

## Marijuana use motives and social anxiety among marijuana-using young adults

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### Abstract

Given the high rates of co-occurring marijuana use and social anxiety, the present investigation examined the relations among marijuana use motives, marijuana use and problems, and social anxiety in 159 (54.7% female) young adults ( $M_{age} = 18.74$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ). As expected, after covarying for a number of variables related to both marijuana use and social anxiety (e.g. gender, alcohol use problems, anxiety sensitivity), social anxiety predicted greater numbers of marijuana use problems. Interestingly, social anxiety was not related to marijuana use frequency. Also consistent with prediction, social anxiety was a significant predictor of coping and conformity motives for marijuana use above and beyond relevant variables. Finally, coping motives for marijuana use mediated the relation between social anxiety and marijuana use problems. These data provide novel evidence for the unique effects of coping-motivated marijuana use in the link between marijuana-related impairment and social anxiety.

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### 1. Introduction

Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States (U.S.) and internationally (Project MATCH Research Group, 2004). The use of marijuana is particularly common among young adults, with increasing prevalence rates being reported through the 1990's (Johnson, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2001).

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Marijuana use in college students is especially high with 60–73% of college students reporting lifetime use of the substance (Bell, Wechsler, & Johnston, 1997; McMillan & Conner, 2002) and approximately one-third of college students endorsing current use (Kilmer et al., 2006). These high rates of marijuana use among young adults are cause for concern given that marijuana is associated with a variety of problems in social, health, and occupational/educational realms (Reilly, Didcott, Swift, & Hall, 1998).

Research has begun to identify factors related to marijuana use among young adults. Negative emotional states in general, and anxiety in particular, appear to convey risk for use (Patton et al., 2002). According to tension-reduction models, individuals use substances to decrease negative affect states like anxiety (Conger, 1956). Consistent with this model, marijuana users report increased use during times of affective distress (Kaplan, Martin, Johnson, & Robbins, 1986) and relief from tension is the most common reason given for their marijuana use (Hathaway, 2003; Reilly et al., 1998). The expectation that using marijuana will reduce negative affect is associated with marijuana use among undergraduates (Schafer & Brown, 1991). In regard to anxiety more specifically, marijuana users appear to use marijuana because they believe that the drug helps to manage anxiety (Hathaway, 2003; Osborne, Smart, Weber, & Birchmore-Timney, 2000; Zvolensky, Bernstein, Marshall, & Feldner, 2006).

Social anxiety is one form of anxiety that is associated with particularly high rates of problematic marijuana use. Social anxiety refers to a type of anxiety experienced in or in anticipation of social and/or performance situations for fear of negative evaluation. Recent studies have suggested that marijuana dependence is associated with high rates of social anxiety (Buckner et al., *in press*). For example, the National Comorbidity Study (NCS) indicated that individuals with social anxiety are *seven times* more likely to experience marijuana-related impairment relative to the general population (Agosti, Nunes, & Levin, 2002). The NCS data also indicate that there may be some specificity between marijuana use problems and social anxiety, as the rate of marijuana dependence among individuals with social anxiety disorder was more than twice that of any other anxiety disorder. In a longitudinal investigation, after controlling for relevant Axis I psychopathology, adolescent social anxiety disorder (but not other anxiety or depressive disorders) was linked to greater rates of marijuana dependence at age 30 (Buckner et al., *in press*). These data further support the contention that social anxiety increases risk for marijuana use disorders. Consistent with studies focused on clinical conditions, other reports indicate that daily marijuana users report significantly higher levels of social anxiety symptoms than individuals who use marijuana less regularly (Oyefeso, 1991) and that college students with greater social anxiety symptomatology demonstrate greater numbers of marijuana use problems (Buckner, Mallott, Schmidt, & Taylor, 2006; Buckner, Schmidt, Bobadilla, & Taylor, 2006).

Although there is a link between social anxiety and marijuana use *problems* in clinical (Agosti et al., 2002; Buckner et al., *in press*; Lynskey et al., 2002) and college samples (Buckner, Mallott et al., 2006; Buckner, Schmidt, Bobadilla et al., 2006) it remains unclear whether social anxiety is related to a greater *frequency* of marijuana use. We know of only one study that has examined the relation between frequency of marijuana use and social anxiety (Oyefeso, 1991). This report examined social anxiety among male undergraduate marijuana users and found daily marijuana users demonstrated higher levels of social anxiety relative to individuals who used marijuana less frequently. Although this study is limited by the exclusion of female marijuana users, this finding suggests that at least some socially anxious marijuana users may use marijuana more frequently than non-socially anxious marijuana users.

The question arises as to why social anxiety, in particular, is associated with such high rates of marijuana-related impairment. Uncovering pathways through which marijuana-related impairment may emerge among socially anxious individuals is a critical step for research in this area. Motivational

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