

# Small-Scale Marijuana Growing: Deviant Careers as Serious Leisure

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## Abstract

Previous research on marijuana growers in the United States has primarily focused on those who have been incarcerated for the activity (Weisheit, 1990; 1998). These growers tend to produce large amounts of the product. It may be that large scale marijuana growers who have been arrested may differ in their reasons for growing, their style of growing and distributing and in how they view marijuana growing as an activity from different types of growers; namely small-scale, indoor hydroponic growers who grow primarily for personal use and enjoyment. Our study analyzes one social network of marijuana growers in central and northern Florida. Through intensive field observations and qualitative interviews with 8 people involved in this closed social network of marijuana growers, we discovered that the growers all followed a similar pattern of initial trial and error, learning new techniques from one another to improve their product, to finally maintaining techniques that enabled them to maximize taste, potency and yield. All of the growers in our sample were white middle class men (6) and women (2) with at least a college degree who had already or planned to enter white collar occupations (e.g., a teacher or business owner). Although profitable, the growers greatly downplayed the importance of making money as a reason for growing, describing the endeavor as a passionate activity they performed for enjoyment, to save their own money, and for the high regard they have of plants in general. Discontinuing the activity (thus exiting the deviant career) is often influenced by such contingencies as risk of detection, commitment to family, and conventional occupations. Future research is needed to compare and contrast different kinds of marijuana growers including those whose growing activities are legitimated by state law.

Keywords: qualitative; deviant career; marijuana; leisure

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## Introduction

A majority of marijuana research is similar to research of other illicit drugs in that use and demand analysis tends to focus on arrest reports (King & Mauer, 2005; Ramchand, Pacula, & Iguchi, 2006; Reuter, Hirschfield & Davies, 2001), interviews with arrestees (Bouchard & Ouellet, 2011; Fagan, 1992; Golub & Johnson, 2004; Reuter & Haaga, 1989) or national survey data (Jacobson, 2004; Register & Williams, 1992). For this reason, much of what is known about illicit marijuana distribution relies on street-level (Fields, 1986; Sifaneck, Ream, Bardhi, Johnson, Randolph, & Dunlap, 2006; Turnbull, 2000), or large-scale dealers (Desroches, 2007; Weisheit, 1990; Weisheit, 1992; Wilkins & Casswell, 2003). The specific area where sociological research on marijuana cultivation and distribution is weakest is the deviant careers of marijuana growers who cultivate and distribute marijuana without ever being detected by law enforcement.

Illicit marijuana markets tend to be rooted in social networks of distribution among friends and relatives rather than being a market dominated by professional sellers who distribute to a wide variety of unknown, impersonal customers (Caulkins & Pacula, 2006). In fact, the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse [now the National Survey of Drug Use and Health] indicates that much of the illegal marijuana distribution and use in the United States (U.S.) occurs through small transactions that go undetected by law enforcement, with the vast majority of users spending less than \$50 per month on marijuana use, obtaining the drug from someone they know (Caulkins & Pacula, 2006). These friendship networks of marijuana exchanges have been vastly understudied in the U.S. More intrinsic sociological methodologies such as ethnographic research are essential in understanding illicit marijuana distribution.

Outside of the U.S., one study consisting of 192 interviews of adolescent marijuana users living in rural and urban England indicated that 78% of the users had given at least part of their marijuana to others (friends or relatives) for free (Coomber & Turnbull, 2007). Another study from Great Britain found that the vast majority of young drug users do not rely on street-level drug dealers, but rather on friendship and acquaintance chains and networks (Parker, 2000). These data from Great Britain match very closely to national survey reports from the U.S. where 90% of users in national surveys report last obtaining marijuana from a friend or relative and over half of those surveyed in the U.S. report their last marijuana transaction being obtained for free (Caulkins & Pacula, 2006). Combined, these data indicate illicit marijuana transactions typically do not extend into larger open, street-level drug markets.

## Drugs as a Deviant Career

It has been suggested that careers in crime can be seen as “vocational” since participants in that particular criminal culture view their illegal behavior as their “calling” (Inciardi, 1975, p. 128). What distinguishes career criminals from non-career criminals is their level of commitment. As individuals begin to commit to the deviant norms of a particular subculture they begin to adopt the motivations, attitudes and behavioral patterns found within that social milieu. The overall life history of a deviant career has few defined sequences for mobility (Luckenbill and Best, 1981). Rather than a continual upward mobility, career pathways in deviant social worlds tend to take on a “zig-zag” nature (Meisenhelder, 1977). The shifts and oscillations (Adler, 1985) of a deviant career depend on a variety of social factors or contingencies (Luckenbill and Best, 1981). Contingencies may include the individual’s objectives, resources and opportunities within the deviant social world (see e.g., Dunlap,

Johnson & Manwar, 1994). There is also however, what has been referred to as “the pull of normality” (Meisenhelder, 1977); namely one’s level of attachment to conventional roles such as familial and work responsibilities. Whether or not an individual increases or decreases her commitment to a deviant career therefore, is predicated on the pushes and pulls of conventional and unconventional social roles. This relationship between deviant and conventional contingencies has been termed the “moral calculus” (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) of drug use. The level of investment one has in his conventional career and self-identity will have a dramatic impact on his level of involvement in the drug subculture and whether or not an individual establishes a deviant drug career. In other words, people who are able to successfully mediate their conventional work and lifestyle with their continued drug use are more likely to continue participating in the drug subculture. There are also other kinds of contingencies that enable people to adopt a conventional career that arise from one’s previously deviant career (Brown, 1991). That is, one can officially drop out of a deviant career by entering a conventional occupation that is linked with it, such as becoming a drug rehabilitation counselor.

The level of commitment found in career drug users and dealers is gained through a process of socialization. As Becker (1963) states: “The individual learns, in short, to participate in a subculture organized around the particular deviant activity” (p. 31). The first step in this socialization process for marijuana (Becker, 1963), heroin (Faupel, 1991) and cocaine (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) use is to learn the technique of getting high. It often takes several times for the individual to experience a high regardless of what drug is being used. That is, it takes interaction with more experienced users (typically friends or relatives) for novices to learn that using a particular drug is actually an enjoyable activity. If individuals do not associate drug use with a pleasurable experience, their use will cease and they will most likely not enter a deviant drug career.

Once the pleasure of using a particular drug is established, the new user must now find a drug supply (Becker, 1963). Drug use, now established as pleasurable, shifts to an issue of availability. Instability of supply is the major threat to regular use and therefore the major threat to establishing a deviant drug career. In order to enter a drug career and establish regular, systematic use, one must establish social connections with people who sell the drug in order to maintain a stable supply. While Becker (1963) outlines this process for marijuana users, the same can be said for all kinds of drug careers, such as cocaine users (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991), heroin users (Faupel, 1991), dorm room marijuana dealers (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010) and even high-end cocaine distributors (Adler, 1985).

Once the pleasure of using the drug is established and a supply is found, one must negotiate the meaning of his continued drug use into his everyday life. Techniques of neutralization are often used to establish the morality of use (Becker, 1963). For example, marijuana users (Becker, 1963), high-level cocaine and marijuana dealers (Adler, 1985), smaller-time dorm-room marijuana dealers (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010), lower level cocaine users and dealers (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) and heroin users and small-scale dealers (Faupel, 1991) all use techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957) in accounting for, or justifying (Scott & Lyman, 1968) their illegal activities. The techniques of neutralization drug users and distributors typically employ involve denying injury and condemning the condemners (Adler, 1985; Becker, 1963). In this way, many career drug users and dealers are not completely rejecting conventional social norms but rather offering and

adhering to conventional norms that have been altered to some extent via techniques of neutralization (Becker, 1963). Once the conventional standards for illicit drug use have been neutralized, non-users become outsiders, users become insiders, and a social world centered on drug use and distribution may open up.

Having established a supply connection, the individual is now one part of a chain of users and sellers. As the individual associates with more users she often notices that 1) her own consistent drug use is getting expensive and 2) other users of the drug are seemingly always looking for a supply. Often selling an illegal drug starts out as an altruistic enterprise (see e.g., Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) where the drug dealer is helping out her friends so that everyone within her social circle may consistently experience the pleasure of the drug. That is, if supply is at times uncertain for each person within a network of drug users, sharing and selling the product within the network can help individuals maintain consistent (perhaps daily) use. Sharing and selling within a drug network may be somewhat haphazard with different members selling one day and purchasing the next, or one member with an established connection to a higher-level distributor may purchase more than he needs and distribute amongst friends on a regular basis. In this way, drug selling on a smaller scale often starts out motivated by factors other than monetary gain (see e.g., Faupel, 1991; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) with sales generally remaining within a closed network of friends and associates. For higher-end distributors who smuggle drugs in from South America (Adler, 1985), this is not the case. They set up rather sophisticated, socially organized drug networks for the primary purpose of making money. These high-end distributors often sell to a few large bulk purchasers (for a discussion of deviant colleague networks, deviant peer networks and formal deviant organizations see Best and Luckenbill, 1980). That is, high-level drug distributors are often professionals. Lower-level dealers, however, frequently remain amateurs (see Stebbins, 1992) throughout their entire dealing careers, often maintaining conventional employment, selling drugs to friends and associates only so that they themselves can use for free or to supplement their legitimate income rather than participating in sales as their primary source of income (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991).

It has been noted many times throughout the past several decades (see e.g. Luckenbill and Best, 1981; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Petersilia, 1980; Shover, 1983; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) that deviant careers are not long lasting. This “aging out” of deviance however, is not simply a case of biological age as is perhaps a compressed athletic career (Gallmeier, 1987) in which someone that is 28 years old is referred to as a dinosaur. Aging out of deviance involves a process of “socially constructed and negotiated changes in perspectives which accompany aging,” (Shover, 1983, p. 210). For example, aging out of a deviant career may involve temporal contingencies such as shifts in personal life goals and aspirations as well as interpersonal contingencies such as ties to loved ones and conventional work that become more prominent in a person’s life as she ages. While some drug users and distributors will exit and re-enter the illicit drug market several times throughout their “career” (see e.g., Adler, 1985), this is not always the case. For example, in one study of marijuana distribution on college campuses (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010), virtually all of the sellers (some of whom also cultivated marijuana indoors) in their sample began distributing marijuana in college and then “matured out” of their deviant careers after graduation, choosing instead to focus on conventional work and family relationships and avoiding law-breaking activity altogether. A similar conclusion has also been drawn among lower-level cocaine users

and dealers (Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991). That is, while there are consistent transitions in deviant drug careers like entering, continuing/progressing (steady and/or increased use; shift from user to user/seller; going from powder cocaine use to injection or freebase) and exiting (giving up the drug lifestyle), individual career transitions are guided by a series of contingencies and these contingencies themselves may shift in importance through time. Individuals may go from one career phase to another, such as buyer to seller, then a week later revert back to buyer. That is, the transitions in deviant careers may overlap and are often nonlinear in nature.

### **Marijuana Growing as a Deviant Career**

Indoor marijuana cultivation and distribution as a deviant career may differ from heroin (Faupel, 1991) or cocaine (Adler, 1985; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) dealing, primarily because distribution is secondary to the activity of cultivation. That is, rather than viewing distribution activities as “work” or a “necessary evil” to fund one’s own drug use, distribution may be seen as a way to share and display one’s final product, similar to craft artists (Stebbins, 1992). Indoor marijuana cultivation may resemble the career of a serious leisure activity (Stebbins, 2007) in which there is a beginning stage (interest in cultivation takes root); development stage (pursuit of the activity becomes routine and systematic); establishment stage (becoming experts in the activity but still resisting “going commercial”); and a maintenance stage (where one’s cultivation career is in “full bloom,” enjoying the activity to its utmost). Like other serious leisure activities (Stebbins, 2007), there may be a strong, continuous desire to upgrade horticultural equipment. Decline may also set in where cultivation seems less fulfilling than it once was, perhaps losing some of its excitement, offering diminishing returns. If one’s interest in cultivation declines, her dealing activities, as a byproduct, will likely also cease.

In this paper, we explore a closed social peer network of marijuana growers. Our main research objective is to gain insight into the nature of such grow networks (e.g., how they originate; how many growers interact on a regular basis; what is the nature of their interactions; how do they select their clientele) and to explore the social dynamics of a small-scale illicit marijuana growing career. In particular we examine the “career pathway” (beginning, middle and end of their growing activities; whether or not any growers experience re-entry into this deviant activity) these growers experience. Through the use of intensive ethnographic data collection we will be able to compare the deviant career of this particular network of marijuana growers to previous research that has explored large-scale cultivators and dealers (Weisheit, 1990; Weisheit, 1992; Weisheit, 1998) or those located on college campuses (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010).

### **Methodology**

#### **Getting In**

Identifying and obtaining access to an intimate network of marijuana growers is a difficult process, which was aided by a long-term relationship where mutual trust between the authors and one of the participants was established and reestablished over the course of the study. Our access was the result of a 15-year relationship between one author and a person who was involved in marijuana cultivation and distribution. The author established a relationship with two coworkers (who were also siblings) at a retirement home, where they all worked as

cooks during college. He maintained loose contact with one of the brothers for many years, and when the idea surfaced to study the circle of marijuana growers that he was a part of, he agreed to initiate contact between both authors and another former employee who he had mentored in growing marijuana. Following this initial contact we relied on snowball sampling techniques (see e.g., Shukla, 2005) to expand our sample. In this way it can be said that one of the authors maintained a peripheral role within the social network of marijuana growers by which he was a part of this social world but did not partake in the members' core activities (Adler & Adler, 1987).

This ethnographic research combines direct observation and qualitative interviews obtained over the course of six years in order to describe the range of experiences and relationships that occur in an interconnected group of marijuana growers/distributors that were located in central Florida. Although it has been several years since some of the growers involved with the study have been active in the illicit drug market as distributors (many remain part of the purchasing community), our data collection includes observations and interviews of growers during their time of production as well as follow-up interviews with the growers as they decided to end their cultivation practices, thus effectively ending their role as drug distributors (at least for the time being). Our data include field observations and in-depth qualitative interviews with a community of hydroponic growers who reflected on how they began growing, their experiences at the peak production period of their cultivation activities and their reflections on their growing career, why they terminated their growing activities, and plans for the future. This extensive analysis of these growers offers insight into their past, current, and possible future roles in a marijuana career.

### **Sample**

Study participants were recruited in the natural settings of use and distribution through face-to-face meetings at their home. Our snowball sample enabled us to meet others involved in the hydroponic growing community, including the general manager of a local hydroponic store and four other growers. Altogether, 8 people were interviewed, with six being men who were or had been intimately involved in growing and distributing marijuana throughout their community. The other two participants were women who lived with one of the six growers. While the women did not see themselves as distributors, they did help in the cultivation process (primarily during the cutting/manicuring stage) and benefited from the profit generated in the selling of some of the marijuana that was harvested. They lived in homes where marijuana was grown over the course of many harvests and many years, ultimately creating a shared world of marijuana cultivation, use and distribution between their partners and themselves.

All participants knew each other and interacted with each other socially to varying degrees. Some of the participants in our sample were close friends, while others were only connected through having the same growing mentor, with limited interaction beyond trying each other's products and at times sharing clones (cuttings from a fully grown "mother" plant, rooted in rock wool; enables growers to skip the germination [seedling] period) when needed. While all participants were part of a closed social network, some members had a higher degree of reachability; that is a smaller number of intermediaries that must be contacted in order to reach certain others in the network (Stebbins, 2007). All participants were white, self-reported as middle class, ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their early thirties. Their educational level ranged from college graduate to possessing a post-graduate degree. All but one of the growers was either in school and/or had a legal, mainstream occupation outside of their

growing activities. Most growers lived in detached homes they either rented or owned. Two of the growers lived in an apartment. While often involved in the same social network of friends, each grower had a specific set of clientele he sold portions of his marijuana harvest to, thus establishing a well-run high level, closed marijuana distribution network where transactions occurred indoors among a web of friends and social acquaintances.

The growers in our sample ranged from growing between two to four full-sized plants using a hydroponic system set up inside of a bedroom closet (producing approximately \$20,000-\$30,000/yr) to using an entire bedroom or garage, producing between ten to twenty plants per harvest which could conceivably generate close to a couple hundred thousand dollars per year.

### **Procedure**

A semi-structured qualitative interview guide was prepared (see e.g., Mullens, Young, Hamernik & Dunne, 2009; Rhoads, Burke, Fredette, & Shrier, 2012; Wengraf, 2001) in order to capture the participants' roles and experiences within marijuana drug markets starting from the time of first use through the time of the interview. These recorded, transcribed interviews often occurred several years after initial field observations of their growing process had begun. This amount of time was often necessary prior to a grower consenting to have his reflections and narratives about growing and distributing marijuana recorded and used for research purposes. While the field observations enabled us to capture the everyday lived experiences regarding cultivation techniques, strains of marijuana that were grown, and quantity of marijuana produced per harvest, the recorded interviews enabled us to capture and analyze specific interconnections and conventional contingencies such as marriage and family life and educational and employment achievements that influenced the participant's marijuana career.

An informed consent was created, read to each participant and his/her consent to be interviewed was recorded prior to the start of the formal, recorded interview. With strong rapport established between researcher and participant through extensive field observations, participants were quite comfortable with having the researcher in their home as well as being comfortable with the interview process. The interviews were roughly one and a half hours in length. The primary author interviewed three people in the sample (two men, one woman) while the secondary author interviewed the other five participants. The interviews, coupled with extensive field observations, also enabled the researchers to "cross-check" information, return to a grower for additional information if needed, and ultimately generated an internally valid understanding of this particular closed marijuana network. Following transcription, all interview tapes were destroyed. All transcribed interviews were analyzed using the qualitative software HyperResearch. The primary author conducted the initial coding of all interview texts. The authors met after each interview was coded, read through each interview together, discussing the ongoing textual analysis. That is, if additional codes were found by the secondary author they were added. If some codes were confusing, they were defined and clarified. Ultimately both authors began making theoretical connections among subsets of initial codes (secondary coding). The secondary coding that is presented in this manuscript was conducted by the primary author.

### **Results**

Our findings indicate clear patterns regarding how marijuana growing is defined and

cognitively organized within this particular closed social network of marijuana growers. For example, while the amount of marijuana being grown ranged from two adult plants to about twenty, ranging in an approximate annual value between \$20,000 to well over \$100,000, every grower in the sample downplayed the significance of monetary gain as the reason he was growing marijuana. While the particular group of growers included in our sample downplayed the profit accumulated through marijuana cultivation, the researchers did meet a couple of other growers on the periphery of the community (people who requested clones or asked one of the growers for advice on increasing harvest yield) who began growing in the later stages of the data collection process and were more interested in growing to maximize profit. One such grower (Thom) specifically does not smoke marijuana and openly informed us that he began growing for the sole purpose of making as much money as possible from his harvest. Since he was not part of the original group of growers we began observing and since we had limited interaction with him late in the data collection process, he is not included in our sample. It is important to note, however, that our particular network of hydroponic growers, while likely similar to many indoor growers throughout the world (see, e.g., Decorte, 2010) is certainly not representative of all indoor hydroponic growers. What our results represent is one example of a closed social network of hydroponic growers located in a specific part of the U.S. where marijuana growing and use remains 100% illegal. All names included in the results have been changed.

### **Learning the Ropes: Beginning and Development Stages of Marijuana Growing**

While the primary purpose of the research project was to understand why and how people started growing marijuana, our interview guide started out by asking questions regarding initial marijuana use. This was done primarily because previous literature on deviant drug careers indicates an association between use and distribution (Faupel, 1991; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991). Most people in the sample at least tried marijuana by age 15 (with the noted exception of Sam who did not begin smoking until he was 21). A few participants first tried marijuana earlier in life (around age 12), but then experienced a 2-3 year hiatus due to limited access. Access to marijuana became easier for our participants during the final two to three years in high school, but even then two participants who had at least tried marijuana were not regular users throughout the latter half of high school. For example one person stated he was too involved in school activities at the time to smoke regularly and another had been forced to enter a rehabilitation program by his parents after experimenting with LSD and so experienced several years of non-use after his initial heavy usage as a teenager. Growing marijuana for profit typically began around the second or third year of college (age 20-21), usually at least a few years after consistent marijuana use had started (except for Sam, whose heavy use and initial growing occurred much closer together than others in our sample).

After discussing at what age and why they began using marijuana, participants were eventually asked about when and why they decided to begin growing marijuana. The initial growing process was often described as an experience in trial and error; a process which did not often yield a high-quality product:

Me and a friend bought a light from somebody and set it up and built a big box. We basically put some fans in it and the light and the weed

came out like shit. We ordered seeds from this place in Amsterdam and it came out pretty crappy. Some of it came out good. We didn't really know how to do it. It was too hot in there but it was, you know that's how it started. (Sam)

Being users of the product, Sam and his college roommate Angus wanted to attempt to produce it on their own, thus saving some money. This is similar to why many people in the lower rungs of the illicit drug distribution chain begin selling; so they can offset their own costs of drug use. The experience may be seen as an act of casual leisure in which Sam and his roommate “dabbled” in the growing process (Stebbins, 2007). While only dabblers at this stage, the initial experience still worked out well enough that they decided to continue growing after their first harvest. Techniques were adjusted (learning the ropes), the growing operation expanded, and more friends became involved in the growing process. At this point, Sam has progressed from the beginning stage of his growing career to the development stage (Stebbins, 2007).

After that my friend and his new roommate started doing part of it at their house. The vegetative (early stage of growing) then we would do flowering at our house and it kept expanding. That was scary because we had to drive boxes full of pot plants like 5 miles across town. (Sam)

Sam is a grower who at the time of the interview was in his early 30s living in a house that had a garage full of marijuana with multiple lights operated via mechanical arms (continuously moving the lights across all of the plants), with all aspects of the growing process set by an automatic timer. At the time of the interview his cultivation career was in full bloom and he was enjoying growing, trading and using marijuana to its utmost. He did not start out that way, however. Sam went through several stages of learning the cultivation process in order to create a fairly large (by far the largest in our sample), expertly operated hydroponic grow room. During his first attempt to grow marijuana, he did not master temperature control. On the second attempt he began to develop and refine cultivation techniques. While doing so, he involved two other people to set up a small vegetative stage and transported the vegetative plants back to his house to begin the maturation stage. Sam also mentions switching from growing in soil to using rock wool in a hydroponic-style growing system that can offer higher yield per plant and enables one to better control the quality of the final product. This transition also marks a desire to upgrade equipment. While learning to separate plants at different stages of maturation after his first attempt, Sam was still taking legal risks by involving three other people in the grow process and transporting live marijuana plants across town, increasing his risk of being detected by law enforcement. In other words, although Sam was improving his cultivation techniques, tensions were being created due to the risk involved in transporting marijuana plants across town. Growing marijuana also involves successfully managing illicit contingencies (involving others in the grow process; transportation issues). If one does not successfully manage these contingencies, then they are likely to end their growing career at the beginning or development stage, going back to a purchaser/user rather than maintaining and further developing their producer/seller status.

For John the first attempt is seen as a trial and error process with subsequent grows taken much more seriously, gradually becoming successful in producing high quality plants through learning specific growing techniques. Dabbling in growing in high school, John's initial attempt was not very successful so he exited from growing after one attempt. Still using

however, he reentered the growing career in college:

The first time I had done it was probably my senior year of high school. It was actually gold plant. I tried growing in the back yard with a five gallon bucket. I had a bunch of little seedlings and I planted a couple out by the ditch and again my first one was in the top of my garage. A little light, nothing serious, but it happened, the one outdoor bloomed a little bit, but it was more of just the experience and then I'd say sophomore year in college I really started getting serious about it. (John)

Establishing a socialization network is extremely important in the process of becoming a career marijuana grower. For example, one grower, Angus, a mentor to other growers in the sample who fluctuated between small to fairly large, back to smaller grow rooms, describes the importance of the mentoring relationship in the initial attempts at marijuana growing. Each individual grower referenced other growers during their interviews (e.g., Angus learned along with Sam; John learned along with another grower, Jerry, both of whom were mentored by Angus). Much like Becker (1963) describes the importance of an experienced user initiating novice marijuana users in learning how to get “high”, the mentoring process was essential during the early stages of growing to show novice growers how to transform dabbling into a more structured, more serious activity. Mentorships could at times turn into partnerships. Some growing partnerships last many years, while other growing partnerships change in dynamics due to one of the growers moving out of the house. When one partner would move, each grower would set up his own operation, but the sharing of materials, information and products would continue amongst this network of growers.

### **Progressing Through: Establishment and Maintenance Stages of Marijuana Growing**

The growers in this social network remarked that they initially started to grow to avoid the cost of a marijuana purchase. This occurred after they began smoking more potent, more expensive forms of marijuana. At between \$300-\$400 an ounce, as young men in college or finishing high school, without a large amount of disposable income, they decided it would ultimately be cheaper to purchase seeds online, plant them in soil and attempt to grow their own marijuana plants. Although they experienced limited success in their initial attempts (a plant that yielded some marijuana, but not as high quality as they had hoped for), rather than giving up and continuing to purchase their marijuana on the black market, they decided to continue growing, trying to improve upon their initial attempts. This commitment to the growing process marks the most important aspect in determining whether one becomes a career grower or not. Having a growing partner and others who could encourage and provide feedback and insight into the grow process was of tremendous importance in establishing and maintaining commitment to one's career as a grower. Also of importance in continuing after beginning and development stages to marijuana cultivation was expressing a passion for the cultivation process.

It's fun to grow stuff. I've always liked plants and stuff and I had terrariums when I was a kid. I still do and you know I just like it. It's cool. I like plants. I like watching them grow and if I can grow some plants that save me 300 dollars a month... (Sam)

This idea that growing marijuana is fun was also expressed by Jerry:

Interviewer: What was that [initially growing marijuana] like?

Jerry: Awesome. When I was introduced to it, it blew my mind. It's a fun hobby. It's neat to see something grow from nothing into something so wonderful. It grows from Mother Earth if you want it to and it's like you create it, you grow it, you smoke it, so it's not really causing any problems either.

These sentiments are also expressed by Ben, another grower in our sample:

We do live in Florida and it is kind of hot all the time. Gardening outside is okay, but gardening inside is better, and then the fun of hydroponics.

Seeing growing marijuana as fun rather than a way to make money enables growers to express their passion and love for the plant as well as the socially acceptable interests in horticulture. Such an orientation to their deviance also enables them to enter the establishment stage of a cultivation career where they become experts in the activity. While they are able to grow much more than they can use personally, they do not self-identify as drug dealers the way marijuana dealers in previous research do (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010). Cultivation, for them, is a serious leisure activity, organized within a social network of cultivators and friends, where their activities are seen as contributing to the betterment of their community. Within this social network, as time goes by, growers begin improving their outputs through adopting new techniques and cultivation strategies learned from one another. Categorizing marijuana growing as a serious leisure activity also enables growers to remain part of mainstream society, where some individuals in society share the same interests but others do not. Marijuana growing, defined as simply an aspect to indoor gardening the way Ben defines it, enables him to maintain a grounding in non-deviant cultural norms (gardening is fun; gardening is a leisure activity; flowering plants or bushes such as roses, gardenias and marijuana can be used, shared and sold). Clearly growing an illegal plant is not the same as growing one that is legal. There is a reason our participants grow marijuana in a closet, blocking out windows and using charcoal filters to offset the smell of their garden. There is a reason they severely restrict people who enter their home to a select few friends. Framing the experience in a similar way to all types of gardening, however, offers an account that explains or rationalizes what conventional others may view as untoward behavior (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Rather than participating in a deviant behavior, one may present their activity as a serious leisure activity that is “substantial, interesting, and fulfilling” requiring “special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 2007, p. 5).

Marijuana growing within the social network we studied was also an economic enterprise. While this side of the growing culture was largely downplayed by the growers, and none of the growers ever self-identified as a marijuana “dealer”, it still represents an important aspect to the growing process:

...but then it [growing] gets addicting and other people want the weed you're growing and you're like whoa I could make a little money doing this too, but I feel good about that because people I know that

I'm friends with, I'm saving them money. They aren't having to pay 400 dollars an ounce from somebody. I sell it to them cheap and then they don't have to worry about getting in trouble. (Sam)

And another grower's perspective:

[Growing] gives me something to do, something to keep up with and also just, I supply my own, that's the only reason I would get rid of anything, 'cause it pays the bills or something really. My job doesn't pay all that much right now. If I had the money for it I'd keep it all to myself, but the job doesn't allow it right now so every here and there I'll get rid of a little bit and that helps out, definitely. (Jerry)

Downplaying the importance of selling marijuana was a universal orientation of all growers (and the two wives of growers we interviewed). Much like many low-level drug distributors the profit generated from their horticultural activity was seen as a tertiary outcome, and then more as an altruistic act than a purely economic one. Ben and his wife Mary express a very common theme among our growers regarding the importance of the generated profit. Namely, that the selling of excess marijuana they produced paid the bills while in college, but became "bonus money" after they began working full-time. In fact, selling marijuana helped the purchasers, because they no longer had to gamble buying marijuana off a stranger on the street or off a friend of a friend. The buyers knew they were getting a fair deal and receiving exactly what they had intended to purchase.

Ben : Primary number one is obviously so that I don't have to go out there and buy weed. Secondary reason is because it's [growing] relaxing. And another reason is I know what goes into it [pure, high grade marijuana]. Third reason is it does lend itself to some additional income.

Mary: But we haven't come to rely on that in a very long time. Back in college we were relying on that. It was just to get us through because we had bills we couldn't pay, and that was hard. We couldn't afford to support the habit and pay the bills, so when we can grow, that will be a quick way to pay off the credit card bills. But now that we're out of debt and doing very well professionally we haven't come to rely on it. It's been bonus money. It's been investing money, traveling money, project money, that kind of money.

Much like other serious leisure activities, these marijuana growers, while earning money from their activity, did not rely on the money generated from growing to survive. In this way, they are not professional drug dealers, but rather amateur horticulturalists. As Stebbins (1992, 58) states: "many of them [amateurs] are in no way opposed to making money at their pursuits – even a lot of it – as long as their pursuits continue to be voluntary and enjoyable." Some leisure activities are more lucrative than others. The growers in our sample enjoy growing marijuana, they do it primarily for their own enjoyment, and if they can help out others and be able to pay off credit card debt, take a vacation, or purchase the dream motorcycle they

have had their eye on, it is merely a bonus of the leisure activity they chose. By seeing their marijuana production as a voluntary activity they enjoy mastering and performing, the activity as deviant or profit driven is minimized and the activity as fun, personal and something shared among friends is brought to the fore. In fact, growers who grow purely for profit are looked down upon among these particular growers:

Interviewer: So there are good growers and bad growers?

Angus: Yeah I think so. Like the one guy, this guy Thom who Sam got into it. He did it for the money. He didn't even smoke it. He just wanted to make money and he saw how much money he could make from it so he bought some lights, set it up and was making a lot of money. But he didn't smoke so it didn't matter to him how good it was. Like the people he was selling it to were going to buy it no matter what. So he wasn't growing it for his own personal taste, which I think changes things. If you're growing it because you want to make the best you can because you want the best you can for yourself, that's a little different than if you're like, I just want it to be a pound. I don't give a shit if it's sticky, green, crystalline, you know. He just wanted it to be a pound worth 4 grand. So he didn't really care as much. He wasn't taking a microscope, a magnifying glass thing and looking at the crystals and that kind of stuff. He didn't care about that kind of stuff.

Not being a marijuana connoisseur or even a run-of-the-mill user and only caring about maximizing financial profit are clear indications that Thom is not only a “commercial” grower, he is a professional drug dealer and therefore not really a member of the social network the other growers belong to. The other growers relish their amateur status, emphasizing that they are “doers” who take pride in their active approach to marijuana cultivation (see Stebbins, 1992, p. 121). Marijuana cultivation is an activity in which the growers within this social network interweave skills, knowledge and talent. This differentiation between doers and dealers is similar to Becker's (1963) description of musicians who distinguish between commercial musicians and true jazz artists. The allure of going commercial, increasing yield to the point that one could generate very large sums of money is always there, however:

There's always the thought of filling up the bedroom to make a couple hundred thousand dollars really quickly. The thought is always there and it is really possible and unfortunately and fortunately it is pretty much that easy. All you have to do is have some time and patience and I guess a stomach of iron to be able to handle that unknown mist and uncertainty and scariness. That's also part of the reason I obviously haven't done that. I really do enjoy my job. We enjoy where we are. I don't necessarily have to grow 50 or 100 or a thousand plants. (Ben)

### **Decline: Exiting From a Marijuana Career**

Through time, all of the growers we interviewed stopped growing for one reason or another. For Angus, moving out of state, starting his career and starting a family with his wife were all factors in why he stopped growing:

I think that they might get into situations where the risk becomes too much because they own a house, they have a baby, there's a lot of stories about people who get their kids taken away if they get caught growing. Or their house forfeited. So I think the threat of asset forfeiture and taking your kids away outweighs the benefits of growing for a lot of people, including me.

Similar to Angus, Ben and Mary took a prolonged hiatus due to the birth of their first child, but aging (Stover, 1983) or phasing out of a deviant drug career (Adler, 1985; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991) due to increased occupational and familial responsibilities is not the only reason to stop. One of the growers we interviewed, living in an apartment complex, was eventually arrested for his growing operation when the plants were discovered following a water leak caused by a faulty hot water heater. While he was offered probation and treatment rather than a prison sentence, the arrest was enough for Jerry to exit out of the growing community and focus on starting his professional career. One grower, Sam, tragically passed away during our study while his growing operation remained at peak production levels.

One grower in our study, Rick, stopped growing very early on in the study, prior to his recorded interview, accepting a position of general manager of a hydroponic gardening store. By doing so, he was able to stay within the community, while being a completely legitimate businessman. This is similar to recovering alcoholics, cocaine, or heroin addicts who become treatment counselors (Brown, 1991). Operating a hydroponic store enables Rick to maintain his passion for horticulture, maintain his identity as a conventional member of society, while also enabling him to remain part of the marijuana growing community through supplying the equipment necessary to successfully progress through a growing career. While no longer growing marijuana, Rick continues to smoke it and mentor others who grow [outside of his occupational life].

Interviewer: Do you regret that you can't do it anymore [grow marijuana]?

Rick: Sometimes but I still get to grow many, many things at my work and I still have that 'in touch' feeling with plants. I always joke around and say to my close friends that it's a noble cause what I'm doing. I feel like I do regret the fact that I can't grow but because of my situation I would never grow unless I stopped working where I am or unless there was a situation that would be safe enough to grow like maybe have one of my friends do it or something, you know help them out. I'm not growing but I am helping the cause you know. I'm helping other people grow so it kinda makes me feel good that I'm educating and helping, selling people the stuff to grow. [laughs]

"The cause," as Rick puts it, is an interesting phenomenon. All of the people in our sample expressed disdain towards federal drug policy, often stating that prohibition is a complete failure on multiple levels. First, it is seen as a waste of taxpayer money and second it is seen as the prime example of government overextending itself into what should be private affairs of citizens. Most of those interviewed expressed that they still felt a closer bond with friends who were against marijuana prohibition and particularly among those who continue to

smoke well into adulthood. There remains an intimate bond among the growers to this day that they do not share with anyone else. This bond is stronger and much different than the bond they share with other users who do not grow marijuana. Interestingly, during follow-up interviews with several of them, the biggest issue the former growers now have (regarding the marijuana marketplace) is finding a steady supplier of a high-grade product that is similar to the marijuana they themselves grew.

### Discussion

The growers in our sample can be seen as one group of people who entered, progressed through, and exited a drug dealing career. Although they no longer cultivate and sell marijuana, many continue to smoke it in states where it remains prohibited both by state and federal law, thus keeping them loosely attached to the deviant marijuana subculture. We have presented this style of indoor marijuana growing as a specific type of deviant career, namely as a serious leisure activity (Stebbins, 2007). Within serious leisure activities a particular ethos develops that is used to convey the spirit of the community. This growing ethos is manifested in the shared attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, and goals that are expressed in the organized social world of marijuana horticulture. Within the growing community, there is a strong sense of cooperation where one grower will teach another grower specific methods for increasing production and growers will watch each other's plants if one grower takes a vacation or must be gone for several days. At the same time there is a healthy competition regarding who makes the "best" marijuana (best tasting; most potent). For example, one legendary strain within this particular community was called AK-47, with clones being distributed and shared so that the strain could continue even after the original grower (Angus) exited the marketplace. The AK-47 strain was used as a benchmark for a peak quality product that newcomers into the growing network could try to match. The sharing, cooperation and healthy competition all culminate into a strong sense of pride and satisfaction one has in growing high-grade marijuana. This pride is only shared among the growers themselves, with other users seen as peripheral to the inner circle of friends and associates who actually produce the products. In this way, the growing ethos helps establish growers as unique, useful doers within their community. Growing thus becomes a source of positive self-esteem and identity reinforcement.

It has been noted in previous research (Hough et al., 2003) that growing marijuana is not just about the money generated from the product. Our findings support this, with growers expressing a love for the plant, in terms of its beauty, smell and taste, as well as in a love for gardening itself. This kind of deviant drug career represents a true blending of conventional norms (producing a high quality product for others who desire it; exhibiting an independent, entrepreneurial spirit) with unconventional, or deviant norms (just because growing marijuana is prohibited by law does not make it wrong; there are many legal products and activities much worse than marijuana use and cultivation). The techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957) or justifications (Scott and Lyman, 1968) our growers used are not unique and in fact are quite consistent with others involved in deviant drug careers (see e.g., Adler, 1985; Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2010; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991). The pull of normality (Meisenhelder, 1977), or aging out of their deviant career due to normative contingencies centered on work and family is also consistent with previous deviant career research. What is fairly unique is that the deviance conducted by our growers is not just neutralized through providing accounts for their unconventional behavior but it is a source of pride and serves as a symbol of political and social justice.

The decriminalization of marijuana remains an ongoing debate in our country, largely rooted in the medicinal and monetary value of the plant (Nadelmann, 1997). There are other considerations such as the expressive value that the serious leisure activity of growing marijuana clearly possesses for many devoted to the activity. The goals of maximizing taste and aroma are similar to the interests found in gourmet coffee roasting or local wine making. People consume all sorts of things that lack any proven benefit, not just alcohol and tobacco, but spices such as pepper, hot sauce, and oregano. Most Americans consume these products daily simply as a matter of personal taste. With that in mind, those who champion decriminalization of marijuana should not be forced to prove the benefits of it, but rather prohibitionists should be forced to prove its dangers. Even then, there are many legal activities rife with danger, such as kayaking through rapids, mountain climbing and flying small aircraft.

Leisure pursuits offer people an arena where they can gain personal expression, enhance self-identity, self-fulfillment and self-development (Stebbins, 2007). Since amateur growers are participating in an unconventional, non-institutionalized activity, there is an ambiguity regarding what they do and why they pursue growing with such passion. These growers are serious about what they do, but this seriousness can lead to misunderstandings from outsiders who generally view it as a frivolous activity one may dabble in but “mature out” of rather quickly. What we discovered is that decline in their growing activities was not a product of age but rather a byproduct of increased tensions between the joy they felt in growing marijuana and the risks involved if they were caught. With increased commitment to conventional family and work structures, the risks that once seemed worthwhile no longer do. If our participants lived in areas where their activities were sanctioned by law, it seems fairly certain many of them would reenter their career as marijuana growers.

The marijuana growers in our sample were quite similar to the growers in Belgium who responded to an internet survey (Decorte, 2010). They are highly educated, young adults (20s-30s), who know about six other growers, all of whom are otherwise law abiding, productive members of their community. Unlike their Belgium counterparts, however, all the growers in our sample ultimately grew indoors, and while sometimes changing the strains of marijuana they grew, each grower attempted to maximize potency as well as output. One weakness of our study is a lack of a comparison group of growers who may grow primarily for profit in states where they are sanctioned to grow. These growers may have different orientations to marijuana growing. That is, rather than a serious leisure activity, professionals may orient to growing rather differently, or they may share many similar thoughts and experiences. Growers in a state where medical marijuana is 100% illegal, like our sample, may have different perspectives and experiences compared to growers in states where growing for medical purposes is permitted. This comparison across state borders is an important aspect to consider for future marijuana research. This change in career dynamics (going from completely deviant to non-deviant) may very well change the characteristics of people who begin growing in the region (perhaps more women become primary growers), the number of growers each person knows, and the overall sense of cooperation and community among growers (that is, the market may revert more to the corporate model rather than the cooperative one). Further sociological research is needed in these areas.

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