

'You can't go without a fag ... you need it for your hash'—a qualitative exploration of smoking, cannabis and young people

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ABSTRACT

Aims To examine the relationship between smoking tobacco and cannabis use among smokers in their mid-to-late teens.

Design and participants Two qualitative studies in Scotland. One study used semistructured paired interviews involving 99 16–19-year-old smokers, the other comprised eight focus groups involving 46 15–16-year-old smokers.

Measurement The interviews and focus groups explored the role and meaning of smoking in the participants' lives, smoking histories and future cessation intentions and how these related to other aspects of their lives, particularly cannabis use.

Findings Cannabis use was regarded as an important and enjoyable aspect of many of the participants' lives. Importantly, cannabis use and cigarette smoking were linked inextricably. Several reported how smoking joints had been a 'gateway' to smoking cigarettes. While most wanted to quit smoking cigarettes, cannabis use reinforced their cigarette smoking and few wanted to stop using cannabis.

Conclusion National studies need to be conducted to examine how widespread the problem identified is and tobacco control initiatives and smoking cessation treatment services need to consider urgently how to overcome the barrier that a desire on the part of young people to continue cannabis smoking poses to achieving a reduction in tobacco use.

KEYWORDS Cannabis, cessation, qualitative, smoking, young people.

INTRODUCTION

The British Home Secretary's intended reclassification of cannabis in 2003 from a Class B to a Class C drug (BBC 2002) has stimulated debate about the probable impact on young people's behaviour as well as the health effects. Some health agencies and researchers regard this as a sensible step, reflecting the widespread use of cannabis among young people (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs 2002; Bates 2002; Wodak *et al.* 2002). Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in the United Kingdom, with prevalence highest among young people (Clark *et al.* 2002; Fraser 2002). In 2000 34% of Scottish 15 years olds boys and 30% of girls reported that they had used

cannabis, with 21% of boys and 18% of girls reporting use in the last month (Boreham & Shaw 2001). Others have raised concerns about how this change might increase access to the drug and the possible health and social consequences (British Lung Foundation 2002; Drummond 2002; Henry *et al.* 2003). However, there has been little discussion about the ways cannabis use may act to increase and/or maintain cigarette smoking in young people, which would have a major impact on their future health. This probably reflects the paucity of research that has explored the relationship between young people's smoking and cannabis use. While quantitative studies find that most cannabis users also smoke (Jacobson *et al.* 2001; Advisory Council on the Misuse of

Drugs 2002), and therefore that cigarette smoking might act as a 'gateway' to cannabis, qualitative research has indicated that for some young people the reverse may be true (Bell *et al.* 1998; Allbutt *et al.* 1995). While the gateway theory has its critics (Morral *et al.* 2002) tobacco smoking and cannabis use appear to be linked, but this relationship is not well understood. We know little about how young smokers view cannabis use, how this relates to their smoking behaviour and the implications for policies and action on cannabis and tobacco.

This paper draws on two qualitative studies of smoking among the mid-to-late teens to explore the relationship between their cigarette smoking and cannabis use. The primary purpose of both studies was to explore smoking behaviours and attitudes, including cessation and quitting experiences' within the wider context of their lives. Through this holistic approach it emerged that for some young people cannabis use was not only an important and enjoyable part of their social lives, but that it related to their smoking behaviour in different ways.

METHODS

The sample

Both studies involved teenage smokers living in Lothian, Scotland. The first study involved eight focus groups, with 24 female and 22 male 15–16-year-old smokers. Participants were recruited by a market research recruiter in friendship groups, i.e. each participant had at least one friend in the focus group. Half the groups were ABC1 and half C2DE, and each group had participants from at least two schools. All but one participant was still at school, and all had smoked at least one cigarette in the preceding week.

The second study involved 48 paired interviews with a total of 99 16–19-year-old smokers, 52 female and 47 male. Interviewees were recruited purposively from a range of educational and occupational backgrounds, with the sample weighted towards more disadvantaged smokers. Recruitment sites included a youth café, colleges, universities, youth clubs and work-places. All had smoked at least one cigarette in the previous month. Seventy-five were regular (daily) smokers and 24 social (non-daily) smokers.

Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups, conducted May–June 2002, involved four to seven participants and lasted approximately 80 minutes. These formed part of a larger study with young people in five European countries on smoking and gender. Small friendship groups were recruited to help participants relax and encourage discussion about

shared experiences and activities, including smoking (Hight 2003). A topic guide focused discussion on participants' interests, smoking patterns, smoking history, school and parental attitudes to smoking, quitting experience, future smoking intentions and other social behaviours including drinking and cannabis use.

The semistructured interviews, conducted January–June 2002, were carried out mainly with two friends/colleagues (42), with four involving three friends and three with single smokers. Paired interviews were chosen as they can generate in-depth individual data about smoking attitudes and behaviour, with participants being less inhibited in discussing personal material, as they know and trust the other interviewee (Hight 2003). Interviews with friends can also facilitate more natural conversation than individual interviews and allows greater insights, for example, into potentially embarrassing events and social meanings. The interview explored: the role and meaning of smoking in their lives; smoking history, current patterns, perceptions of habit and addiction; motivation to quit; and views about cessation support, other interests and activities including cannabis use.

Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed by all the authors. Regular discussions were held to achieve consensus on emerging themes from the descriptive to the analytical stages. The interview coding was organized using NVIVO, with the focus groups coding undertaken manually. Both sets of data were indexed in terms of similarity and contrast of content. Finally, the conditions and circumstances in which smokers deployed these formulations were compared and contrasted, with extracts from the transcripts used to illustrate particular points. Quotations in the Results are used to illustrate some key emergent themes around smoking and cannabis use. Focus-group quotes are identified by the sex and socioeconomic status of the participants (ABC1, C2DE). Interviewee quotes are identified by sex (M, F), number, cigarette smoking status (R: regular/daily, S: social/non-daily) and educational/occupational status (university, FE college, employed, unemployed).

RESULTS

Neither study set out primarily to explore cannabis use. However, it became clear in the discussions that cannabis use was an important part of many participants' lives, particularly the young men. Most (31 of 47) of the male and half (26 of 52) of the female interviewees said they used cannabis, as did some participants in all but one

focus group. Cannabis use was described as being much more common in young men, in contrast to cigarette smoking which was viewed as being more common in young women:

You dinnae see many girls smoking hash—it's more of a boy thing (focus group male C2DE).

I don't really know anyone, any guy that just smokes cigarettes but doesn't smoke cannabis, whereas girls would tend to smoke just cigarettes (interview SM1 university).

Young women were more likely to use cannabis on an opportunistic basis; for example, if their boyfriend used it or they were offered it at a party, tended to get cannabis from friends rather than 'dealers', and expressed more concerns about risks around getting and using cannabis.

Cannabis use was linked with smoking in three ways: starting to smoke cigarettes; continuing smoking cigarettes and reinforcing addiction to cigarettes; and actual and anticipated problems in quitting smoking cigarettes. While most had started smoking cigarettes before trying cannabis, a few had smoked cannabis first. For this group, smoking cannabis with tobacco in joints had led to smoking cigarettes through becoming used to tobacco and subsequently smoking cigarettes when they could not smoke cannabis (e.g. at school, in pubs or when they did not have any) and/or because they felt that they had become addicted to tobacco.

I used to smoke hash then when I couldn't get it or didn't have it I smoked fags (focus group males C2DE)

When I went up to college I hadn't smoked at all, but then I was in the social scene of like smoking hash and things like that, I got into that and then that made me get addicted to tobacco (interviews F99 unemployed)

For many regular cannabis users their use was inter-linked closely with smoking; indeed, some found it difficult to discuss them separately. This included the way cannabis was smoked and the culture associated with acquiring cannabis. Thus for many, smoking cannabis in joints reinforced their cigarette smoking:

Like you really just use the fag to roll a joint and if you've no' got any hash, you just smoke your fags (focus group males ABC1)

P: You smoke both really because somebody will go 'Aye, give me a fag for a joint' and then you'll give them a fag and then

Int: You swap a fag for a joint?

P: Aye, they still need to roll it and then you tend to have like a fag while waiting on them rolling it (focus group males C2DE)

The relationship between cannabis use and smoking was most pronounced when participants talked about their experiences of quitting smoking and future intentions regarding smoking and cannabis. Most had tried to quit smoking but had encountered, often to their surprise, considerable difficulties. Although these were ascribed in part to socializing with smokers and nicotine addiction, several talked about the difficulties that they had experienced trying to quit cigarettes while still smoking cannabis:

I've tried to stop smoking but like I say, the green [cannabis], you need just like. You cannae go without a fag for, well I can go without smoking it sometimes, but you need it for your hash (focus group males ABC1)

I was still having a sneaky fag now and again, still smoking weed. Started smoking weed heavy and then it was like a Friday, Saturday, Sunday drinking, so just smoked fags then [started again] (interview RM45 employed)

Most cannabis users said that they wanted to quit smoking cigarettes in the future, but few intended stopping using cannabis. While there were drawbacks in using cannabis, particularly its illegal status, many felt it had a much more positive functional value than cigarettes, and thus preferable:

I mean hash makes you happy and that, but smoking just does nothing. It's not as if it kills you (focus group females C2DE)

I would rather stop smoking cigarettes than stop smoking cannabis, at least it does something for you. I want to quit smoking first but I think it would be hard if I was still smoking [cannabis] at night, it would just make you want to and keep the craving going. I don't really want to smoke but I have to have a fag (interview RF32 college)

It was fun, helped young people to relax or 'chill', deal with stress and keep out of trouble because consumption was generally in private with friends:

When I was younger, where I stay there is a lot of trouble and fighting and things like that, I found if I was in having a smoke I wasn't going out and getting involved with that—relax, just get stoned (interview RM54 employed)

I don't intend to like [stay a cigarette smoker]. Just now, while I'm young, 'cause I don't want to end up messing my life up. Going out, getting involved in gangs and, you know, stuff like that. So I'd rather just sit in with a few friends and just get melted and not be able to go out (focus group males ABC1)

None of the participants had considered how they might quit smoking while remaining cannabis users. Indeed, for some, smoking cannabis without tobacco was not viewed as an option.

DISCUSSION

The studies reported in this paper were limited in scope and used small purposive samples. However, they show clearly that for at least some smokers in their mid-to-late teens their cigarette smoking is linked with their cannabis use in significant ways, particularly regular cannabis smokers who seem more likely to be male. For a minority of participants, smoking cannabis in joints had been an introduction or gateway to smoking cigarettes. Regular cannabis use appeared to reinforce cigarette smoking and act as a barrier to quitting. While most said that they wanted to stop smoking, few intended to stop using cannabis. However, none had thought through how this could be achieved while still smoking cannabis with tobacco.

Reducing smoking in young people is a key target of the British Government's tobacco control strategy and cessation services are being set up for young people (HEBS 2002). However, little attention has been paid in tobacco control to the relationship between smoking and cannabis in young people. ASH Scotland has produced the leaflet 'Fags and Hash'. This covers the physical, psychological and social effects of tobacco and cannabis, including the legal position, but does not address issues around cessation (ASH Scotland 2002). Indeed, most health promotion programmes treat smoking and drugs separately, and do not address smoking cessation and cannabis use. This is perhaps not surprising, as few smoking cessation studies have assessed cannabis use as a predictor of quitting success and those that have focused mainly on adult cessation clinics (Humfleet *et al.* 1999). However, a recent US community study found that adult smokers who used cannabis were much less likely to have quit smoking 13 years later than non-users (Ford *et al.* 2002).

The issues identified in this paper are unlikely to be unique to the United Kingdom. Several other industrialized countries, such as the United States and Australia, have similar patterns and trends in cannabis use, with use highest among young people and prevalence rates having increased significantly during the 1990s (Gledhill-Hoyt *et al.* 2000; Smart & Ogborne 2000; Clark *et al.* 2002; NHSDA 2002). A recent Australian survey of young people, for example, found that 21% had used cannabis at least five times in the previous year (Coffey *et al.* 2000). In the United States prevalence in 2000 was highest among 19-year-olds, with 18% reporting use in the

last month (NHSDA 2002). As Lantz (2003) has argued, the simultaneous increase in smoking and cannabis use among young people in the United States over the last decade strengthens the case that cigarette smoking should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon.

In conclusion, whether or not the reclassification of cannabis in the United Kingdom results in an increase in its consumption, more attention is needed on how to support young smokers who want to quit smoking but also use cannabis. This will involve research to develop a better understanding of the nature and extent of this relationship, and to assess the effectiveness of new cessation approaches with young people. We are not aware of any guidelines, in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, for smoking cessation programmes for young people or adults who use cannabis. Developing such guidelines may involve addressing politically and socially sensitive issues such as whether to recommend 'harm reduction' approaches to cannabis use which do not involve smoking tobacco. It also requires a more collaborative approach to research, with researchers and practitioners from the tobacco and drug fields working together, a relatively rare phenomenon. Until guidelines are developed, those helping young people to quit smoking need to be aware of the potential importance of assessing cannabis use with their clients, and the implications cannabis use may have for their cessation plans and probable outcome.

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