



Divergent marijuana trajectories among men: Socioeconomic, relationship, and life satisfaction outcomes in the mid-30s

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ABSTRACT

Background: Given recent changes in marijuana policy in the United States, it is important to understand the long-term effects of marijuana use on adult functioning. We examined whether men who displayed different trajectories of marijuana use from adolescence through emerging adulthood (age ~15–26) differed in terms of socioeconomic, social, and life satisfaction outcomes in their mid-30s.

Methods: Data came from a longitudinal sample of men who were recruited in early adolescence ($N = 506$) and followed into adulthood. Four trajectory groups based on patterns of marijuana use from adolescence into emerging adulthood were compared on adult outcomes (age ~36) before and after controlling for co-occurring use of other substances and several pre-existing confounding factors in early adolescence. The potential moderating effect of race was also examined.

Results: Although there were initially group differences across all domains, once pre-existing confounds and co-occurring other substance use were included in the model, groups only differed in terms of partner and friend marijuana use. Chronic marijuana users reported the highest proportions of both. Frequent and persistent marijuana use was associated with lower socioeconomic status (SES) for Black men only. **Conclusions:** After statistically accounting for confounding variables, chronic marijuana users were not at a heightened risk for maladjustment in adulthood except for lower SES among Black men. Chronic users were more likely to have friends and partners who also used marijuana. Future studies should take into account pre-existing differences when examining outcomes of marijuana use.

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1. Introduction

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the United States (Johnston et al., 2013), and recent changes in marijuana laws in several states have led to increases in use among adolescents (Miech et al., 2015). Given the high and growing prevalence of users, it is critical to understand how chronic heavy use affects later life functioning and adult role attainment. Prospective studies examining the long-term effects of chronic marijuana use on adult functioning are relatively scarce and existing studies have methodological limitations (enumerated below). Expanding on prior research, this study uses longitudinal data from a sample of young men who were followed at least annually from adolescence through their mid-20s to examine the associations of varying trajectories of marijuana use with life functioning in

adulthood (approximate age 36) in terms of socioeconomic, interpersonal relationship, and life satisfaction outcomes. Below we briefly review studies that have assessed these outcomes for varying patterns of marijuana use.

1.1. Socioeconomic outcomes

Many prior studies have found that trajectories of marijuana use are related to adult socioeconomic factors. There is fairly consistent evidence that frequent marijuana users tend to report fewer years of formal education than low or nonusers (Ellickson et al., 2004; Green and Ensminger, 2006; Lynne-Landsman et al., 2010; Patton et al., 2007; Tucker et al., 2005). Similarly, studies have found that abstainers report the highest earnings and heavier users report higher unemployment, higher welfare dependence, lower income, and lower work commitment (Brook et al., 2013; Ellickson et al., 2004; Fergusson and Bowden, 2008; Green and Ensminger, 2006). The group differences for socioeconomic outcomes have remained significant in the few studies that have attempted to control for some confounding factors that pre-date regular use (e.g.,

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family socioeconomic background, family functioning, achievement, cognitive abilities; Fergusson and Bowden, 2008; Green and Ensminger, 2006) and co-occurring other substance use (Fergusson and Bowden, 2008).

1.2. Relationship outcomes

Although several studies have examined the influence of marijuana use on marital status, many assessed marital status at or before age 25 (e.g., Tucker et al., 2005; Patton et al., 2007), which may be too early given that the average age of marriage in the United States in 2008 was 27 for men and 26 for women (Cherlin, 2010). Studies that assessed marriage later in adulthood consistently have found that heavier marijuana use in adolescence and early adulthood is associated with lower rates of marriage (Brook et al., 1999; Green and Ensminger, 2006; Juon et al., 2011) and higher rates of having children out of wedlock (Brook et al., 1999; Green and Ensminger, 2006; Lynne-Landsman et al., 2010; Patton et al., 2007). Nonetheless, few of these studies have controlled for factors that pre-date heavy marijuana use which may impact the formation of positive adult relationships (e.g., parent–child conflict).

In addition to marital status, it is important to examine relationship quality. Researchers typically have found that greater marijuana use during adolescence and emerging adulthood is associated with lower intimate partner relationship satisfaction, cohesion, and harmony, and more conflict (Brook et al., 2008, 2011; Fergusson and Bowden, 2008), even after controlling for potential confounding variables, such as adolescent interpersonal difficulties and parental relationships (Brook et al., 2008) and early family functioning and participant other drug use (Fergusson and Bowden, 2008).

It is also important to consider social relationships more broadly as studies have consistently found that drug users, compared to nonusers, are more likely to have drug-using friends (Pandina et al., 2009) and partners (Homish et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2014). There is a lack of longitudinal studies, however, that have specifically explored the association between early trajectories of marijuana use and later substance use by peers and partners. One exception is a study by Brook and colleagues, which found that chronic marijuana users had the greatest number of partners who used marijuana (Brook et al., 2011) and peers who used illicit drugs (Brook et al., 2013). In addition, we are aware of no longitudinal studies that have examined whether chronic marijuana use across adolescence may negatively impact the formation of a positive social support network more generally in later adulthood.

1.3. Life satisfaction outcomes

Only a few studies have examined the association between patterns of marijuana use and later life satisfaction. Fergusson and Bowden (2008) found that greater marijuana use was related to lower life satisfaction in emerging adulthood, even when controlling for confounding factors (e.g., childhood adjustment, mental health problems, other drug use). Ellickson et al. (2004) reported that abstainers had the highest levels of life satisfaction at age 29, compared to all marijuana trajectory classes, although the early high group did not differ from the other groups.

1.4. Limitations in prior research

There are several limitations in prior work that were addressed in the present analyses. First, many studies were only able to capture marijuana use in adolescence or only at a couple time-points. Second, most studies have not followed participants into the 30s, a developmental period when adult roles and intimate relationships

become increasingly solidified. Third, studies have not been able to comprehensively control for potential confounding factors that pre-date regular marijuana use, which makes it impossible to rule out the possibility that common causal factors account for the association between marijuana use and later adult functioning (Fergusson and Bowden, 2008). Fourth, many studies have failed to account for co-occurring other substance use. It is well known that marijuana users, compared to non-users, are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs (Jackson et al., 2008). Without controlling for other substance use, it is impossible to determine the unique effect of marijuana use on adult functioning.

Finally, only one study that we are aware of examined whether associations between regular marijuana use and adult functioning differ between racial groups. Braun et al. (2000) found that marijuana use was associated with occupational prestige for Whites but not for Blacks and with family income for White men, Black men, and White women but not Black women. However, Braun et al. examined marijuana use only during adulthood and did not examine early use. In addition, they did not account for confounding factors that pre-date regular marijuana use. Given racial differences in adult role attainment, such as lower income and education (Haynie and Payne, 2006), and later and lower rates of marriage (Piquero et al., 2002; Wilson, 1987) among Black, compared to White, individuals, it is important to understand whether the associations between marijuana use and adult functioning differ by race.

1.5. The present study

The purpose of this study was to examine the potential long-term associations between marijuana use and adult role attainment and life functioning among men. We examined whether patterns of marijuana use assessed annually from adolescence through emerging adulthood (approximate age 15–26) were associated with educational/economic achievement, relationship characteristics, and life satisfaction around age 36. Differences were examined before and after controlling for an extensive array of confounding factors that pre-date regular marijuana use and co-occurring other substance use. We expected that chronic marijuana users would report the worst outcomes and nonusers would report the best outcomes but that these group differences would largely be accounted for by early confounding factors and co-occurring other substance use. We also examined whether the association between chronic marijuana use and adult outcomes differed for Black, compared to White, men.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Design

Data came from the oldest cohort of the Pittsburgh Youth Study, a prospective longitudinal study of the development of delinquency, substance use, and mental health problems (Loeber et al., 2008). A random sample of boys enrolled in the 7th grade in Pittsburgh public schools in 1987–1988 was selected for screening; approximately 85% of the target sample ($N \approx 850$) agreed to participate. There were no significant differences between boys who were screened, compared to those who were not, in regard to achievement test scores, parental education, and race (Loeber et al., 2008). All boys who scored in the upper 30% on an index of conduct problems (based on their own, primary caretaker, and teacher reports) were selected for follow-up (hereafter referred to as “at-risk” youth). A random sample of an approximately equal number of boys from the remainder was also selected for the follow-up (total $N = 506$; 54.5% Black, 41.7% White, 3.8% other). At the first

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