundance of knowledge existing about marijuana, it remains classified as a Schedule I narcotic, alongside heroin and LSD because of its apparent high potential for addiction and abuse (Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). Nonetheless, society's views continue to evolve and the slow tearing down of the stigma has begun. Although many papers poorly attempt to argue for marijuana's legalization, I am taking an in depth look at the evolution of the stigma on marijuana and attempts by contemporary society to tear it down.

Similar opinions on cannabis use are seen across the world, and thus, it is classified as an illicit drug in many other countries outside of the United States. Generally, laws are strong driving forces behind creating an image of what behaviors are acceptable in society. As laws prohibiting the use of marijuana gained support, they were utilized to construct the stigma of the drug. A stigma that remains difficult to tear down. One law currently in existence, the Control Substance Act, prohibits the use, sale and production of marijuana and classifies it as a Schedule I narcotic (Denning, 2015). Classification of marijuana alongside highly potent narcotics (i.e. heroin, LSD, cocaine) further attributes to the negative stigma associated with cannabis use. As a result of its criminalization, association with the drug classifies individuals with the societal label: 'stoners'. Politicians, law enforcement officials, and the media have all made significant contributions to the stigma (Levine, 2003). Advantage is taken of by the fact that criticizing the drug has become quite useful in political campaigns. Likewise, the media has played a strong role in evolving and strengthening the stigma. Considering that the Westernized world is so technologically driven, most of what we know and consume comes from some form of media. Television very often negatively portrays marijuana users. They are viewed as lazy, emotionless, and deviant members of society. What is made in Hollywood often reaches many nations across the globe and thus, the negative perception of marijuana users is universally accepted. Most countries belong to what is referred to as a worldwide system created to prohibit production, possession, and sale of narcotics (Levine, 2003). Global perception of the drug is similar across many borders and adds more fuel to the fire of the stigma. Japan has perhaps some of the strictest laws and punishments for drug use and as a result, prevalence of illicit-drug use is quite low (Tominaga et al., 2008). While other nations, such as Mexico, France, and Germany have laws quite similar to those in the United States and prevalence is much higher. Though the Westernized world has had great influence in establishing the negative stigma on marijuana, it is without question that the rest of the world has helped maintain it.

As a consequence of marijuana's stigmatization, society has exaggerated the impact on its users. Often times, users of medicinal marijuana are viewed as no different than recreational users. A recent study showed that therapeutic users of marijuana experienced the stigma as a result of the negative views on cannabis and its use in contemporary culture as a recreational drug (Bottorff et al., 2013). Negative perceptions of those who use the drug medicinally have been difficult to avoid. One of the leading questions that continue to puzzle society is whether or not stigmatization of drug users reduces or promotes drug use? (Palamar, 2012). With advancements in scientific research and knowledge, it is evident that marijuana has many benefits. Alcohol, another key drug of choice in society, has far more adverse health effects, yet is far less stigmatized. To pinpoint why this disconnect exists is quite difficult. Looking back about two decades ago, distributors and users of marijuana were perceived as dangerous members of society and were demonized by mass media (Bennett et al., 2016). On the other hand, alcohol is repeatedly seen as a drug that enhances social interaction. Although it is quite unfortunate, the stigma on marijuana use (whether medicinal or recreational) continues to exist despite campaigns attempting to alter societal perceptions.

Despite extensive knowledge on the drug, outdated scientific research and focus on the adverse health effects of marijuana sustains the stigma. The existence of adverse health effects is something that cannot be questioned. However, two legal substances (tobacco and alcohol) have far greater negative impacts on the health of individuals. An often-stressed health effect associated with marijuana is that long-term use may lead to mental health problems in adulthood (Hall, 2014). Studies have shown this to be true, however, it is focused on negative health effects such as that and it bolsters the stigma of the drug. Society tends to selectively ignore benefits of marijuana and this helps explain why it has been so difficult to tear down the stigma. Aside from this, when individuals of stature come out with strong statements that are often false, supporters listen. Recently, former Presidential Republican primary candidate Carly Fiorina stated there is no understanding of how medicinal marijuana interacts with other drugs and therefore it should not be considered a viable option for therapeutic treatment (Leviton, 2015). This is one case in which a false accusation was made and gained support until several studies were carried out that refuted her claims. Without question, there are many difficulties in studying marijuana in clinical trials. Nonetheless, research has found a number of interactions between marijuana and a few FDA approved drugs (Borgelt et al., 2013). THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the main psychoactive chemical component of marijuana, is also known to be the primary component of several FDA approved drugs. If we lacked knowledge on the interactions between the psychoactive components of marijuana and other drugs as claimed by Fiorina, the Food and Drug Administration would not have approved them for use by the public. The drugs Cesamet™ and Marinol™ are two FDA approved drugs that contain synthetic THC and are orally administered (Borgelt et al., 2013). Both of these drugs have warning labels that list the possible health effects when used with other narcotics or pharmaceutical drugs. When combined with CNS depressants, Cesamet™ is known to have depressive effects and Marinol™ appears to have the same effects when taken alongside other sedatives and psychoactive drugs (Leviton, 2015). Albeit the extensive knowledge available to the public, the focal point of society remains on the negatives associated with marijuana. Indeed, with research continuing to reproduce data demonstrating that the positives of marijuana use far outweigh the negatives, society will shift its views.

Today, recreational use of cannabis continues to become more prevalent. With that being said, it is only a matter of time before the stigma associated with marijuana becomes nonexistent. In the United States, the use of marijuana has nearly doubled in the last decade (Ghose, 2015). It is apparent, especially amongst millennials. A night at any American college campus cannot be spent without exposure to marijuana. During the past 50 years, the recreational use of marijuana has become nearly as common as tobacco among young adults (Hall, 2014). The drug has become a new norm in society. It is apparent we may become the generation responsible for tearing down the stigma associated with marijuana. Apart from becoming quite popular amongst young adults, the media portrayal of the drug has created an all-new perception of users. Nowadays, use of the drug is often exaggerated and celebrated in the media/Hollywood (Bennett et al., 2016). No longer is a heavy negative stigma depicted in movies. A mere twenty years ago any drug use was viewed as barbaric and dealers and users were demonized. Recent films and television shows such as *Pineapple Express* and *Workaholics* often praise marijuana and comical activities associated with its usage. As a result of the great influence of media, the stigma is slowly fading and the image of marijuana has undergone a 180-degree turn.

With public perception continually changing, laws prohibiting marijuana use have evolved as well and have become significantly less stringent. Politics are highly influenced by public perception and thus, a shift in the way respected individuals handle issues associated with marijuana use has occurred. Currently, 23 states have legalized medical marijuana and 4 states have legalized recreational use of the drug, yet, marijuana use is much higher in states where such laws do not exist (Hasin et al., 2015). This alludes back to the earlier question posed. Although it is only a small sample size in terms of time, it appears as though having stricter laws and a negative stigma actually promotes increased deviance and drug use. Despite strict laws that prohibit marijuana, its use continues to grow and become more normalized (Levine, 2003). Laws are not stopping individuals from using marijuana. Even though they are designed to instill fear and promote the well being of society as a whole, these laws are not doing what they intended to do. Laws in the United States are far less strict today than in recent years and many believe this has led to the increase

in marijuana use by the public. The possibility exists that new laws are not what is leading to the rise in marijuana use. Instead, it may be that the attitudes of society have changed immensely and become more supportive of marijuana legalization (Ghose, 2015). Because of changing attitudes, political campaigns have shifted focus elsewhere. The growing popularity and acceptance of marijuana can no longer be overlooked. Campaigns are far less focused on preventing cannabis use and instead some are even promoting its use both recreationally and medicinally.

It is important to note that eliminating the stigma is complex just as with every issue in society. The opposition primarily focuses on the adverse health effects of cannabis on children and adults. While those in favor of marijuana promote the potential benefits it can have in the field of medicine as well as that the risks far outweigh the negatives. Changing perception of marijuana use has shifted the majority of the public towards the drugs' support. Nearly 58% of Americans are in favor of legalizing marijuana (Denning, 2015). Scientific research on marijuana is now more popular than ever before and extensive results have come about to help support the push for decriminalization of the drug. However, some of the science remains inconclusive. Both sides tend to focus on the positive extremes or negative extremes when in reality, the truth about marijuana is somewhere in between (Nelson, 2015). With majority of public support leaning towards its legalization, the opposition continues to lose ground. A time will have to come in which the two sides will be forced to compromise on the issue.

Lack of a consensus has further heated debates between the two sides and both continue to focus on the extremes. Currently, the supporting side is attempting to lessen the stigma and decriminalize the drug. Perhaps the most common topic approached when showcasing support for legalization is how difficult it is to overdose on marijuana. According to the FDA, marijuana has been the primary 'suspect' in 0 deaths and a secondary suspect in 279 deaths while a well-known FDA approved drug (Viagra) was known to be the primary suspect in 2254 deaths and the secondary suspect in 40 (Nelson, 2015). The point to be taken is that a federally approved and popular prescription medication has been a leading contributor in significantly more deaths than marijuana. Though negative health effects exist, it is not a drug that kills individuals directly. Typically, comorbidities are present that are exaggerated by drug usage. On the other hand, the opposition continues to take advantage of the previous stigma associated with marijuana to help aid their campaigns (Levine, 2003). Because of reversion to the previous notion on marijuana, it remains difficult to fully eliminate the stigma associated with it. Another claim made by anti marijuana campaigners is legalizing the drug has the potential to lead the United States down a "slippery slope." If marijuana becomes legal, other far more potent, addicting drugs (i.e. cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin) will soon follow (Bennett et al., 2016). This is quite a brash and bold claim, however, it has gained acceptance. Yet, as the majority of the public continues to change its perception about the drug, more people are realizing that this likely would not be the case. Backing of more scientific research will eventually put an end to such claims but until then, the stigma will persist.

The legalization of marijuana is inevitable. Reasons for my opinion are both social and medicinal. It is evident that society is evolving and attitudes are changing. Though these changes are slowly occurring, they are necessary. Furthermore many potential benefits exist in terms of its therapeutic uses. Currently, opioids are one of the more heavily abused prescription drugs available. Marijuana is a potential alternative for use as a pain medication instead of many of the addictive opioid substances commonly used today (Carter, 2015). Scientific advancements continue to advocate for the legalization of marijuana. Today, we are able to safely derive the effectiveness of cannabis in medicine (Borgelt et al., 2013). Risk factors still exist but much of the knowledge we have will help alleviate health problems plaguing millions of individuals. Often times, the drug is compared to tobacco and alcohol. These are two of the more widely used legal substances in society for which science has shown a more extensive amount of adverse health effects. Yet, despite this, both tobacco and alcohol are far less stigmatized. It is becoming difficult to numerous therapeutic benefits marijuana and that it is far less harmful than substances not prohibited to the public.

In spite of a long history of being stigmatized, marijuana has made progress in altering its image. No longer does it carry the stigma of being a demonized and deviant substance. Racial tensions and political agendas were the primary driving forces behind the construction of the stigma on marijuana. Although both factors are still in existence today, they

are far less pronounced and thus the drug is less negatively perceived. The evolution of public attitudes towards social issues is evolving and we have become more accepting in allowing change to occur. Scientific research is aiding the push towards a less intense stigma on marijuana. Research continues to be carried out and soon society will realize the heaping benefits stemming from such a powerful, naturally occurring plant. Further down the road, decriminalization of marijuana will no longer be necessary for debate. Instead, focus will shift into further advancing medicine and how we can more often use the plant to promote the well being of society as a whole.

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