



GOING GREEN

An ongoing study among long term cannabis users paints a picture of reluctant skunk smokers whose often low-level addiction has had both good and bad impacts on their lives.

By **Caroline Chatwin and David Porteous**

Much of the academic research conducted thus far into cannabis use tends to focus on young and potentially vulnerable people, who come to the attention of the researchers either by being apprehended by the police or by being referred through treatment programmes. Unsurprisingly, this has led to a focus on the problems that heavy cannabis use can cause, such as truancy, poor educational attainment and developmental problems. There has, in contrast, been a real lack of investigation into people who have been using cannabis for a much longer period. What information there is tends to centre around dependency and mental health issues.

This study attempts to redress the balance somewhat, by using in-depth interviews with lifelong cannabis users to construct a comprehensive and reflective picture of their patterns of cannabis use. It looks at how their use has changed over the years, as well as how it has impacted, either positively or negatively, on several areas of their lives, namely on health, employment and relationships.

In order to participate in this ongoing study, cannabis users must be 35 or older, have been using cannabis for at least 15 years and must be currently using cannabis on at least a weekly basis. These fairly stringent parameters have, thus far, resulted in a small but unique

sample of 23 long term, heavy cannabis users with a strong response bias from white, British, middle class, middle-aged men. Although numbers are currently too low to draw any generalisations about long-term cannabis use, some interesting issues have already been exposed, suggesting further research in this area would be fruitful.

For all the interviewees, cannabis use had become habitualised within their normal routines. They used cannabis frequently, but did not consume particularly large quantities – between an eighth and a quarter ounce a week. All reported that they usually smoke the drug, but many did so without the addition of tobacco. Three of our sample

grew their own supply, but the rest were reliant on sourcing their cannabis from elsewhere.

Most interviewees did not use the type of cannabis they prefer. When asked about their preferred type of cannabis, there were as many answers as there were research participants. Interestingly, however, only one participant mentioned 'skunk' as a preferred type of cannabis – and he was careful to specify that this was only if it was not “commercially grown skunk that is full of chemicals”.

Nearly all, however, stated that, in reality, they would use whatever type of cannabis was available to them at any one time – and that this was usually skunk.

Participants were also asked to reflect on how their patterns of use had changed, as they became more experienced consumers of the drug, over time. Unsurprisingly, all stated that their use had greatly increased over time, as cannabis became more available to them, instead of only being accessed through friends. Many also implicated the practice of using cannabis alone, on top of using with friends, as being a defining factor in continuing use.

Strikingly, these descriptions of long term cannabis use do not adhere to typical addiction narratives; rather they depict a fairly conventional group of adults who happen to be heavy and long-term cannabis users as well as parents, partners and employees.

Respondents attest, without exception and despite their heavy use, to their ability to maintain long periods without use of cannabis, while suffering only mild irritation. Many have taken regular gaps in use, for example while travelling, living abroad or being pregnant. They described their ability to exercise self-control and moderation for a number of reasons – for example when the cost of cannabis use, to their health or wallet was too high, or before a public speaking engagement or a complicated work task. Furthermore, several have taken steps to minimise the health costs by significantly decreasing their tobacco use or by cutting it out all together.

Ultimately, however, the motivational pulls of cannabis use, in terms of both the pursuit of pleasure and the search for relief from pain, remain too strong for a permanent abstinence from the drug to be a realistic consideration.

Notwithstanding the shift to using alone as a defining factor for our respondents in becoming long-term users, all still enjoyed the shared experience of using cannabis with

like-minded friends. For many, using cannabis had become a normal and long-standing activity within their intimate circle, possibly contributing to the longevity of their use.

Close friends, partners and parents were largely cited as condoning and understanding use, rather than providing a censorious response, even if they were not users themselves. It was only in their relationships with children that respondents displayed a lack of openness, suggesting that under certain circumstances, cannabis use retained an element of the taboo. Our group of respondents demonstrated both self control over their use and the ability to 'normalise' its use within their wider lives.

MAJOR MOTIVATIONS FOR LONG-TERM USE WERE THE ENHANCEMENT OF PLEASURE AND GENERAL ENJOYMENT OF LIFE, THE SOCIABILITY OF USE WITH FRIENDS AND THE BOOST TO CREATIVITY

Major motivations for long-term use were the enhancement of pleasure and general enjoyment of life, the sociability of use with friends and the boost to creativity, although the specifics of these proved hard to pin down. Cannabis was described as a 'mood enhancer', a 'catalyst to creativity', a 'relaxant', a 'psychedelic' and a 'disinhibitor'. It was said to provide 'positive thoughts', 'inspiration', 'creativity', 'euphoria' and 'increased sensory information'; to make 'conversations seem to flow more easily', 'music sound fantastic', 'rhythms change, harmonies open up' and to 'let humour bubble to the surface'.

However, more unique to this particular sample was the frequent reference to cannabis as being fundamental to the overall health and well being of participants. All made some reference to the relaxing and stress relieving properties of cannabis and many went further to cite its use in aiding sleep and relieving chronic pain. Some made it clear that they considered

cannabis invaluable in treating particular physical and mental health problems such as depression, Asperger's syndrome, restless leg syndrome and Ankylosing Spondylitis, an inflammatory condition of the joints. These are not motivations for use that are commonly cited amongst younger or less experienced users of cannabis and point to a perceived inability to function normally, for whatever reason, without the use of cannabis.

It was generally acknowledged that cannabis could have both a positive (mainly in terms of boosts to creativity) and a negative (mainly in terms of lack of productivity) impact on work. For example, a retired IT consultant cited his three convictions for cannabis possession as a defining factor in his decision to go freelance and a software developer reported being kicked off a consultancy project when outed by work colleagues as a user. Several others felt that their use of cannabis had closed down certain types of employment opportunities.

Furthermore, nine of the sample had been in contact with the criminal justice system because of their use of cannabis, with sanctions ranging from cautions to convictions and, for one, prison. The most serious consequences, as attributed by the users themselves, of a lifetime of cannabis use came not as a result of its inherent properties and associated harms, but because of the illegal status of the drug itself.

While the use of cannabis, as described by our respondents, can be viewed as a fairly normal part of otherwise healthy and fulfilled lives not necessarily subject to the usual patterns of addiction, it has not been without serious consequences.

If you meet the criteria outlined above and would like to be involved in the ongoing study please contact either Dr Caroline Chatwin at c.chatwin@kent.ac.uk or Dr David Porteous at d.porteous@mdx.ac.uk. Alternatively, the web address printed below will take you directly to an online version of the survey which takes between half an hour and an hour to complete and can be submitted anonymously to the research database. <https://survey.kent.ac.uk/researchproject>

■ **Dr Caroline Chatwin**, lecturer in criminology at the University of Kent and Dr David Porteous, principal lecturer in criminology at Middlesex University