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A qualitative exploration of the psychosocial risk factors, experiences and implications of cannabis use amongst young men

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study was to examine young men's experiences of recreational cannabis use in order to gain an understanding of why they choose to smoke cannabis despite the widely reported risks, their perception of relevant risk factors and how they justify their actions in relation to broader social frameworks. Following an extensive literature review, it was evident that a large proportion of quantitative research focussed on associated risk factors, therefore ignoring the importance of rational choice and agency relating to cannabis consumption and providing a shallow understanding of why cannabis is so popular amongst this particular group. The research therefore utilised semi-structured interviews in order to gain accounts from six men, aged 18-24. Three themes were subsequently developed using thematic analysis, and considered within a social constructionist theoretical framework: resisting the 'druggy' stereotype, peer influence and the relational implications and looking towards the future. Through consideration of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990), the research illustrated the necessity for young men to construct identities based on responsible consumption of cannabis in order to make their actions intelligible within relative cultural contexts, therefore justifying their actions as rational despite awareness of the potential negative consequences of their cannabis use.

| KEY WORDS: | CANNABIS | RISK FACTORS | YOUNG MEN | SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM | POSITIONING THEORY |
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**Introduction**

**Initiation into the world of drugs – risk factors**
Cannabis was the most commonly used illegal drug in the UK in 2012/2013, with 6.4% of adults aged 16 – 59 using cannabis in the previous year, with that number rising to 13.5% of young adults aged 16 – 24 (Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2013). Due to this, cannabis use and the potential consequences of sustained use has been the subject of extensive research in the UK (Di Forti et al., 2014; Stone et al., 2014; Miller and Plant, 2002).  Research examining drug use has generally been centred upon two main tenets: factors that influence the initiation of drug use and the implications of continued drug use (Peele, 1998). Research surrounding initiation of drug use has focussed upon the psychosocial influences on commencement of drug use in order to understand the associated risk factors. These risk factors have been statistically associated with an increased probability of drug use (Kandel, Simcha-Fagan, and Davies, 1986; Simcha-Fagan, Gersten, and Langner, 1986). Hawkins, Catalano and Miller (1992) argued these risk factors can be divided into two categories. Firstly, broad societal factors, for example legalisation of medical cannabis in America, led to increased recreational use amongst adolescents (Wall et al., 2011; Harper, Strumpf and Kaufman, 2012). Also, factors that lie within an individual and their interpersonal environment, e.g. maternal control patterns, are important in explaining adolescent cannabis use (Brook et al., 1990)

Nation and Heflinger (2006) conducted a review of the psychosocial risk factors associated with adolescent drug use and suggested that the factors that are most effective in explaining cannabis use are: psychological functioning, family environment, peer relationships and stressful life events. In terms of family environment, research has indicated the quality of parental relationships as a significant predictor of cannabis use (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). Peer relationships also provide a useful insight into adolescent drug use. Bailey and Hubbard (1991) observed that the onset of cannabis use was predicated on adolescent's beliefs regarding the number of their friends using cannabis and also the frequency of their friend's use. This relationship between adolescents and their peers is reciprocal in nature as an adolescent's use also predicted increased perceived peer drug use amongst peers (Curran, Stice and Chassin, 1997).

Unlike Hawkins, Catalano and Miller (1992) who focussed on the identification of different risk factors, Nation and Heflinger (2006) considered the relationship between various risk factors. They suggested that the relationship between risk factors appears to be additive, as the number of reported risk factors by adolescents predicted frequency of drug use (Newcombe, 1995). However, Nation and Heflinger's (2006) focus on adolescents entering treatment has been criticised as these individuals display a propensity for drug dependence as opposed to recreational use, with research suggesting that constitutional factors such as genetics play a dominant role in the development of drug dependence, thus reducing the importance of psychosocial factors (Weinberg, 2001). Hence, this qualitative exploration of cannabis use examined psychosocial aspects of drug initiation as the intended sample will be recreational rather than dependent users.

**Explaining risk factors – the theory**
It is evident from the research that an individual's social and familial environment play an important role in the initiation of drug use. A number of theories have attempted to explain why these factors play such a vital role, with focus being placed on the importance of socialisation in development of risky behaviours such as drug use. Oetting and Beauvais (1987) based their theoretical explanation of drug use around socialisation in addition to the role of identification with peer groups. According to their peer cluster theory, socialisation factors play an important underlying role in drug use, as these factors interact with adolescent development in order to create peer clusters that either encourage or dissuade against drug involvement. These socialisation factors are also affected by variables such as religious identification and strength of family ties. The resulting peer relationships create a powerful context in which risky behaviours develop (Allen et

al., 2012), with the interaction between peer selection and socialisation facilitating the development of these behaviours (Burk et al., 2012; Mercken et al., 2010; Urberg et al., 2011).

**Consequences of cannabis use**

It has been well documented that regular cannabis use increases the risk of a range of psychosocial outcomes, such as: crime, mental health problems, other forms of illicit drug use and unemployment (Fergusson and Horwood, 2000; Luthar and Cushing 1997; Poulton et al. 1997; Miller-Johnson et al. 1998; Weinberg et al. 1998; Johns, 2001). Research conducted in Australia identified a number of consequences of long term cannabis use. They found the most commonly reported negative effects were feelings of anxiety, paranoia and depression in addition to tiredness, lack of motivation and the effects of smoking on the respiratory system. A number of participants also reported cannabis related criminal charges. On the other hand, participants also reported a number of positive aspects of their cannabis use such as relief of tension (Reilly et al., 1998). Another widely reported study on the implications of cannabis suggested that persistent use is associated with neuropsychological decline, with adolescent-onset users showing a greater IQ decline than adult-onset users and cessation not fully restoring neuropsychological functioning (Meier et al, 2012).

**Why is a qualitative exploration of male cannabis use necessary? – Looking beyond risk factors**

Identifying risk factors associated with cannabis use has been an important development in understanding its prevalence in the UK. However, implicit within much of this research has been the notion that young adults are deterministically led into cannabis use due to an interaction between various risk factors, hence the notion of choice and agency has been neglected within quantitative research. Measham, Newcombe and Parker (1994) therefore conceptualise drug use as a series of rational choices about consumption, as opposed to an uninformed response to peer pressure, due to the normalisation of recreational drug use amongst mainstream youth culture (Parker, Aldridge and Measham, 1998). As a result of this, consumption provides a key resource in young adult's identity formation (Miles, 2000), with consumption of illicit substances becoming an influential element in the creation and negotiation of youth cultural identities (Duff, 2003). This reinforces the 'individualistic morality of our consumer culture' (Garland, 2001:198). However, placing too much emphasis on how individual choices are made regarding risks, in the context of information rich environments, obscures consideration for the structural determinants of drug use (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002; Shildrick, 2002). It is therefore necessary to recognise the role of agency and choice located within the broader structural frameworks in the UK (Measham and Shiner, 2009).

This study therefore explored the nature of young adult's identity construction in order to understand how cannabis use is intelligible in terms of these identities and cultural frameworks. This also involved consideration of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) to comprehend the meanings young men attach to their actions associated with cannabis use within the local moral domain, with private discourse considered within cultural contexts in relation to larger normative systems in which their actions are embedded (Harré et al., 2009). A more detailed investigation of the circumstances and social context surrounding initial cannabis use was required to understand why it is so popular for males during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). More needed to be understood regarding the personal experiences of cannabis users. The use of qualitative methods therefore facilitated an in-depth exploration of a number of these different aspects of cannabis use from, arguably, the most important perspective: cannabis users.

## Method

### Design and Data Collection

The research utilised semi-structured interviews, as this method facilitated the production of a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of cannabis users through provision of an open platform in which they could honestly express their experiences surrounding their cannabis use. Semi-structured interviews ensured the main topics of the research were thoroughly discussed whilst providing the freedom to explore different topics relating to the experiences of cannabis users that were not identified during background research (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). This approach was grounded within a contextual epistemological assumption that is founded on the belief that all knowledge and experience is provisional and situation dependent (Madill et al. 2000). Thus, the utilisation of semi-structured interviews facilitated an exploration of these important contextual issues relating to cannabis use and how these issues influenced an individual's perceptions of their experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. These experiences were therefore considered in terms of social constructionist epistemology, as meanings are discursively produced through social relationships (Burr, 2003). This methodology helped develop an understanding of the interpretations young men attach to their experiences, within Anglo-centric cultural and social frames of reference, and therefore advocated a relativist ontological approach to the study of being. However, the importance of this relative contextual understanding of experience was also considered from a critical realist perspective as the underlying social structures influence rather than directly determine behaviour (Bhaskar, 1991).

The research involved interviewing six participants who were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criteria that they currently smoked cannabis recreationally and were aged between 16 to 24. In addition to this, the research only focussed on the experiences of male cannabis users. This was due to the fact that the prevalence of cannabis use amongst male adults (8.6%) is more than double that of female adults (4.1%), therefore the research focussed on exploring the reasons for this prevalence amongst males. Also, it is difficult to gain access to a female sample of cannabis users; this is linked to the lower prevalence of cannabis use amongst females but can also be attributed to differing attitudes between genders in regards to cultural and social constructions of drug use and its link to gendered socialisation and identity (Anderson, 2001). Although females were not part of the sample in this study, this does not mean that female cannabis use is not an important topic for investigation.

Interviewees were known to the researcher prior to the study, this was beneficial as a rapport was developed prior to the research which enabled the them to feel comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics, as Schafer and Navarro (2003:39) suggest 'a person reveals no secrets without rapport'. They were asked to contribute to the research through an invitation email (Appendix C), which provided a brief outline of the proposed research, with more detail regarding the research being offered through the consent form (Appendix B) and interview schedule (Appendix F). Their contribution to the research involved participation in a one-hour interview which was undertaken in a location chosen through discussion with them, and provided an environment in which they were comfortable discussing a range of topics surrounding their cannabis use. Due to the illegality of its use and the associated stigma it was essential to hold the interview in a private location which was not at the interviewee's house due to the proximity of parents and the potential for their presence to disrupt or influence responses. Interviewees were also given a debrief sheet (Appendix E) subsequent to the interview which provided contact details of the researcher if they had any queries regarding the research. Also, due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed, they were provided with contact details of organisations that provide information and support for drug users, such as the 'Frank' helpline and 'Addaction' website.

**Data Analysis**

In order to analyse the extensive textual data produced by semi-structured interviews effectively and inclusively, thematic analysis was utilised to derive important overarching themes within the data which were subsequently linked to theoretical assumptions and relevant previous research. Thematic analysis required a deep immersion within the data in order to produce an extensive understanding of the different perspectives and experiences put forward by participants that were implicit and explicit in the data whilst also capturing the complexity of meaning within the textual data set (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012).

The process of analysing data through thematic analysis involved a number of non-sequential stages. Firstly, familiarisation with the data was required to produce an immersive understanding of the depth and breadth of interviewee's accounts, as any potential codes needed to be understood in the context of the interview as a whole. This was done initially through transcription of the interviews and repeated reading of the completed transcription (Reissman, 1993). Next, salient material within the data was identified and descriptively coded with brief comments made in regards to the relevance of each code in understanding interviewee's experiences and perceptions surrounding cannabis use (see Appendix G for annotated transcript). These descriptive codes were subsequently refined and grouped based on shared meaning and used to develop interpretive codes that captured this shared meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Finally, these interpretative codes were used to create three overarching themes which reflect the meaningful coherence between these codes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Following creation of these three themes, theoretical assumptions were considered in order to understand the themes in the context of previous research in terms of how they supported or questioned previous findings.

The use of thematic analysis therefore facilitated a deeper understanding of the meanings participants attached to particular experiences associated with cannabis use which gave an insight into the reasons why they choose to smoke cannabis, their perceptions of the risk factors and implications of cannabis use. It also provided the flexibility to generate unanticipated insights into participant's experiences due to the deep immersion and understanding of the textual data set.

**Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research**

Ethical principles are concerned with ensuring the dignity, safety and rights of interviewees were maintained throughout the research. The study was based around exploration of potentially sensitive topics which may have evoked negative emotional responses, however this was justified as it was a necessary part of understanding people's experiences surrounding cannabis use. This drew upon principles of utilitarian ethics, which suggested that respect for interviewees should be guaranteed through their right to participate voluntarily with adequate information about what the research involved; this was gained through provision of a participant information sheet (Appendix B) and consent form. Utilitarianism also emphasises the importance of beneficence in ensuring the well-being of participants through minimisation of potential harm, hence the discussion of sensitive topics was not excessive and remained relevant to the research. Justice was also considered in terms of the fair distribution of benefits and burdens of the research (King and Horrocks, 2010). It may appear unjust to ignore the experiences of female cannabis users in this research, however the male only sample was a reflection of the increased likelihood males have of smoking cannabis.

This rational approach to ethical research was built upon to develop a more localised morality, with shared governance of the research involving collaboration with the interviewees (Denzin, 2002). This was achieved through a process of negotiation whereby the interviewees were able to suggest other important topics to be discussed which were not presented on the interview schedule. Part of this negotiation involved gaining 'process consent' (Ramos, 1989) ensuring interviewees were comfortable with the topics discussed during the interview and aware of their right to withdraw throughout the research process. The British Psychological Society code of

ethics was adhered to during the research (see Appendix F for ethical approval form), as no deception was required and interviewees were debriefed following the research (see Appendix D) and given access to the completed report. The anonymity of participants was ensured through the provision of a pseudonym during the research, also their personal information remained confidential and was treated with respect and discretion.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Theoretical Underpinnings of Analysis
Utilising the methodological framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. This led to identification of three prominent themes within the data set that reflected the construction of individual experience in relation to culturally relative expectations of behaviour regarding cannabis use.  The relative experience of interviewees was therefore considered from the perspective of positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990), as it suggests individual experience should be considered in terms of the meaning that is attached to experiences in relation to principles within the local moral domain (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). Thematic analysis therefore provided the means to explore interviewee's experiences, expressed through discourse, which reflect high order acts of positioning through which rights and duties of cannabis users are distributed (Harré et al., 2009). The positioning of individuals was considered through the epistemological lens of social constructionism as these positions were negotiated through linguistic expression (Burr, 2003) and can be understood as discursive constructions of personal story lines that make actions intelligible within particular social contexts (Harré and Langenhove, 1991). Following a Vygotskian framework, this expression of personal storylines through private discourse, and the meaning and structure of private discourse, was considered within a cultural context, in relation to larger normative systems in which a their experience was embedded (Harré et al., 2009).

### Theme 1: Resisting the 'Druggy' Stereotype
One of the most prominent aspects of young men's cannabis use was the notion that despite regularly using a potentially damaging and addictive drug (Budney and Hughes, 2006), they expressed an ability to maintain a level of responsibility in order to avoid possible detrimental effects. A requisite for responsible use was an ability to prioritise other important aspects of their life above cannabis, such as employment and relationships. According to Ben, an important aspect of this was having positive reasons for deciding to smoke cannabis:

Ben: *"If you are using it for the right reasons, if you are prepared to limit your usage and if you prioritise other things over it I don't see it having a negative effect."* (Interview: 1, Line: 655 - 656)

This account reflects Ben's desire to maintain a level of control over his cannabis use, through limited usage and prioritiasation, therefore allowing him to position himself as having control over his actions and maintaining a level of responsibility over his cannabis use. Previous research has shown that the construction of an acceptable drug user identity is difficult to achieve for both recreational and regular drug users (McCoy et al., 2005; Rødner, 2005; Soller and Lee, 2010). However, interviewees felt able to challenge attributions ascribed to the social representations of cannabis users, thereby negotiating new positions.  Part of this negotiated positioning involved resistance of relative cultural stereotypes associated with cannabis use, therefore first order positioning within a moral space was questioned and rejected in favour of a negotiated second order position (Harré and Langenhove, 1991). These cultural stereotypes are the product of moral judgements relating to the illegality of cannabis, therefore to negotiate a position pertaining to responsible use, interviewees separated moral and legal domains. John therefore compares the context of his cannabis use to the more socially acceptable activity of drinking to highlight the disparity between attitudes towards legal and illegal drug use:

John: *"if I told them I drink every weekend it shouldn't really affect someone's view of me and on the same level if I tell people I enjoy a spliff when I come home I think personally that shouldn't affect someone's view on me but the fact it is classified how it is in our society causes people to see it as a sort of criminal thing so see you as a bit of a questionable character"* (Interview 6, Line 216 - 218)

John is evidently aware of the potential to be positioned as a 'questionable' or even 'criminal' character due to the illegality of cannabis. He therefore avoided speaking openly about his cannabis use to colleagues as this would create an identity that would be contrary to the identity he had constructed within this social context. This is indicative of the tacit nature of forced self-positioning where cultural representations are the product of assumptions relating to particular characteristics of drug users, prescribed by others. Therefore these young men separate the notion of legality and morality in order to express their desire to be considered morally acceptable whilst participating in something illegal. John's quote, similar to other interviewee's accounts, reflects the necessity for cannabis users to construct various social representations which allow individuals to position themselves in a variety of ways relative to the symbolic field of particular cultural contexts (Duveen, 1993). These negotiated identities help to orient themselves towards particular social norms and therefore create an image which can be perceived by others to reflect a person who conforms to social norms both legally and morally. The 'moral quality' (Andreouli, 2010) created by this particular position, external to the local domain associated with cannabis users, is therefore associated with a different set of rights and duties which are constrained by socially constructed expectations of acceptable behaviour.

Another important facet of positioning as responsible cannabis users was the justification of cannabis use as a 'tool' to facilitate creativity as opposed to a necessary means of escapism associated with drug use (Cannon, 1976). A prominent aspect of this creativity, as expressed by Tom and other interviewees, was to facilitate music production:

Tom: *"The main thing for me is getting into smoking weed and sort of carrying on was when I made music, so whenever I get more creative basically when I smoke weed. So it wasn't anything to do with like, at first I was just trying it and the reason why I carried on wasn't linked with like depression"*
(Interview 2, Line 207 – 210)

Tom therefore rejected the idea that cannabis is mainly used to avoid rumination on negative experience and alleviate negative emotions in favour of viewing cannabis as a means to facilitate positive experiences. This reflected the generally held view within the interviews that there are particular settings in which cannabis is most beneficial and least detrimental to everyday functioning. The binary division of responsible and irresponsible use, reflected in Tom's quote by the comparison of facilitating creativity relating to music and cannabis as a means of escapism from depression or an unhealthy family life, can be conceptualised in similar terms to Butler's (1990) view of identity i.e. the binary division of heterosexual identity. Similar to Butler's view, these categories are not essentialist with predefined terms, rather they are arbitrary and normatively constructed categories defined in opposition to each other (Ravn, 2012).

The notion of responsible cannabis use is therefore considered in relation to dominant societal discourse about drug use, individualisation and health and is situated within wider societal values regarding the questionable nature of drug consumption. Despite being a distinct cultural group with separate moral duties and values, this culture is embedded within prevailing discourses and normative values of society. Therefore, the combination of an illegal activity with the notion of responsibility is necessary for the development and presentation of a coherent self (Ravn, 2012).

**Theme 2: Peer Influence and the Relational Implications of Cannabis Use**

It is assumed that initiation into drug use, usually through cannabis, is the product of interaction between various risk factors including association with particular peer groups (Nation and Heflinger, 2006). Within cultural representations of drug use, peer pressure is seen to be one of the most influential factors in an individual's decision to use drugs (Bahr et al., 2005). However, interviewees rejected the notion of peer pressure due to the negative connotations and the loss of autonomy associated with it. Tom therefore attempted to explain his initial cannabis use as not resulting from peer pressure, but his experience essentially reflects the basic principles of peer pressure:

Tom: "*I don't want to say peer pressure but more just being around people who did it, who were a lot older than me and it was normal... I was just too young around some people who were just too old sort of thing and y'know it just got offered to me and I didn't say no*" (Interview 2, Line 31 - 34)

This suggests that, for Tom, association with drug using peers was an important factor in initiation of cannabis use, with age being particularly salient relative to the age of other peers at the time of initial use, which is reflected in the use of "too young" and "too old". Tom's experience of initial cannabis use therefore provides the most stark example of the potential effects of peer pressure. However, interviewees such as Ben and John, who reported trying cannabis at an older age, position themselves as having agency and the ability to make a conscious decision based on viewing the effects of cannabis on other people and perceiving these effects to be desirable. Harré et al. (2009) suggest that rather than being the product of peer pressure, agreement with the majority is the product of conformity to local norms of agreeable behaviour and positioning themselves alongside their peers by conforming to these norms. Agreement is therefore not the product of a deterministic robotic response, rather it is the ability to select an option from various possibilities. This is supportive of previous qualitative research examining introduction into drug use, with individuals expressing a high degree of autonomy in choosing to become involved in a drug taking culture (Fast et al., 2009), therefore conceptualising young adult drug use as a series of 'rational decisions about consumption' (Parker, Aldridge, Measham, 1998:154) as opposed to an uninformed response to peer pressure and the product of personal passivity (Mayock, 2005), as found in Tom's quote.

This identity construction through cannabis use becomes mutually reinforcing as their perceived similarities to other cannabis users lead them to seek out other cannabis users which in turn further supported the acceptability of their cannabis use within their cultural framework:

John: *"The fact you smoke cannabis brings you into contact with other people that smoke cannabis, you make friends with them and become part of social circles which everyone is comfortable with smoking cannabis and everyone does smoke cannabis regularly. So y'know you become part of a culture and a lifestyle"* (Interview 6, Line 179 - 181)

John's account provides support for the idea that the relationship between adolescents and their peers is reciprocal in nature, as use is predicted by increases in perceived drug use amongst peers (Curran, Stice and Chassin, 1997). Also, John normalised his actions as appropriate to this cultural group and associated lifestyle. By positioning himself within this particular group, similarly to other interviewees, John's moral values and duties can therefore be seen as the product of identity construction through a relational and dynamic process (Andreouli, 2010). This deliberate self-positioning within cannabis using sub-culture is the product of identity construction through self-other relations, as the meanings they attach to their experiences within the group help them to structure their social world. These meanings, i.e. choosing to smoke cannabis due to the desirable effects, and deliberate self-positioning as an autonomous individual with the ability to make rational and informed decisions, are the two components of young men's social identities (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990).

Inclusion within these groups and association with the more general drug using sub-culture can also have implications in terms of further drug use. Typically, the gateway effect suggests cannabis use can lead to an increased risk of progression onto more dangerous drugs (Morral, McCaffrey and Paddock, 2002). Frank reported coming into contact with more serious drugs as a result of his association with cannabis using peers. However, rather than being overtly influenced by them, he explains his further drug use was the product of making a conscious decision to explore the effects of other drugs:

Frank: *"I don't think anyone is stupid enough to go 'oh well I smoke weed so let's try this really strong drug how bad can it be' sort of thing, I don't think anyone is that stupid, its' either you want to do it or you don't"* (Interview 3, Line 337 – 339)

Frank suggested that anyone who is led into further drug use, not through their own choice, is 'stupid' and irresponsible, thereby distancing himself from that assumption and positioning himself as intelligent and capable of making informed choices about his actions. This serves to reject the socially constructed moral duties associated with cannabis users which suggests their desire to use stronger drugs is the product of a physiological need for a greater 'high'. Rather, it is influenced by various factors including gaining reassurance from peers to allay fears regarding the potential risks portrayed in the media and a desire to use different drugs in appropriate social contexts. Through deliberate self-positioning, as rational individuals capable of making informed choices, all interviewees rejected the deterministic view that they were led in to further drug use without having any influence on their decision to do so. This emphasis on agency, i.e. the presentation of their actions as the result of a choice relating to various possibilities, reflects the deliberate self-positioning within the interviews as a means to express their identity (Harré and Langenhove, 1991).

## Theme 3: Looking Towards the Future

As reflected in the previous two themes, these young men generally disputed the detrimental nature of cannabis use and argued that with responsibility and a level of self-awareness they were likely to avoid many of the potential implications of prolonged use. Frank, along with all the other interviewees, therefore expressed his intentions to continue to use cannabis in the near future as long as it did not have a noticeably damaging effect on other aspects of his life:

Frank: *"At the moment I'm not worried at all because I've felt fine over the past few weeks when I've been smoking it, I might feel fine for the moment but you never know how it's going to affect you later on… So I think if I get the balance right and I'm not smoking it like I was doing then I think I should be fine and as long as it's not affecting your job and I suppose your social life which it isn't really"* (Interview 3, Line 262 – 267)

This suggests, despite being aware of the potential risks, Frank justifies his cannabis use by arguing that if he maintains a level of awareness and foresight of the potential risks he is less likely to experience the negative effects in the future. Despite this, all interviewees express a desire to eventually either limit their use or abstain completely when their identity changes from that of a young adult, where cannabis use is seen as less socially unacceptable, to a more mature adult, with more important commitments and responsibilities including having a family and being in a long term relationship:

Ben: "*I think the main thing that would curb my use in the future would be, erm, responsibility such as kids and family. I mean for example if I had a kid I would certainly limit my usage drastically in that I would never smoke it with a kid in the house. Erm, so I mean in the next 2 – 3 years I can't see myself stopping using it drastically but as I grow up and approach 30 I'm gonna have to sort of make some decisions about what I'm gonna get from it moving forward"*
(Interview 1, Line 552 – 555)

This view, expressed by Ben and present in all of the interviews, reflected an expected change in identity as they progress from students and young adults to fully fledged adulthood. An aspect of responsible use implicit within the interviews was the notion that they are not responsible for anyone else apart from themselves therefore their cannabis use has little effect on anyone else. The transition to parenhood is considered one of the most significant transitions in the life course of an individual (Alexander et al., 2001) and is therefore likely to have a considerable effect on a person's identity. The social representations of parenthood and cannabis users are completely conflicting and therefore the moral roles and duties associated with these positions would be difficult to intergrate, as parenthood assumes conformity to social norms whereas cannabis use does not. This reflected an intended transition from personal positioning, i.e. in terms of individual characteristics and particularities (Harré and Langenhove, 1991) based on the characteristics of using cannabis, to moral positioning. This is due to the fact that being a parent and continuing to smoke cannabis would be unintelligebile in terms of moral positioning. Therefore, to create a more coherent and unconflicted sense of self, interviewees anticipated a need to reconsider their lifestyle to one that is more congruent with the moral roles of parenthood.

The idea that, upon reaching a certain point in their lives, they will naturally stop smoking cannabis can also be considered in terms of the maturity principle (Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2005) which suggests that individual's personality structures exhibit developmental adaptations to cope with roles associated with adulthood. These normative changes in personality are largely attributed to individuals undergoing role transitions associated with adulthood, such as marriage and parenthood (Helson et al., 2002; Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer, 2006). This view that their cannabis use will cease as a result of natural progression in their lives is contradictory to the emphasis on autonomy found in Theme 2. However, it must be noted that much of the research pertaining to the maturity principle has examined it in relation to alcohol and opiate addiction. Its applicability in relation to recreational cannabis use is therefore questionable (see Brook et al., 2011 for cannabis related maturity principle). Interviewees also expressed worries regarding the loss of autonomy associated with the potential for tolerance and dependance to effect their ability and choice to use cannabis responsibly. This is reflected by Tom who suggested the potential for dependence is something he needed to consider moving forward:

Tom: *"The thing I worry about most is just being dependent on something which I don't like and spending a lot of money on something which is far from necessary so when it comes to thinking about the future effects it might have on my head it's something I sort of think about"* (Interview 2, Line 365 – 367)

This loss of choice associated with the potential risk of dependance represents a worrying progression for the interviewees. This could potentially lead to a loss of ability to deliberately self-position themselves as responsible cannabis users and fully functioning members of society, with forced self-positioning becoming more prominent and centred around 'addict identities' (Reith, 2004), defined in terms of subjective and individual evaluations of loss of control.

**Summary**
The identification of these three themes, centred upon responsibility, identity construction and autonomy, reflected the meaningful components of young men's experiences of cannabis use and provided a valuable insight into the meanings and significance of their social actions within relative social contexts and cultural frameworks. This also provided an understanding of the temporal space in which their experience was embedded, reflecting a desire to avoid being positioned as a cannabis user through intentions to abstain in the future and create a more socially acceptable sense of self. Therefore the expression of their experiences represented a desire to be defined by their personal characteristics and social actions, not assumptions relating to cannabis users and their perceived characteristics based on its stigma.

It is clear that the previously identified risk factors, particularly social influence, associated with cannabis use are important to consider when attempting to reduce the likelihood of continued use amongst the most at risk group (males aged 18-25). This approach to reducing the associated risk factors must also be considered in conjuction with providing accurate, accessible and, when possible, individualised information regarding the potential damage of cannabis. However it was evident that these young men were aware of the potential risks and despite this continued to use cannabis. Therefore it was necessary for them to position themselves as responsible and justify their social actions accordingly to make these actions intelligble and create a coherent sense of self as a result.

**Reflexivity**

Qualitative research is concerned with exploring experiences and the meanings people attach to their experiences, and is therefore co-constitutued and influenced by the relationship between the researcher and interviewees. As a result of this, it is important to examine how intersubjective elements influenced the research (Finlay, 2002). Due to the sensitive and illegal nature of the topic being discussed, the inclusion of individuals who were familiar with me on a personal level and conducting the interview where they felt comfortable and able to speak openly led to responses which were, I believe, honest and authentic, therefore providing a genuine insight into their experiences surrounding cannabis use. In addition to this, the fact that they knew I was aware of, and not judgemental towards, their cannabis use and could therefore be seen as a 'insider' (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), led to open responses in regards to the associated stigma. However, my liberal attitudes towards their use and cannabis in general may have limited further probing into the negative aspects of cannabis. Also this may have had an influence on analysis in terms of the discursive deconstruction and interpretation of meaning embedded within interviewee's language.

Initially, the justification for utilising qualitative methodology allowed for a more detailed exploration of personal accounts of cannabis use. It proved beneficial as it allowed for a particular focus upon positioning of indivduals within social contexts, allowing for the inclusion of positioning theory as an analytic theoretical framework which had not been considered prior to the research. This ensured thematic analysis was not limited to atheoretical intepretation and allowed for a more detailed unpacking of how their knowledge and experience was situated. Also, this led me away from a more quantitative-oriented thematic analysis which was initially going to be focussed on the interaction between various risk factors, evaluation of quantitatively identified negative effects and gate-way considerations.

The research has therefore led me to develop a more empathic understanding of the motivations and social actions of cannabis users whilst also dispelling the harmless nature of cannabis use in favour of a more realistic understanding of the motivations for use and negative effects.

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