

SELF-ESTEEM AND SUBJECTIVE EFFECTS DURING MARIJUANA INTOXICATION¹

Stephen R. Wilson
Frank Maguire

This study tests the hypothesis that persons varying in self-esteem have different expectations about "getting high" and therefore have different experiences while high. Experienced marijuana users responded to a questionnaire containing Rosenbergs (1965) self-esteem scale and Tart's (1971) items to measure marijuana effects. It was found that low self-esteem respondents were more likely than high self-esteem respondents to report becoming less inhibited, more sociable and more spontaneous when high. They were also more likely to experience anxiety about losing control. The results suggest that for low self-esteem persons, whose ordinary state of consciousness is generally unpleasant, getting high is an "excuse" for moving into a euphoric state. Because this transformation is so dramatic, getting high is more likely to cause anxiety among persons with low as compared to high self-esteem.

Introduction

Researchers such as Weil (1972), Becker (1953) and Goldberger (1966) have argued that an individual's experience while "high" on marijuana will be influenced more by the individual's expectations about what he should or will experience than by the pharmacological characteristics of the drug itself. These expectations would be determined by the social demands of the immediate situation and the norms and attitudes of the larger culture (the setting) as well as by the individual's personality traits (the set). It follows from this perspective that individuals with different personality traits should have different perceptions and expectations about getting "high" and that they would therefore have different subjective experiences during intoxication. While this view is generally accepted, very little direct empirical support is available. This study was carried out to explore the possibility that subjective experiences of being high are related to self-esteem.

Since a wide variety of personality factors could have been used to carry out

Stephen Wilson, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122. Frank Maguire is Lecturer in Sociology, Beaver College and a Ph.D., candidate in sociology at Temple University. A version of this paper was presented at the 1983 Annual Pennsylvania Sociological Conference, Nov. 4-5, Villanova University.

this exploratory research, we will begin by explaining why we decided to use self-esteem. Most research relating personality to drug use has been interested in discovering those personality traits which distinguish between marijuana users and non-users. A great deal of effort, for instance, has been expended in attempts to substantiate the long standing notion that marijuana users suffer from insecurity, self-rejection and low self-esteem (see Ausbel, 1970, Cross and Davis, 1972; Beaubrun and Knight, 1973; Brehm and Back, 1968). According to this view, persons who are not well-adjusted socially and personally are those who turn to marijuana as a means of coping. While a careful reading of these studies suggest that *some* individuals may use marijuana to meet such needs, there is no evidence that low self-esteem is a major distinguishing factor between those who do and do not use marijuana.

Why is there no clear relationship between self-esteem and marijuana use? To begin with, not all individuals who suffer from low self-esteem use drugs as a means of escaping and coping. Peele (1975) suggests that while "addictive personalities," characterized chiefly by low self-esteem, do exist, many of these individuals turn to experiences other than those provided by drugs (e.g., work, gambling, lovers, etc.) to find pleasure and security and many persons use drugs without becoming addicted. What this means is that different people use drugs, including marijuana, for different reasons. This would be particularly true in the case of marijuana which is currently so widely used—recent estimates show that over 16 million Americans have used marijuana (Douglas and Waksler, 1982). For a variety of reasons, including increased availability, "normalization" and decriminalization (see Douglas and Waksler, 1982) smoking marijuana has become a socially accepted recreational activity among young adults at all levels of personal adjustment or mental health. Even, if at an earlier time, marijuana use was correlated with measures of adjustment such as self-esteem, (and this has not been established), no relationship would be expected today because of its widespread popularity. It is not surprising then to find that the single factor which does predict marijuana use is whether a person belongs to a marijuana-using reference group (Becker, 1953; Ginsberg and Greenly, 1978).

While self-esteem does not seem to distinguish between users and non-users, the literature suggests that high and low self-esteem individuals may use marijuana for different reasons. As we designed this study, our educated guess was that individuals who varied in self-esteem would bring to the act of "getting high" distinct expectations which would in turn help create very dissimilar subjective experiences while intoxicated. For instance, studies show that low self-esteem individuals tend to have low self-confidence, are generally anxious and dissatisfied with themselves along different dimensions (Coopersmith, 1967; Luck, 1968). They are also more likely than high self-esteem individuals to find social relationships stressful and to have a great deal of concern about making a positive impression on others. It is such characteristics which Peele (1975:56) suggests distinguishes the "addictive personality." Speaking of such individuals, Peele states:

His is not a pleasant state of affairs. He is anxious in the face of a world he fears, and his feelings about himself are likewise unhappy. Yearning to escape from a distasteful consciousness of his life, and having no abiding purpose to check his desire for unconsciousness, the addict welcomes oblivion.

It should be mentioned again that Peele does not contend that "addictive personalities" necessarily become addicted to drugs and this would be especially true in the case of marijuana which seems to be less conducive to dependency than other drugs. But, it is reasonable to expect, based on Peele's theory, that people with low self-esteem enter into the experience of getting high on marijuana with very different needs and expectations than someone who is more comfortable with their ordinary state of consciousness. We anticipated that low self-esteem individuals would be found to use the act of getting high as a means of moving into a state of consciousness which is drastically different and more pleasant than their everyday experiences of life. Because high self-esteem individuals find everyday life to be more rewarding and would be more generally relaxed than those of low self-esteem, any changes in consciousness initiated by ingesting marijuana should not be dramatic or intense. We would expect that for high self-esteem persons "getting high" would be a pleasant diversion which would also be available to them through means other than using marijuana (see Peele, 1975).

Based on the literature suggesting that an individual's personality (as it affects his or her set) can influence his or her subjective experience while intoxicated, we expected that high and low self-esteem would describe their experiences of being high in different terms. Since we were not certain of the exact form these differences would take, we provided marijuana users, whose self-esteem was also measured, the opportunity to describe their high state of consciousness along a number of different dimensions. The details of the method are described in the section which follows.

Methods

Data for this study was obtained through questionnaires distributed to students in 15 classes at Temple University. The investigators told the students that they were carrying out a study of consciousness and they were assured anonymity. The procedure for the distribution was to give every student in each class a questionnaire. Since the instrument was to be self-administered, students were asked to return the forms, whether filled-out or complete, at the next class meeting. The instrument was so designed that completed forms could not be distinguished from blanks by external examination. Other drop points were established for those who might wish greater anonymity. Respondents were asked to review and complete the instrument in solitude and to avoid discussion of the questionnaire. The authors promised, and provided, lectures on the instrument to participating classes after all returns had been collected.

Instructions on the questionnaire stated that only those students who had used marijuana more than twelve times were invited to participate. While there was no way to guarantee that those who completed the questionnaire had smoked marijuana at least twelve times, several items were inserted into the design to establish credibility and consistency. (e.g., subjects reporting frequent scalp-itch when smoking marijuana would be suspect). None of the completed questionnaires failed the consistency-credibility check. Of the 131 completed questionnaires, six were found to be too incomplete to allow analysis. Thus, our analysis, is based on information provided by 125 respondents.

Self-esteem was measured using seven items of Rosenberg's (1965) scale. Items were in the form of declarative statements with agree or disagree as available responses. Rosenberg (1971:13) reported the reliability of the seven-item scale with

a Coefficient of Reproducibility of 89.4 and a Coefficient of Scalability of 64.6. Analysis of reliability based on the findings of the present study are fully in keeping with Rosenberg's findings. Given the possibility of reactivity, subjects were informed only that the study was directed by interest in human consciousness. A variety of other items were included on the questionnaire, many of which were used to validate the self-esteem measure.¹ These items were intermixed with self-esteem items making it unlikely that respondents could guess that self-esteem was of central interest to the study.

Of particular relevance to this paper are the measures of subjective experiences when high. The subjective experience items were selected from 125 items constructed by Tart (1971). The 30 used in the present study were chosen as being representative of several important dimensions of subjective experience identified by Tart. Each item describes a possible experience or effect and respondents were asked to indicate on a five point scale how often they experienced that effect when high. Many of the items were stated in the following form: I became more _____ when high than when straight. Others were in the form: I experience _____ when high. Available responses were: never, rarely, sometimes, very often, usually.

Rather than examine the correlations between self-esteem and each subjective item, the data were simplified by running a factor analysis on the Tart items (Kim and Mueller, 1978). A factor rotation yielded four factors which we were able to identify and label. Correlations between self-esteem scores and each of the four factors were then computed to determine the nature of the relationship between self-esteem and subjective experiences.

Analysis of the Data

Table 1 contains the results of the factor analysis on the items taken from Tart (1971). Four relatively pure factors emerged and those items with a factor loading of .50 or greater are listed in the table. The high loading items on Factor 1 seem to describe changes in perception and body awareness which occur as a result of marijuana intoxication. Factor 2 consists of items which describe a loosening of inhibitions and ordinary ego functioning ("letting go"). Individuals scoring high on this dimension report becoming more spontaneous, less inhibited, and more likely to engage in novel behavior when "high." Factor 3 consists of items which denote shifts in mental attention and awareness. The last factor we have called "fear of letting go." Those who score high on this factor often have difficulty in allowing their ordinary cognitive and perceptual processes to change as they become intoxicated.

The correlations between each of the four factors and self-esteem are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, there is no relationship between self-esteem and factors 1 and 3. These two dimensions seem to involve effects which almost everyone experiences when intoxicated, so there is no reason to expect self-esteem to affect the frequency with which these effects are experienced. Interestingly, self-esteem is correlated negatively to both "letting go" and "fear of letting go." This may seem paradoxical at first, but if we consider what is known about high and low self-esteem individuals the results become more meaningful.

Let us begin with the low self-esteem individual, who we said would not be satisfied with his or her ordinary consciousness (i.e., his or her everyday experiences in life). Other items in our questionnaire indicate that the subjects with low

Table 1

ITEM CHARACTERISTICS OF FOUR FACTORS EXTRACTED FROM TART ITEMS

<i>Factor Loadings</i>	<i>Item Descriptions</i>
	<i>Factor 1: Perceptual-Sensory Changes</i>
.71	I become aware of parts of my body that I am normally unaware of when straight.
.72	I feel more in contact with the "spiritual" side of things.
.68	I become aware of organ processes that I am unaware of when straight.
.60	Sounds have visual images of colors associated with them.
	<i>Factor 2: Letting Go</i>
.69	I do things without thinking first about "what people will think."
.68	I want to be with and interact with people more.
.57	I talk a lot more than when straight.
.55	I have lost all consciousness of my body and the external world.
.54	I do things I'm normally too inhibited to do (not antisocial acts).
	<i>Factor 3: Cognitive and Attentional Changes</i>
.67	I find it difficult to read while stoned.
.73	If I pay attention to one body part the rest of my body fades away.
.55	Time seems to stop.
	<i>Factor 4: Fear of Letting Go</i>
.72	I worry about losing control, such that I might do something I wouldn't want to do.
.71	I get somewhat paranoid about the people with me.
.56	I find it very hard to play ordinary social games when stoned.

Table 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND THE FOUR FACTORS

	Self Esteem	
Factor 1 Perceptual-Sensory Changes	-.01	(P<.45)
Factor 2 Letting Go	-.21	(P<.01)
Factor 3 Cognitive-Attentional Changes	-.08	(P<.21)
Factor 4 Fear of Letting Go	-.30	(P<.001)

self-esteem scores tended to also be more introspective, introverted, and more inhibited in expressing feelings and wants. It is likely that "getting high" is the only (or perhaps one of the few) ways that low self-esteem individuals can experience spontaneous relaxation and a sense of "letting go." Thus low self-esteem respondents would score high on Factor 1 (letting go) because of the great contrast between their ordinary and intoxicated states of consciousness. High self-esteem individuals would not score as high on these items, not because they do not experience them, but because the contrast between their altered and ordinary state of consciousness is not as great.

If our portrait of low self-esteem individuals as being generally anxious, vigilant and inhibited is correct, we can also understand the negative correlation between self-esteem and the "fear of letting go" factor. The correlation between self-esteem and Factor 2 indicates that low self-esteem individuals do experience a "letting go" when high. The correlation with Factor 4 suggests that low self-esteem individuals are not comfortable with this shift in consciousness. The experience of becoming more relaxed and spontaneous may constitute such a drastic change in their self-awareness that low self-esteem individuals become frightened (see Lindesmith *et al.*, 1975). Those who are generally more relaxed and uninhibited (i.e. high self-esteem respondents) should not witness such a dramatic shift in their behavior and feeling states, so the experience of being intoxicated would not arouse feelings of fear, paranoia or concern about their ability to relate to others.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggests that high and low self-esteem individuals use marijuana to meet different needs and that they actively create experiences, while intoxicated, that are consistent with those needs.

For low self-esteem individuals, "getting high," is an opportunity to move out of a generally negative state of consciousness. Since contemporary researchers agree that the euphoria of the "high" state is not contained in the active ingredients of the marijuana, the individuals using the drug must "work" to create the experience of euphoria. According to Panzarella (1980), peak experiences occur when one's experience of oneself and the world is different *and* this experience is defined as pleasurable. It seems from our data that letting go, acting more spontaneously and uninhibitedly is something that low self-esteem individuals are more likely to experience only when high.

According to Weil and Rosen (1983) "Highs exist within the human nervous system: all drugs do is trigger highs or provide an excuse to notice them" (170). According to Peele (1982) drugs work because they are perceived as "magical solutions" which, along with love and sex, provide escapes from the dissatisfactions of daily life. Likewise Wilmot (1984) contends that drugs produce euphoria (as well as addiction) because they are believed in by the users. In Weil's terms, marijuana is an "active placebo which works, much like a sugar pill," to bring about a more pleasant state because it is expected to. Just as individuals are variously susceptible to the power of sugar pills (see Frank, 1974), it seems that individuals vary in the extent to which they believe in the power of psychoactive drugs. In short, drugs can be used to induce pleasurable as well as unpleasurable experiences because individuals believe that the drug has that power.

Peele (1975) has written: "People's estimate of a drug's power over them reflects their estimate of their own essential strengths and weaknesses" (p. 54). From what

we have pieced together from the literature on self-esteem, the literature on drug use and the results of our study, it seems safe to say that low self-esteem individuals tend to fully accept the notion that marijuana has the power to provide them with experiences which are more pleasurable than those faced in everyday life. By becoming more sociable, outgoing, less inhibited, more spontaneous, they feel themselves to be transformed by the chemical ingredients of marijuana to become "selves" whose behavior is intrinsically rewarding and in line with their idealized self-conception.

But placing oneself under the "power" of marijuana can also have its drawbacks. First, although low self-esteem individuals may "get high" in order to behave and feel differently, other components of the set and setting may not be conducive to such a transformation. There is always the possibility of a "bum trip." Secondly, to the extent that a person believes that marijuana contains the power to cause euphoria, they most likely also perceive themselves as weak and controllable which makes them feel bad about themselves. This is especially true in a society such as ours, where puritanism and the protestant work ethic still have such a firm grip. While people use drugs in order to experience a more pleasurable state, they often are very ambivalent about this because of its implication for their character. As Douglas and Waksler (1982:222) point out, "the experience of *too much pleasure* is seen as dangerous because of the strong motivation it provides for continued and increased drug use." Thus for those with low self-esteem, who seem to depend upon getting high to feel good, such ambivalence would be especially strong. This would explain why low self-esteem respondents in our study were more likely than high self-esteem respondents to score high on the various items comprising the factor "fear of letting go."

While the high self-esteem individuals who use marijuana seem to experience the same perceptual and cognitive changes as low self-esteem individuals, and, no doubt, experience these changes as pleasurable, they appear to experience less drastic alteration in their sense of self (Lindesmith, Strauss and Denzin, 1975). Because they have fewer inner conflicts and inhibitions and because they have a wider range of options in seeking pleasure, they do not need to rely on the placebo actions of marijuana to be transformed and to experience pleasure. Rather, marijuana helps them to relax and feel good and little more is expected. Since "getting high" is not viewed as a powerful transforming experience, the high self-esteem individual need not fear losing personal control when intoxication occurs as does the low self-esteem individual.

When individuals agree to get together to get stoned, they may be anticipating very different experiences. For some it may be an occasion to relax with good friends and to enjoy the diversion of intoxication. For others it may be an occasion to escape the "selves" they usually are and to assume a whole new personality. We would expect that those in this latter category (those with low self-esteem) would most likely follow the patterns of behavior which Peel (1975) ascribed to the "addicted personality"—for instance an increased frequency of use and increased dosage over time. In addition, we would expect that these individuals would show these patterns in other areas of their life as well (e.g., in the areas of eating, sex, work, etc.). While the present study was not designed to measure such variables, this seems to be a fruitful line of research for the future.

NOTES

1. Other items consisted of 84 questions selected from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway and McKinley, 1943), the Maudsley Personality Inventory (Eysenck, 1959), the Personal Orientation Inventory (Shostrom, 1964) and the Pittsburg Scales (Bendig, 1962).

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