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Rocky Mountain High: An Investigation of Downhill Snow Sports and Marijuana Use

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Rocky Mountain High: An Investigation of Downhill Snow Sports and Marijuana Use

Abstract

What comes to mind when you imagine a ‘stoner?’ Most stereotype the term—some couch-bound, chip-munching slouch with a foggy gaze (and perhaps a goofy grin). Marijuana and its chemical effects hold an increasing presence in American minds. With full legalization of recreational use in 8 states and various degrees of medical legality in 18 others, the substance is caught up in a cultural shift. Our society is tackling the ethicality of marijuana, and the stigmas built around the drug are changing. What was once cited for ‘reefer madness’ is becoming (to some) a medical treatment, or just another way to enjoy a Friday night.

Whether legal or not, people use marijuana for their own purposes— this is where my interest lies. The phenomenon I’ve found most engaging is this: people get stoned and hurl their bodies down a mountain on a pair of skis. Anyone who hits the slopes on the weekend can witness this, especially if you’re with the right cadre of college students. This intensely physical activity flies in the face of stereotypical stoner behavior. By asking the question “why do people ski/snowboard and use marijuana?” this paper ethnographically explores the culture of downhill snow-sports (skiing and snowboarding) and its interplay with the use and experience of marijuana. Data collection will be conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observations. It will rely upon literature regarding the anthropology of drug use, biochemical aspects of marijuana, and ‘flow theory’ as outlined by the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Understanding drug use through an anthropological lens offers alternatives to our societal stigmas— I suggest the effects of the drug are not purely biochemically determined, but are also mediated by the user’s culture, environment, and intention.

Introduction

What comes to mind when you imagine a ‘stoner?’ Most stereotype the term—some couch-bound, chip-munching slouch with a foggy gaze (and perhaps a goofy grin). Marijuana and its chemical effects hold an increasing presence in American minds. With full legalization of recreational use in 8 states and various degrees of medical legality in 18 others, the substance is caught up in a cultural shift. Our society is tackling the ethicality of marijuana, and the stigmas built around the drug are changing. What was once cited for ‘reefer madness’ is becoming (to some) a medical treatment, or just another way to enjoy a Friday night.

This study focuses on those who enjoy marijuana on the ski slopes of western Montana. In Montana, skiing and snowboarding are culturally imperative activities during the winter months. A broad array of people have access to the sport, including those that regularly partake in marijuana use. Being a skier myself and observing the skiing/smoking phenomenon provided me the inspiration for this study— it is confounding in its juxtaposition to the ‘lazy stoner’ stereotype that surrounds marijuana as a

substance. This is what I wanted to explore, and I hope it will open research avenues for other sports in which marijuana is involved.

This study is unique in that it is one of few in the current literature that investigates marijuana from an ethnographic standpoint with the goal of understanding user's intentionality and understanding of the substance. An overwhelming amount of marijuana-related literature understands the drug from an epidemiological stance— it is framed as a problem to solve, an issue of drug abuse and dependency. These perspectives also understand the drug in a largely biochemical sense, where I approach it from a socially constructive perspective. I have chosen to frame it through members of the skiing and snowboarding subculture, who are using the drug not as crazed addicts or troubled youth, but as real people performing complex tasks with competence. I also hope to emphasize the subjective nature of the drug, Though the epidemiological stance is solidified by academic and governmental institutions, I hope this study will be a starting point for a clearer understanding of this drug and its users.

Literature Review

Biochemical Properties of Marijuana

Marijuana is a plant-based drug with complex and variable chemical compositions. Depending on the genetic variation and hybridity of the *indica*, *sativa*, and *ruderalis* strains of the plant, cannabis contains around “400 chemical entities of which more than 60 of them are cannabinoid compounds” (Atakan 2012). Cannabinoid compounds are those that bind to endocannabinoid receptors in the body, resulting in the drug's effects. Most widely studied of these compounds are marijuana's active ingredients: delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (d-9-THC), delta-8-tetrahydrocannabinol (d-8-THC), cannabitol, and cannabidiol (CBD). D-9-THC has been identified as being primarily responsible for the drug's characteristic effects, or ‘high.’ These include “hypoactivity, hypothermia, spatial and verbal short-term memory impairment.” One feels ‘stoned’ on account of d-9-THC. CBD conversely “does not affect locomotor activity, body temperature or memory on its own,” and may even play a role “in blocking most of the effects of d-9-THC when both drugs [are] given together” (Atakan 2012). In some studies, administration of CBD “decreased the anxiety component of d-9-THC effects in such a way that the subjects reported more pleasurable effects” (Atakan 2012). While marijuana's active biochemicals and their effects on the body are generally understood, they occur at varying degrees and interact in ways that aren't fully understood. Like other plant drugs, marijuana is chemically complex.

Human subjects add to the complexity of the drug's effects. A study by Sewell et al. measuring the effects of THC on time perception in frequent and infrequent cannabis users illustrates this. Their findings suggested that doses in all participants “induced time overestimation and under-production,” but less experienced users “showed temporal overestimation at medium and high doses and temporal underproduction at all doses” while “frequent cannabis users showed no differences” (Sewell et al. 2012). Regular use of marijuana may blunt its effects. Epidemiological studies (focusing on drug abuse) recognize this variability as well. Atakan's study on marijuana's effects recognize “not everyone who uses cannabis is affected adversely in the same way.

What makes someone more susceptible to its negative effects is not yet known, however there are some emerging vulnerability factors, ranging from certain genes to personality characteristics” (Atakan 2012). A study by Lacey et al. for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) highlights the unpredictability of marijuana’s effects– the drug has “a variety of effects on humans and can be associated with stimulant, sedative, and hallucinogenic effects” (Lacey et al. 2016). Human variability and variability of marijuana’s chemical compounds clouds certainty regarding its effects.

Marijuana and Safety

It is then important to ask, for the case of this study and many others, whether marijuana is a safe substance to use in any context (including performance-heavy activities such as downhill skiing). One study of the effects of smoking marijuana on brain perfusion and cognition utilized dichotic reactionary tests to determine behavioral effects of marijuana use. Participants were selected for similar age, sex, and frequency of use, and thus controlled for experience with the drug. Researchers found “behavioral performance was not significantly altered” after smoking (O’Leary et al. 2002). A 2008 study by Weinstein et al. using virtual reality and PET scanning found “in regular marijuana users, the immediate effects of marijuana may impact on cognitive–motor skills and brain mechanisms that modulate coordinated movement and driving” (Weinstein et al. 2008). Reactionary lab tests are one thing, high velocity performance is another. The NHTSA (Lacey et al.) study aforementioned provides a few clues for the most mundane of our high-speed adventures: driving. The authors acknowledge that “both the experimental and epidemiologic evidence on cannabinoids’ effects on driving are mixed.” Their findings reflect a similar sentiment. Though marijuana use is suggested as a factor for crash risk pre-analysis, after “controlling for variables known (based on previous research) to be associated with age, gender, race/ethnicity, and alcohol” researchers found “drugs did not show a significant crash risk” (Lacey et al. 2016). For the ‘drugs; in question in this study, marijuana was the most frequently encountered. This muddles marijuana’s perceived risk in high velocity activities such as downhill skiing.

Marijuana through an Anthropological Lens

From the available literature it is fairly safe to say that marijuana has significant effects on the body and brain. For many, this alone is reason to avoid its use in contexts where one may be put at risk, much less others. It is also safe to say from the available literature that people use marijuana extensively anyways. The plant “is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States” and “its use is widespread among young people” (NIDA 2018). It is also increasingly legal rather than illicit. With full legalization of recreational use in 8 states and various degrees of medical legality in 18 others, the substance is caught up in a cultural shift.

Marijuana Stigmas and Stereotypes

It wasn't always this way. Marijuana entered American consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s when its use began to proliferate across society. In response to what was perceived as a dramatic increase and 'normalization' of use, "social scientists became very busy collecting information from users on their subjective responses to this drug" (Knipe 1995, 80). For two decades researchers focused intensely on variables that seemed to correlate with marijuana use. Cocaine and heroin entered the drug scene in the late 70s and 80s, shifting the attention of researchers. As a result of this 20-year period, "we have been left with a legacy of empirical generalizations about the social characteristics of marijuana users for that era" (Knipe 1995, 49). These generalizations regard age, sex, socioeconomic status, religion, political leaning, use of other substances, etc. Psychiatric literature of the era further generalized that the drug provoked scattered attention to tasks. This claim expanded into the assertion that marijuana causes a psychological disorder by the name of "amotivational syndrome." Narrative such as this corresponded to a trend "common in the psychiatric literature during the 1960s and 1970s" which worked to "equate a weak physiological response to THC with social incompetency" (Knipe 1995, 80). In other words, social scientists were working to connect mild marijuana 'highs' to mental and social disorders. These stereotypes and stigmas are difficult to break.

Marijuana as a Symbol

While many of the generalizations of marijuana users were grounded in the context of the era, one was unanimous across the board. In nearly every study where it was measured, "having friends who smoked marijuana was the best predictor of the respondent's use of marijuana" (Knipe 1995, 50). Use of the drug is highly social. Reasons for this vary— Knipe proposes an understanding of marijuana as a tool for the "maintenance of boundaries between informal groups." In this theory of group attraction, marijuana "performs the symbolic function of distinguishing between groups and groupings" as a tattoo, uniform, or vocabulary would (Knipe 1995, 50). Other literature suggests that drug use is more than just a line in the sand. Although his work is not focused on marijuana specifically, Burr's work on punk and skinhead use of barbiturates addresses drug use as an expression of identity— this is far more intentional than a group distinguishing factor. Barbiturates are self-destructive central nervous system depressants, which Burr suggests troubled youths use as a "vehicle for symbolically expressing their frustration and discontent." Burr defines symbols as mechanisms "used by individuals as vehicles for transmitting messages about themselves and their place in society and the universe" (Burr 1984). In this case, this specific drug's use invokes deleterious biochemical effects in the user which is reflective of their desperate position in society. Could marijuana users be expressing an identity in a similar manner?

Marijuana as 'Learned'

To answer this question would require a standard understanding of marijuana users' motives and experience— a difficult thing to pin down. While much of the current literature hasn't worked to understand marijuana users in this way, this investigation will attempt to do so. This will require some older clues from Howard Becker's seminal

work— *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. The third chapter of the book titled *Becoming a Marijuana User* proposes the experience of marijuana is a learned one. The process takes place in three stages: learning to smoke the correct dosage, learning the effects, and learning to enjoy said effects. Becker's data found that first-time and novice users often fail to perceive a 'high' from the substance. Though the drug's biochemical effects are present, "the user must be able to point them out to himself and consciously connect them with having smoked marijuana" (Becker 1963, 49). This process is often aided by more experienced users, who introduce recognizable aspects of the high. Becker further acknowledges that "marijuana-produced sensations are not automatically or necessarily pleasurable" (Becker 1963, 53). Just as the high must be learnt, so must its enjoyment. Becker places emphasis on the social context of this process— "enjoyment is introduced by the favorable definition of the experience that one acquires from others" (Becker 1963, 56). By emphasizing the pleasurable effects of the drug and mitigating the negative, marijuana user groups develop their own perceptions of use, and their own reasons for using. Essentially, "marijuana use is a function of the individual's conception of marijuana and of the uses to which it can be put, and this conception develops as the individual's experience with the drug increases" (Becker 1963, 42). This conclusion implies marijuana's effects aren't standardized— the experience and motives vary by individual and social group.

The post-modernist philosopher Jaques Derrida made comment about the subjectivity of drug use in an interview titled "The Rhetoric of Drugs." His opening point about drugs is this:

"there are no drugs 'in nature.' There may be natural poisons and indeed naturally lethal poisons, but they are not as such "drugs." As with addiction, the concept of drugs supposes an instituted and an institutional definition: a history is required, and a culture, conventions, evaluations, norms, an entire network of intertwined discourses, a rhetoric, whether explicit or elliptical.

Derrida's thesis describes 'drugs' and their use as more-than biochemically defined. His suggestion is that the human understanding, and even the describable effects of a substance are in large part socially constructed. Becker's data support this with the idea of 'learned' use, of the social manipulation of biochemical effects.

Marijuana, Skiing, and Flow

In what way, then, and for what motivations, do skiers and snowboarders use marijuana? Stereotypes surrounding the drug suggest its use is more appropriate for an evening on the couch. Conversely, downhill snow sports are intensely physical, requiring high degrees of coordination and strength. They are fast-paced and exhilarating, and take place in environments rich with natural beauty. The theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi may be able to provide some insight into the motivations of skiers and snowboarders, and perhaps their paired use of marijuana.

Csikszentmihalyi authored the first work on *Flow Theory*. Essentially, the theory emphasizes individual's attention as 'psychic energy' which is focused into life's tasks. 'Flow' itself is experienced when "people become so involved in what they are doing that

the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 53). Csikszentmihalyi’s work studied this state across disciplines— he interviewed chess players, swimmers, rock-climbers, artists, and so on. The state is unanimous despite variability in skill set and performance. ‘Flow’ requires a degree of individual skill for the task at hand, with achievable personal goals to direct performance. The concept of goals is important, because “when all a person’s relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person’s attention is completely absorbed by the activity... All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 53). Goals represent the boundaries of experience regardless of skill level; when they aren’t approached the actor risks what might be called ‘boredom.’ Absorption requires the entire utilization of one’s built knowledge.

Flow is accessible through mental activities in the same way as physical activities— it is goals that differ. Furthermore, one does not require Olympic skills to experience the state. Csikszentmihalyi outlines the requirements for access:

“Even the simplest physical act becomes enjoyable when it is transformed so as to produce flow. The essential steps in this process are: (a) to set an overall goal, and as many subgoals as are realistically feasible; (b) to find ways of measuring progress in terms of the goals chosen; (c) to keep concentrating on what one is doing, and to keep making finer and finer distinctions in the challenges involved in the activity; (d) to develop the skills necessary to interact with the opportunities available; and (e) to keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 97).

While this framework is applicable to any physical activity, skiing and snowboarding have a unique conditionality (as does any other activity). Downhill snow sports inherently require an actor to slide down a mountain on waxed boards attached to their feet. Goals established around this concept might pertain to velocity or grace, and are amended by the variety of terrain and conditions that a mountain has to offer. Progress toward these goals is often dictated by the actor themselves— these sports are individualistic, and an individual’s intuition measures the success of a run or terrain feature. Skiing and snowboarding present great risk to participants. They require intensive awareness of one’s own abilities and how those correspond to the environment. As one’s skills develop so does their adaptive capability to environmental variability. Beyond adaptation, more active options and creative freedom present themselves to someone growing their skill set. Marijuana may play a role for skier and snowboarders accessing these psychological states of flow.

Methods

In this study I work to understand marijuana as it exists in the minds of skiers and snowboarders simply through asking “why do people smoke marijuana and go skiing or snowboarding?” While this involves marijuana’s biochemical properties and their interplay with human physiology, it is more focused on the drug and its effects as a socially constructed by its users. I utilized data collected from participant-observations

and interviews conducted with nine participants. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, and all had experience skiing and smoking marijuana. Three participants identified as women, six identified as men. Participants were selected through a snowball sampling technique— where “each respondent is asked to suggest other persons for inclusion in the research” (NSF N.D). Three key informants suggested further participants to interview.

I was able to conduct participant-observation sessions four times over the course of this study. In these situations I was able to collect data for the full duration of the day on the frequency and intensity of marijuana use, the active and contextualized decisions of participating skiers and snowboarders, and their described intentions. Four of nine interviews followed these sessions, which was methodologically advantageous— the interviewee and I were able to refer back to specific moments on the hill, reducing memory biases for both parties.

Interviews themselves were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, with multiple unplanned follow-up questions. Structured questions focused on participants’ experience levels skiing, experience levels using marijuana, ideals pertaining to terrain and conditions, sociality and group skiing, the discernible properties of marijuana, and cross-referential questions pertaining to other sports or activities. These interviews were recorded on a cellular device. The audio files were transcribed into text.

In order to document themes emerging from the interview data, I developed ‘codes’ for different semantic categories. Using different colored highlighters I went through each interview transcript, marking dialogue that corresponded and related to ‘sociality,’ ‘marijuana use and context of use,’ ‘performance and flow,’ and ‘nature and environment.’ I developed these code categories by ‘mind-mapping’ as I read the data— essentially noting potential themes and connections through a visual medium. I then analyzed the data by copying the marked text from each interview into their respective color categories, looking for recurring patterns and commonalities in each domain. This provided me with my findings.

Findings

Describing Marijuana Methodology

To understand how skiers and snowboarders use marijuana on the slopes, I first had to pinpoint their understandings of the drug itself. Participants in this study all reported that different varieties of marijuana affect them in different ways. Each understood this differentiation in terms of the two predominant strains of marijuana: indica and sativa. Participants nearly unanimously generalized particular properties and effects of these strains, and often contrasted them to each other. Sativas were thought to be more of a cerebral ‘head high.’ This implies less physical and more mental and emotional symptoms, including feelings of euphoria, and an uplifting of the mood. They are also correlated with energy and motivation— one participant described them as “recharging” the mind. Another described sativa strains as “kind of a stimulation” for the purposes of “putting an extra pep in your step.” One further understood their head-highs as “interpretive” of the world around them, implying a sort of creativity or curiosity. Two participants described sativa as occasionally provoking symptoms of anxiety, as well. Indica strains contrast sativas in that they are perceived largely in a bodily, physical way.

Participants described indica highs as a “body buzz” or “body high,” inducing “numbing,” and even “pulsating” in one’s body and extremities. Indicas contrasts sativa in they generally provoke more depressive moods and emotions— descriptions include feeling “chilled-out,” “relaxed,” “calm,” and even “sleepy time.” One participant assigned sativas to daytime use, and indicas to night.

It is worth noting that most strains of marijuana are hybridized versions of indica and sativa. Two participants demonstrated knowledge of this, describing the experiences between the two extremes as “a spectrum” with differing percentages of effects from either strain. All participants but one didn’t (or weren’t able to) chose their marijuana on a strain-specific basis. The illegality of marijuana in Montana restricts participants’ options for variety— the one exception is a medical marijuana patient in the state. Most participants don’t know what they receive, and inductively assign “indica” or “sativa” after they experience the high. In the words of one participant, “until I smoke something, I never really know.”

Participants also discussed the mode of use as pertinent to the marijuana high. Across the nine interviews, I encountered two dominant methods of delivering the drug— smoking and eating. Smoking delivers THC to the brain through the lungs. Participants discussed three different methods for this: joints, spliffs, and oil. A joint is a rolled marijuana cigarette, whereas a spliff is a rolled mixture of marijuana and tobacco. Oil, otherwise known as butane hash oil (BHO), is a condensation of marijuana’s psychoactive chemical THC. It is generally vaporized and inhaled. Only the medical patient had access to this method. Joints and spliffs were by far the most prevalently used among participants. Most all corroborated that smoking gets one high more quickly, and for a short period of time— generally around three hours. Spliffs provide an instantaneous tobacco high, which transitions into the marijuana high. One participant described the tobacco as a “leveler,” complimenting and tempering the marijuana high. The medical marijuana patient described smoking oil as “very similar” to smoking the flower of marijuana, and noted it has a higher intensity. Participants agreed that consuming marijuana in an edible form is very different from smoking. In contrast, digesting through the stomach makes the high come-on more slowly, with “longer-lasting” effects. One participant noted the high can extend to “12 hours if it’s a strong edible.” Some participants loosely assigned head-highs to smoking and body highs to edibles— others refuted this and found no discernible difference.

Participants generally noted that smoking or eating marijuana differs in their manageability. Smoking is more popular on the ski hill because “smoking you can sort of control better.” The dosage is managed by the individual’s inhalation, and the shorter time-span of the high is less committal. Several participants assigned uncertainty and caution to the use of edibles. The dosage is difficult to discern, and the closed-system of one’s digestive system means edibles are a commitment whether the user wants to be high or not. One user noted “you can’t just stop getting high. You’ll just keep getting high, which sucks.” While two users had used edibles on the ski hill in the past, the rest had not. Nearly all participants utilized pre-rolled joints and spliffs while skiing and snowboarding.

Participants covered a broad spectrum of marijuana use, from occasional weekly use to everyday consumption. Despite this, nearly all participants noted a built experience smoking marijuana. Several discussed the notion of needing to “know their

limits,” something that can be understood “a little better if they smoke often.” One person acknowledged that “it’s kinda something you have to break into.” Participants generally shared a relativized view, where one should “smoke as much as it takes [one] to get to where they want to be, and not a debilitating amount.” More experienced users found they appreciated a chemical tolerance to the drug. The medical patient noted they “like to be more acclimated” to where the high is milder, and they “don’t get as high as most people.” Participants’ experience using the drug was contrasted to a hypothetical interview question, which asked the participant to provide advice for someone skiing and smoking for their first time. Nearly all the participants advised this hypothetical character to take it slow at their own (relative) pace, and stick to comfortable terrain. Finally, two participants commented on the variability and contextual nature of the drug’s effects. From one day to another one’s “perception is completely different than the last time they smoked.” Experience and tolerance with marijuana are relative to the individual.

Describing Implications of Marijuana on Performance and Flow

All participants perceived tangible effects on their performance while smoking marijuana and skiing. While participants covered a broad range of experience levels in both skiing and marijuana use, one emergent theme united their experiences: the notion of ‘focus’ or ‘attention.’ Across the board, participants described scenarios smoking and skiing where their attention was narrowed-in on something, for better or for worse. One articulated this explicitly, noting “one thing that pot does is it narrows your view to where you’re focusing on one thing.” This theme covered a wide variety of scenarios on the mountain.

Several participants described their focus on their body posture and form while skiing, saying “my attention to my body language and my posture, my speed and what’s coming ahead.” In this domain, two participants referenced a sense of rhythm or cadence, where you’re “essentially having this beat going in your head. And everything’s a rhythm. That’s why you tap your ski poles.” One described the feeling by saying “it brings your awareness into your body.” Another emphasized that their “body is perceiving everything.” While most participants described this sense of self-awareness in a positive light, it should be noted that one participant in particular found it uncomfortable. They said “I’m just hyper aware of myself and that makes me not enjoy it. I’m just thinking about too many things...I just kind of can’t concentrate on anything.” This person did not regularly ski and smoke marijuana.

Others explained their attention to be less within themselves, and more purely on the terrain ahead of them, where “you don’t see an end. You only see the start. Like the next 10 feet.” This sense of awareness heavily implies a sense of ‘presentness.’ Participants were singularly focused on the task at hand. One said:

I’m more in the moment. I’m fearless, more so. I don’t think about all the consequences. Not to say I’m being reckless, but I might throw a 360 off something, I’ll land it perfectly. I don’t even think about it really. It just happens. It feels perfect.

This sense of thoughtless action was pervasive among participants. It heavily correlated with the notion of muscle memory— four interviewees noted that while skiing and smoking “you’re going off muscle memory more than you’re intellectually thinking about your next move.” Smoking marijuana while skiing nearly unanimously provoked thoughtless, intuitive performance.

Participants noted that when terrain becomes too difficult relative to their experience level, their attention turns nearly exclusively to fear. The terrain on a ski hill is incredibly variable, ranging from open, shallow slopes to steep, cliff laden descents through the trees. Skiers and snowboarders usually manage this variability through a conscious curation of their preferred terrain. Most interviewees in this study actively avoided new and challenging terrain while smoking and skiing. One said “I have times when I’m trying to push myself, scare myself a bit. I wouldn’t smoke weed. But I’m not usually skiing for that.” Another noted that “that’s what I like to do, is cruise. Relaxation is what it is.” Where comfortable terrain is conducive to smoking and skiing, challenging terrain can make the experience overwhelming. One interviewee who found smoking and skiing unpleasant said “I aim to scare myself all the time when I’m skiing. So I feel like when I’m stoned, something that would normally be scary is really, really, really scary.” Two respondents noted that being stoned and afraid to crash “makes [them] more likely to crash.” When difficult terrain and fear of it becomes a point of fixation, being stoned and skiing loses some of its appeal. Conversely, on more comfortable terrain, smoking and skiing “numbs a level of fear, because a lot of people are driven on fear. That controls their decisions.” When one smokes in these more comfortable environments, they can fall into the bodily awareness or perception of the terrain aforementioned.

Describing Social Implications of Skiing/Marijuana Use

The participants in this study generally smoke marijuana and go skiing in a social setting. Most noted things like “I ski with people more than I ski alone and that’s often a friend, or sometimes a group of friends” as well as “the only time I do smoke and ski is in a social environment.” One participant summed up the majority of their experiences in saying “this is a social setting. When you’re snowboarding it’s kind of you and a select few friends you bring with to be in your group that day.” All of my participant observation experiences were as described here— a plan is made to go skiing with a carload or two of people, and that is one’s group for the day. Three participants acknowledged they only smoked and skied in social groups where this was the status quo: “there are people that I’ll go to the mountain with and smoke with and there are people I’ll just go to the mountain and ski with...different social groups.” This has implications for group attraction theory. Knipe’s literature on group attraction theory suggests marijuana as a symbol for distinguishing the formation social groups. This was very much upheld in this study— most respondents differentiated between people they ski and smoke with, and people they simply ski with. Some of the heavy marijuana users noted they actively choose social environments with other smokers, making little time for those who don’t smoke. Burr’s work on barbiturate use with punks and skinheads suggested the drug as a vehicle for symbolic expression of identity. I found little evidence of this in this study— for the most part marijuana was described as an amenity, something to bring along to

enhance something that is already a 'good time.' Much of the use was casual and socially opportunistic— this inconsistency in use and facile attitude toward the substance re-enforces its recreational qualities.

Participants strongly preferred minimal contact with other skiers and snowboarders on the slopes. They noted a preference for skiing “mid-week, when there’s not a lot of people” as well as a preference for “exclusive” terrain and smoke-spots on the mountain. These spots generally included tree skiing— “you go on a special run for it and all that. You go off into the trees somewhere. You find a little spot.” Trees offer cover from outside groups as well as shelter from wind. At some resorts, participants acknowledged the existence of “secret spot[s] on the mountain, a structure... a cool little spot” where “there’s that super club feeling of being in that little building that five people know about.” During a participant observation I was brought to one of these secret structures. This one in particular was a hand-built lean-to, with a tarp acting as the fourth wall. It was far off any cut trail, well sheltered, and furnished with benches and beer cans. This phenomenon is largely a result of the illegality of marijuana, and efforts to keep the act of smoking covert.

For every participant interviewed and during every one of my participant observations, smoking on the slopes provides a moment of reflection and rest. As one participant put it:

It’s just the act of stopping and just talking for a sec. Which you wouldn’t normally do, unless you were on the chairlift or in the lodge, I guess. But I guess that brings you to this moment. You stop and you’re like, alright. Here we are. Once again.

Time for reflection is limited in an activity as mobile and individual as skiing or snowboarding. Smoking on the hill is “an excuse to slow down... like you’re thinking about smoking that weed, but sitting down, hanging out with people, that’s what you wanted out of the experience.” Participants described the experience as “ritualized. Especially after snowboarding for a little while, everyone’s pepped up, everyone’s stoked. They’re like ‘Oh, that was fucking sweet. We just did that.’ And taking just a little bit of time to collect.” Most participant groups engaged in this collective ritual every two or three hours.

Most participants acknowledged that skiing and smoking with people differed from skiing and smoking alone. Their comments pertained mostly to risk— one stated they felt “way more conscious about not getting hurt when [they’re] alone” and “definitely a little more bold with people.” Skiing in a group is a safety net if one gets hurt on the mountain. This sentiment was shared throughout the sample group. Furthermore, participants described skiing with people as generating a sort of subconscious “group consensus,” where people just tend to “follow each other.” There is a shared feeling of “want[ing] to keep up” with others, as well as speak with those involved. Other participants noted that skiing and smoking alone released them from a sort of “social obligation,” “cultural obligation,” or “cultural norm.” These limitations pertained mostly to group dynamics: to waiting for friends, to speaking with people. Alone, “it’s not about the conversation anymore, it’s about the quiet. The view completely changes. You’re not

focused on [the people] anymore. It's you and the mountain." Variability of sociality affects the attention of skiers and snowboarders when smoking marijuana.

Discussion/Conclusions

So after all this, what is the answer? Why do people choose to smoke marijuana and hurl themselves down snowy mountain slopes? There seems to be two emergent motives for those who smoke marijuana and go skiing or snowboarding. They both hinge on the idea that marijuana's effects result in a narrowing, focusing, or directing of one's attention. They are defined by where that attention is directed. The data suggests that one's focus can be directed toward *internal* factors, including the body, its actions and reactions, and sensations. It also suggests one can direct attention toward *external* factors, such as the terrain or one's social context. While I am presenting this in a dichotomous manner, it should be noted that an individual's particular high and intention might fluctuate between the two depending on the day and context of use.

When one gets stoned and directs their attention to internal facets of their experience, it seems to enhance their sense of self-consciousness. Though the term 'self-conscious' is socially stigmatized as a negative feeling, in this context it describes the nature of one's attention rather than an emotion. Smoking can provoke an awareness of one's bodily perception while skiing. This might pertain to their form— the way they move their body to effectively descend the slope. It can also work to relax one's muscles, and calm one's actions. Some participants described using it to manage pain or soreness. It is best described by a participant who said "it brings your awareness into your body." Though not explicitly mentioned in reference to skiing, these descriptions resembled those of the 'body high' assigned by participants to indica strains, and to a degree, edibles. Across the board, this strain was noted to increase one's bodily perception and awareness. Participants found this internal awareness appealing in that it offers them an opportunity to consciously 'flex' their built muscle-memory. This does not imply they are using it to learn new technique, but rather to consciously recognize and fall into what has already been learned. Furthermore, this internal intentionality was more often expressed in reference to participants' skiing or snowboarding alone. These contexts have more potential danger, and require more self-consciousness than contexts with people.

Getting stoned and skiing more often directs attention to the external facets of one's experience. This is characterized by a loss of self-consciousness, and a full involvement of one's attention on the terrain at hand (or foot). In these contexts, one's bodily movements and actions are subconsciously directed to meet the terrain in a desirable way. Efficacy is effortless, decisions are spontaneous and confident. It is best described by a participant who said "you don't see an end. You only see the start. Like the next 10 feet." Opportunity presents itself automatically. These descriptions of full present-ness and involvement in skiing correlate to those outlined in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on 'Flow Theory.' This suggests that for skiers and snowboarders, marijuana is a tool used in accessing the desirable 'flow' state. Flow theory necessitates the idea of a 'goal' to approach in the activity outlined— for skiers and snowboarders, tackling terrain with grace and skill manifests the goal, with subgoals pertaining to one's own skill level and efficacy. To a large degree, this external

experience correlates with participants' descriptions of a 'head high,' more commonly provoked by sativa strains and smoking the drug. Participants described these highs as energetic and stimulating, promoting a more interpretive and creative perception of the world around them. These perceptions and feelings work to more fully involve participants in their performance and the terrain ahead of them. Participants found this external intentionality more closely tied to skiing socially than alone. Social settings provide a safety net for accidents, minimizing risk and the need for self-conscious behavior.

A unique facet of this study was the participant's unanimous distinction between indica and sativa strains of marijuana. Even when the strain was unclear to the user (which it most often was because of the substance's illegality), they inductively assigned these labels after trying their particular sample. Literature on these strains suggests that there is little evidence for the dichotomy— each strain has a unique biochemical profile regardless of its origin or hybridity. This implies that 'indica' and 'sativa' are constructed cultural domains that users apply to the product they receive. It is consistent with Becker's descriptions of marijuana's 'learned' use and effects, as well as Derrida's assumption that discourse around the substance constructs its meaning, and perhaps even its effects.

The social nature of marijuana became very apparent over the course of this study. Skiing or snowboarding themselves are individualistic— there is little time to consider anyone but oneself while performing the activity. Marijuana, especially in the form of a rolled joint or spliff, offers a distinct social opportunity for the group in question. Smoking and passing a joint gives people a chance to catch-up, rest, examine the terrain and lines they took, and to plan for future runs. It provides a moment to intellectually understand and recognize the intuitive 'flow' states just experienced. It simultaneously provides the high that facilitates those states. This behavior is ritualized, and eagerly anticipated, an appealing facet of smoking and skiing in its own right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, skiers and snowboarders smoke marijuana to focus on and access internal and external facets of their downhill experience. Internal experiences are characterized by a physicality and perceptiveness in the body, a heightened self-consciousness. External states of minds can be understood as an immersion in the immediate terrain— a loss of self-consciousness, and an intuitive creativity in moving downslope. These experiences are united by a sense of present-ness, and are thus exclusive in nature. The context of use determines which of these states the individual user accesses— strain type, vehicle of use, social setting, and terrain choice are all important facets of this context. This study challenges the dominant epidemiological understanding of marijuana use. It understands the users in question as autonomous, intentional, and functional in their use of marijuana.

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