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Drug-Intake Methods and Social Identity: The Use of Marijuana in Blunts Among Southeast Asian Adolescents and Emerging Adults

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Abstract

This article examines why Southeast Asian American adolescents and emerging adults in two urban settings prefer to use "blunts," or hollowed-out cigars filled with marijuana, over other methods of drug intake. Rationales for preferring blunts were both instrumental and social. Blunts allowed users to more easily share marijuana, the preferred drug among their peers, and protected against potential adverse effects associated with the "high." Blunts also allowed users to identify with the dominant style of drug use and differentiate themselves from users of stigmatized drugs such as crack cocaine and methamphetamine. This article highlights the importance of drug-intake methods in the formation and performance of drug-using behaviors among adolescents, emerging adults, and members of ethnic minority subgroups.

Keywords

marijuana; Southeast Asian adolescents; drug use practices; identity formation; second-generation immigrants

Introduction

Tobacco and drug research has increasingly focused on the use of cigars as "blunts"— hollowed-out cigars filled with marijuana that are commonly used by inner-city minority youth and emerging adults (persons aged 18 to 25 years). Increasing use of marijuana among youths nationwide, together with recurring references to blunts in popular cultural media such as rap music and videos, has lead some researchers to identify persons born in the 1970s and later as the "marijuana/blunts generation" (Golub & Johnson 2001; Golub, Johnson, Dunlap, & Sifaneck, 2004). Yet it is difficult to assess longitudinal changes in blunt use prevalence with national data. To date, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is the only nationally representative study that includes items concerning blunt use, but these items were only added in the year 2000. Analysis of recent NSDUH data suggests that blunts are popular among urban African Americans and older adolescent males (Golub, Johnson, & Dunlap, 2005). However, blunt use may be increasing among non-Blacks, females, and non-metropolitan marijuana users, as evidenced by recent ethnographic research on blunt use (Kelly, 2005; Schensul et. al., 2000). These studies provide information on the broadening demographic characteristics of blunt users and the importance of blunts in marijuana consumption practices.

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Prior studies indicate that blunt smoking represents a subcultural form distinct from joint smoking (Ream, Johnson, Sifaneck, & Dunlap, 2006) that is closely associated with hip hop culture (Kelly 2005; Schensul et al., 2000). Schensul and colleagues (2000) found that rap music and other hip hop cultural media helped legitimize marijuana use (particularly in the form of blunts) among respondents, who in turn adhered to prevailing social meanings marijuana of today's hip hop culture through their marijuana-using behaviors.

In a pilot study of drug use among young Southeast Asians in the East San Francisco Bay Area, respondents described a strong preference for blunts over other methods of marijuana intake (Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2005). Cultural references and contexts of use suggested that blunt use is related to the specific socio-economic conditions shaping the experiences of these second-generation youths. In two subsequent mixed-methods projects of substance use among Southeast Asians—one project focused on tobacco use that also gathered data on use of marijuana and another study of drug-involved adolescents and emerging adults—we collected data on use of marijuana in the form of blunts that indicate lifetime and recent use rates as well as rationales for drug-use practices, descriptions of use settings, and conceptions of themselves in relation to drugs.

This paper presents qualitative data from these projects to explain our respondents' preference for blunts over other marijuana intake methods. We pay close attention to how local meanings of drugs and drug users inform how blunt use is incorporated into our respondents' social identities. We highlight findings from recent national studies and studies of ethnic minority drug use to illustrate how drug trends inform our respondents' marijuana intake methods. We also ground our analysis in the contemporary contexts in which our respondents reside, as well as the mass migration of Southeast Asians to the United States. We thus provide a brief account of Southeast Asian refugee and relocation experience to urban locations in the United States. Next, we outline theories of identity that inform our analysis. We then describe the research methods and present results from the projects. In the results section we outline the instrumental and social reasons for blunt use and illustrate how the social meanings of drugs inform blunt use practices and how use is incorporated into our respondents' social identities and peer group activities. We conclude by discussing the importance of drug use and intake methods in the identity formation for adolescents and emerging adults of this economically disadvantaged ethnic minority group.

National Drug Trends and Ethnic Minority Youth

Numerous studies have documented variation in drug use prevalence rates in recent decades. An analysis of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) revealed that the proportion of marijuana users who progressed to "hard drugs" such as powder cocaine, crack, and heroin was highest among persons born in early 1960s and steadily declined across subsequent generations (Golub & Johnson, 2001). Analysis of NSDUH data from 1979 to 2002 revealed rates of lifetime injection drug use were highest among persons born between the late 1940s and early 1960s (Armstrong 2007). The analysis also revealed that between 1979 and 2002, the mean age of those reporting lifetime injection drug use increased from 26 years to 42 years, while the mean age of recent injection drug users (within the last 12 months) rose from 21 to 36 years. These findings suggest both the correlation between the use of marijuana and hard drugs has decreased and injection drug use has sharply declined among younger drug users in recent decades.

While broad drug trends can be identified from general population survey data, trends among ethnic minorities and other subgroups are less evident. Estimates from nationally representative studies indicate differences in lifetime and recent substance use prevalence rates among adolescents of different races and ethnicities. For example African American

adolescents participating in the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey reported lower rates of lifetime and recent alcohol, cigarette, marijuana and other illicit drug use than white and Latino adolescents (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2008). These race/ethnic categories may be still too broad to capture intra-group variation in drug use.

Recognizing that the category "Asian/Pacific Islander" (API) includes people with widely divergent socio-economic statuses, immigration histories, and cultures, researchers have recently focused on use patterns among API subgroups. Disaggregating API data from four national datasets on youth substance use, Price and colleagues (2002) found use and misuse rates among some subgroups to be equal or higher than those reported for white youth. However the authors concluded that overall the datasets lacked sufficient sample sizes for subgroups to allow for definitive comparisons of substance use, particularly for illicit drugs (Price et al., 2002). Using a school-based sample of Asian American 12th graders in California, Nagasawa and colleagues (2001) found that Filipino, Japanese, and Pacific Islander American adolescents had higher odds of reporting lifetime marijuana use than Chinese American adolescents. Likewise, Wong and colleagues (2004) found in general, Chinese American adolescents had lower substance use rates than all of the other subgroups, followed by Japanese, Filipinos, and Pacific Islanders/Native Hawaiians. Such findings suggest that broad race/ethnic categories may mask sizeable variations in drug use among Asian-American subgroups.

Among API groups in the U.S., Southeast Asians have been identified with risk for use of drugs (D'Avanzo, 1997; O'Hare & Tran, 1998). Southeast Asians arrived in the U.S. as refugees in large numbers from the mid-1970s through the 1990s. The largest percent of Southeast Asians Americans now reside in California. Like many new immigrants in the U.S., Southeast Asians in California have tended to settle, at least initially, in low-income areas of mixed ethnicity with high availability of drugs, high levels of violence, and poor formal-level infrastructures. Experiences of war, torture, involuntary exile, and extended stays in refugee camps have been associated with high rates of depression, anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (D'Avanzo, Frye, & Froman, 1994; Kroll et al., 1989; Mollica, Poole, Son, Murray, & Tor, 1997; Nicassio, 1985), and substance abuse (Amodeo, Robb, Peou, & Tran, 1997; D'Avanzo, 1997; O'Hare & Tran, 1998; Yee & Nguyen, 1987) among adult Southeast Asians. Although many studies have shown lower rates of substance use among immigrants in general compared to the general host populations (for example, Blake et al., 2001; Hussey et al., 2007), substance use for the subsequent generations show an increasing tendency towards the mainstream patterns (for example, Wong et al., 2007), although possibly modified by practices of the parent culture (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2005; Hjern & Allebeck, 2004) and characteristics of receiving communities (Gil, Tubman, & Wagner, 2001; Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2005). It is unclear to what degree Southeast Asian Americans repeat these patterns. There is practically no data available on use of marijuana, or any other drugs, among Southeast Asian adults in Asia prior to immigration or in the U.S. Similarly, very little is known about drug use among the subsequent generations of U.S. Southeast Asians. The present study aims to address this gap by presenting data on the use blunts for Southeast Asian American adolescents and emerging adults.

Drugs and Social Identity

Historical trends and changes in social perceptions regarding drugs and drug users have been shown to influence substance use preferences. Golub, Johnson and colleagues (2004) have proposed the concept of "drug eras" to describe shifts in the prevalence of use of specific drugs over time. These researchers have identified a preference among persons born after 1970 for marijuana over drugs such as cocaine and heroin. Social psychologists (Bishop et al., 1997, 2005; Jones and Hartmann, 1988) have used the concept of identity to explain

adolescent and emerging adult substance use. In accordance with sociological and anthropological theories, we focus on the construction of identities through social interactions within various contexts. Identities are multifaceted and consist of any number of sets of meanings, roles, and behaviors that circulate within contexts, which vary across time and space (Burke, 2004).

In this sense, substance-using behaviors function as resources that inform individual identities by reflecting group membership, or one's role or persona. Associations with drugs, drug-using behaviors, and culturally-specific user categories shape the identities of users and non-users alike. Conversely, the social meanings of drugs may be shaped through associations with specific types of persons, roles, or social groups. Ethnographers have investigated how drug using contexts inform drug preferences and use practices. Zinberg's (1984) study of controlled drug use among heroin users emphasized the importance of what he called "set"—social group and its norms and values—and "setting"—social contexts of use—in shaping the drug use practices of individuals. Becker (1953) identified how novice marijuana users came to recognize and interpret its physiological effects by using the drug in the company of more seasoned users. Inexperienced users often failed to experience the "high" when they had not established a conceptual frame for interpreting the physiological effects. Conversely, veteran users developed frameworks for interpreting the effects through experiences with marijuana-using subcultures. These studies inform our analysis by suggesting how social meanings of drugs, drug users, and intake methods shape our respondents' drug-using practices, and how these practices are in turn incorporated into their social identities and daily activities.

Previous studies by the research team (Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2005) among second generation Southeast Asians in Northern California indicate that while marijuana use was found to be highly normative—said to be quite common, considered to be "no big deal," and easily incorporated into everyday routines. Smoking marijuana helped them to cope with the stresses of their home and neighborhood environments and located them within an alternative "ghetto" lifestyle of rap music, marijuana-smoking (Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2005). The present study explores in particular their preference for smoking marijuana in the form of blunts in the context of forming this alternative social identity.

Methods

Data for this paper were drawn from two research projects on substance use among Southeast Asians in the East San Francisco Bay area. These projects utilized similar data collection and analysis methods, but the samples varied slightly according to the research questions. Project 1 examined knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to tobacco use among Southeast Asians and compared these by generation in the U.S. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected on a number of forms of tobacco use including cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco, and blunts. The research team also gathered interview data on concurrent use of tobacco and marijuana and alcohol. The sample included 164 Southeast Asians stratified by gender and generation in the U.S. as well as by cigarette smoking status (current vs. never or former). In the final sample respondents ranged in age from 15 to 81, with a mean age of 35, and were nearly evenly divided between males and females as well as by cigarette smoking status.

Project 2 investigated the ways in which identity formation and peer and family relationships impact the social construction of drug use and using behaviors for second-generation Southeast Asian Americans. Quantitative data on lifetime, past 12 month, and past 30-day use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit substances were collected prior to conducting semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data were collected to assess how drugs fit into the

social identities and daily activities of our respondents. The sample included 153 Southeast Asians between the ages of 15 and 24. A requirement for participating in this project was current or recent (past six months) use of any illicit drug as identified by self-report. All but one respondent reported lifetime blunt use. The sample was stratified by gender and by age group. In the final sample, respondents were nearly evenly divided between males and females, and between the four age groups of 15–16 years old, 17–18 years old, 19–20 years old, and 21–24 years old.

In both projects "Southeast Asian" was defined to include only persons of Laotian or Cambodian origin. "Laotian" included members of the Lao, Khmu, Mien and Thai Dam ethnic groups but not Hmong, as there are very few Hmong in the Bay Area. The samples were drawn from the same two East Bay communities. The two communities were chosen for having the largest Laotian and Cambodian populations in the East Bay Area. These communities are both low-income with predominantly ethnic minority populations: approximately one-third African American, one-fourth Latino and 10–15% Asian/Pacific Islander. Both communities are known for extremely high rates of violent crime. Drugs and alcohol are easily accessible in these communities, while gang territories divide neighborhoods.

Small, socially-insular populations such as immigrants and substance users constitute "hard-to-reach" populations, among whom recruitment to research studies is extremely challenging. Even when random sampling might be possible among such populations, labor costs for developing census rolls to sample from are generally beyond the scope of smaller-scale ethnographic studies. Such was the case with our projects as well, and therefore both projects relied on community samples.

Respondents in both projects were recruited through a combination of agency referrals and snowball sampling, which allowed the field staff to rapidly identify potential respondents and increased our ability to identify respondents who matched the criteria for these projects. Initial contacts came from community-based organizations serving Southeast Asians in the two cities. For Project 1, field interviewers included bilingual/bicultural staff members of two such organizations, who drew on their own social networks as well as agency and snowball referrals. Potential respondents referred to the study by these persons were asked if they would like to participate and, if so, invited to contact the field staff who scheduled interviews. Project 2 utilized no indigenous interviewers but provided small incentives to research participants for referring other qualified respondents (usually friends and family members) and 70% of respondents resulted from such snowball referrals. Non-indigenous field interviewers—including the first author, who conducted 20 interviews (12% of the total) in Project 1 and 87 interviews (57% of the total) in Project 2—increased community trust by "tabling" or participating in community events as project representatives, where they also recruited potential respondents; by developing collegial relationships with staff at community-based agencies who facilitated referrals; and by developing rapport through attentive and engaged yet confidential communications with respondents and the persons they referred.

Potential respondents for this project were invited to contact the field staff and schedule an interview. In order to protect the privacy of persons who might qualify for these studies but did not wish to participate, and because agencies and persons making referrals were not willing to provide information on anyone not willing to be enrolled, we did not collect information on persons who were invited but chose not to participate in the research. Once enrolled, no participants dropped out during the course of either project, although in the second project data from two respondents were deleted once it was determined that they had

each used false identities to conduct duplicate interviews with different members of the field interviewing team.

All data were collected in confidential in-person semi-structured interviews. Interviews averaged 90 minutes in length and were conducted either at the Prevention Research Center, at the offices of cooperating community-based organizations, or respondents' homes, at their preference, and were recorded and transcribed. Participants received a cash incentive. All interviews cited in the present study were conducted in English. The interview transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and then loaded into the ATLAS.ti program (Muhr, 2004) for coding and analysis. ATLAS.ti is designed for coding and analyzing qualitative texts and allows researchers to cross-reference, index, search, and retrieve data through a keyword coding process. Codes are applied to selected sections of text within the transcripts by trained coders who select from a predetermined set of codes defined in a codebook. More than one code can be assigned to any passage, and codes may be nested within other codes. At any point, texts associated with one or more codes may be output as text files for analysis.

Coding was based on codebooks developed by the research staff. The codes included category codes, such as "female" or "second generation," to identify respondents' general characteristics as well as thematic codes suggested by review of the literature, specific research questions, and emergent themes. Analyses for this paper were conducted by outputting and reviewing all coded texts related to "marijuana" and "drug use methods" as well as all texts referring to "blunts," comparing the selected texts by category codes (such as gender or age), and sorting the texts by overarching and subsidiary themes.

The present study of the social meanings of blunt use is based on only the qualitative data from these projects from second-generation adolescent and emerging adult respondents. Elsewhere we have reported that, among Northern California Southeast Asians interviewed in Project 1, blunt smoking appears to be limited to youth and emerging adults (Lee, Battle, Lipton, & Soller, 2010). As the respondents from both Projects 1 and 2 who were able to provide data on blunt smoking were all Southeast Asian youths and emerging adults from the same two East Bay cities, and as methods for collecting and analyzing the qualitative data for the two projects were comparable, we have aggregated the respondents and report on them collectively. Data for this paper come from a combined total of 199 persons who reported any lifetime use of blunts (47 from Project 1 and 152 from Project 2).

The age range of this combined sample was 15 to 28 years with a mean of 18.9 years (SD = 2.64). In both projects, data on income, and parental education and employment were judged to be highly problematic and therefore not collected, although health insurance status was collected as a proxy for socioeconomic status. The majority of the respondents in this study (87%) reported having publically-funded or no health insurance. Roughly three-quarters (75.4%) of the respondents in the current study were born in the U.S. and 43% were female.

Results

In this section we describe our respondents' preferences for marijuana over other drugs and for blunts over other methods of intake. We highlight the social meanings of drugs and drug users to demonstrate our respondents' rationales for using marijuana over other "hard" drugs, like crack or smokable methamphetamine. We then describe how the instrumental features of blunts and social meanings of drugs inform our respondents preference for the method of intake.

Rationales for preferring marijuana

Marijuana was clearly preferred over and sharply distinguished from other drugs, specifically cocaine in the form of "crack," in terms of both the physiologic effects and the social meanings associated with these drugs. Most of our respondents reported marijuana as having relaxing effects that did not entail loss of control over one's emotions or oneself. This was contrasted to the adverse effects associated with crack and cocaine, which include losing control over oneself in social situations and achieving a blemished identity status.

> It [marijuana] is one of those things where you see people use it and they can still use it and it's part of life. That's probably why they think it's okay. Crack and then cocaine, they just sound so bizarre that you think automatically [of] that image, that you're a crackhead. People say that. I remember one person did it [crack] before and everything just moves so fast and they react to a certain situation like crazy. So that's why you think of a crackhead, because that's how they react to certain situations. They start looking around, eyes are all open. Marijuana, you're more laid back. You can still function at the same time. You're fully not there, but still you can function. You can lay back, you can do things. That's why people do it. Because you can control yourself. *KC[1] 23 year-old male*

As in our pilot study, respondents continued to report strong aversions to both the use of these drugs and the associated identity categories of users, such as "crackhead" or "dope fiend." Our respondents' perceptions of crack and crack users were informed by frequent encounters and observations of crack users in their neighborhoods as well as the local discourse about these drugs and their users.

> I: You said drugs were all around you, it was normal. How did you not use crack if it was all around you?
>
> KS: Because most the people that I know, they sell it. We don't use it. People I know that do use it, it's like one or two and that's about it. And other people are "Oh he's a crackhead," this and that, and then we're like, "Okay, we know crack is bad."
>
> I: Why is crack different from marijuana?
>
> KS: I don't know why there's a difference but it just, crack is bad and people talk about it. Like, the old generations [adult community members], they would like teach us a lesson, 'Don't do crack but yeah, every once [in a while use] a blunt,' stuff like that. I just never did it. *KS, 20 year-old female*

It is clear that the stigmatization and perceived risk of using crack and other drugs contributed to our respondents' preference for marijuana, which was perceived as a controllable and relatively benign substance. Likewise, the widespread acceptance of marijuana within the larger environment facilitated its use within a variety of social settings. Our qualitative data also suggest that the social meanings of drugs and drug users contribute to our respondents' preference for blunts over other methods of marijuana intake, such as pipes, bongs, or joints.

Blunts: The drug of choice

Blunts were found to be the most common illicit drug used in this population, particularly for younger respondents in our studies. In project 1, as we have reported elsewhere (Lee, et al., 2010), among second generation respondents 62% reported lifetime blunt use and 27% reported current blunt use (i.e. in the past 30 days prior to the interview), compared to 45%

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[1] All initials attached to respondent quotes refer to pseudonyms.

for lifetime use and 17% for current use of other forms of marijuana. Among first generation respondents only 10% reported ever smoking blunts, compared to 22% for other forms of marijuana (and only one report of current use for each item). Among respondents in Project 2, who were selected for recent use of drugs, blunts were the most commonly reported form of illicit drug used. All but one of these respondents had ever smoked blunts and nearly 80% had smoked blunts in the past 30 days, including 17.6% who reported smoking blunts every day.

Qualitative data from both studies indicated that younger respondents clearly preferred blunts over other forms of marijuana, with several reporting that they had never used marijuana in any other form.

> I was raised seeing people rolling blunts: put the weed in, lick it, fire it up. I was used to seeing that and I got to try that one time, so I started using blunts. Because everybody else, they like using blunts better. Don't like those other kind of stuff that people be using. We're just more used to the blunts. *RP, 15 year-old male*

Users offered several reasons for this preference. These rationales can be divided into the instrumental and the social.

Rationales for using blunts: instrumental

The primary reasons given for preferring blunts over other means of smoking marijuana were associated with practical considerations. Respondents reported that blunts were easier to use than marijuana rolled in joints because they were easier to hold and did not fall apart like joints. Compared to pipes or bongs (waterpipes), blunts could be discarded after use, making them more portable and also meaning the smoker need not carry any incriminating paraphernalia. Also, unlike pipes or bongs, blunts usually do not need to be relit before each user takes a "hit."

> I don't like the pipe 'cause you gotta hold it when you light it, you gotta hold it down, like, you know, so all the smoke and stuff can go in the little tube, and you know? Yeah, I don't like it. [I: What don't you like about it?] The smell, I guess. I don't know! It's too much work 'cause you got to keep lighting it, and you know, smoking it. I don't like to do that. I'd rather just roll it. *NL, 21 year-old female*

Respondents reported differences in the "high," or psychoactive effect, that resulted from the various methods of marijuana consumption. Some noted that pipe and bong use resulted in a stronger high because of the greater volume of smoke that would typically be inhaled and because the marijuana smoke would not be adulterated by the blunt wrapper. This stronger, more intense high often entailed a loss of self-control and was not a desired outcome for most of our respondents.

> I don't try to do it [smoke from a pipe] 'cause every time they high they always start tripping, you know? They start tripping and stuff 'cause they get too high. There's no paper or anything in there, it's just regular, you know, weed. *CM, 21 year-old female*

> A pipe, I used it only three times or four times. And like I felt different from the blunt because like, damn, I should never used that pipe. I should have just smoked the blunt instead. That be hella different from a fucking blunt. I used it because we had nothing else to use. One time we used it from a pen tube. We took off everything from the pen and put a whole stack of blunt in there, burned the weed and held it like it's a pipe. I got hella high off of that. And, damn, should have never done that. I just got hella high off that. *SS, 15 year-old male*

By contrast, smoking marijuana in a blunt protected against becoming too high.

It [pipe smoking]'s more stronger. When we smoke it in a blunt, they just break it down, but with a pipe they would shred it down to crumbs, and there would be no filter. The blunt has a little slow burning, [but] when it's in the pipe, you just have the weed coming in. With the Swishers [a brand of blunt cigar] and stuff you get like a strawberry flavor from the Swisher and all that, but the pipe is just straight [marijuana]. I think I was more high when I used the pipe. *DP, 15 year-old male*

Rationales for using blunts: social

While some respondents reported smoking blunts by themselves, most considered blunt smoking to be a social act, done with one's friends, or "padnahs."

I don't wanna smoke by myself, it ain't no fun! You be high by yourself — that's why I don't smoke by myself. Always it's either somebody else, or a coupla other people. *PL, 18 year-old male*

Many of the instrumental features of blunts were preferred because they facilitated the social aspects of marijuana use. When properly rolled, blunts were said to burn the marijuana more slowly and stay lit, enabling more effective sharing in group settings. Marijuana rolled in blunts was said to be easier to pass to another smoker compared to joints, which were more fragile and easier to smoke from than pipes, which frequently needed to be relit. Blunts also enabled a smaller amount of marijuana to be consumed by a higher number of people because they burn the marijuana more slowly and "last longer" than pipes, bongs, and joint paper.

Into the bong, it takes the weed faster, but if you smoke from the blunt, more people could smoke it. *DS, 16 year-old female*

An additional feature of sharing marijuana in this way was that users were less likely to get too high.

I guess most people smoke a Swisher because [there are] other people that's smoking on it too. Because if you chop it up—it's a little-ass sack [the $10 bag of marijuana]—you chop it up, everybody's going to get a little. Even though you get a little, you can only smoke a little, you stay high a little longer, but it doesn't get to that [too high] level. *KL, 19 year-old female*

Another social aspect of blunt smoking was related to the ways in which most of our respondents obtained their marijuana. Typically this was by "fading up," in which a group of friends pooled their money to buy a small amount of marijuana. The size of the blunt lends itself to marijuana smoking rituals, as it is large enough to hold a "ten-sack," i.e. a bag costing around $10, which was the increment most typically reported of our respondents' purchases.

We go buy some weed, go get a Swisher from the store, break it down, take the tobacco out, break the weed up, put it in there, roll it and smoke it. Pass it around. If it's a coupla heads [smokers], we ain't gonna be smokin' just like one blunt. We gonna smoke a couple of 'em. Smoke, chill. *PS, 18 year-old male*

Certain features of the blunt-using ritual allowed users to display positive aspects of their social identity. One male respondent noted that he took pride in his blunt-rolling ability and was appreciated by other experienced smokers:

It's just fun, you know? Rolling up a blunt, you know? It's fun. Like showing how people we lock [roll blunts] and shit. You know? You be like, Oh, damn, you got locked [good rolling abilities]! Yeah. *SL, 16 year-old male*

Similar to the reasons for smoking marijuana in general, many respondents indicated that they preferred smoking their marijuana in blunts because it helped them to avoid social stigma that is potentially associated with drug use. Compared to the use of crack cocaine, and heroin, which were highly stigmatized among our respondents, the stigma associated with marijuana use appeared to be largely associated with the method of intake, rather than the substance itself. Cigar-like in form and appearance, blunts are visually distinct from pipes, the intake method preferred by crack and most crystal methamphetamine users. Respondents frequently expressed negative reactions to use of pipes for smoking marijuana, primarily due to the association with these other drugs.

> It [smoking marijuana out of pipes] make you like a dope fiend. I see people smoke crack out of pipes, so I don't want to smoke weed out of no pipe. *BS, 19 year-old male*

> The blunts, it just seem so regular, but then you smoking out of a pipe… I just don't like the feel of it. I feel like a crackhead when smoking out of a pipe. I just didn't like the feeling, so it wasn't for me. It's just not for some people. *CC, 16 year-old male*

Discussion

We found that social meanings and outcome expectancies combine to support our respondents' preference for blunts as a marijuana delivery system in contrast to other forms of marijuana consumption as well as other available drugs. The use of blunts among our respondents was in part shaped by general perceptions of drug use and characteristics attributed to certain drug-user categories (for example "crack heads"). As blunt smoking has become increasingly normalized beyond subcultural groups to several mainstream youth cultures, the meanings of smoking marijuana expressed by our respondents, along with related risks of stigma and ostracization, represent a cultural shift from mainstream values expressed in previous decades. For our respondents, blunt use expressed valued character traits such as a "chill" or laid-back personality and helped signify that the user embodied the urban youth subculture. The instrumental features of the blunt enhanced our respondents' self-definitions by distancing them from stigmatized drug user categories while helping them to regulate their consumption and the physiological effects of marijuana.

Within certain contexts, blunt smoking could become a positive expression of identity that would entail little social esteem within other settings. Fletcher and colleagues (2009) describe a similar process among urban black secondary school students in London. They found marijuana use to be an important feature of self-presentation as it expressed valued features of a street, or "safe" identity. Apart from facilitating peer group bonding, expressing this identity characteristic helped students achieve social status within the larger school context and facilitated group membership, which in turn helped students to avoid bullying and other forms of victimization. Like the students in Fletcher and colleagues' (2009) study, drug use facilitated peer group membership among our respondents. Perhaps more importantly, it helped our respondents express characteristics that are valued within the urban youth culture and distance themselves from stigmatized identity categories, such as "crack heads" and drug addicts.

In addition to acting as a marijuana delivery system with perceived functional advantages over other systems, blunts can reinforce certain social meanings surrounding marijuana use and serve to forge inter- and intra-ethnic bonds among participants of certain urban youth cultures. Instrumental and social aspects of blunt use allow users to reinforce and express desirable character attributes, establish social boundaries between themselves and other groups, and avoid much of the social stigma that potentially accompanies drug use while

achieving a desired psychoactive state (the "high"). We find that these aspects intertwine to reinforce established definitions of marijuana use and promote the practice as an important identity attribute.

British researchers have suggested a trend toward the normalization of marijuana use, particularly among younger substance users (Measham, Newcombe, & Parker, 1994; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998). According to these studies, as illicit substance use becomes more widespread it also becomes a normal part of the leisure activities of well-adjusted and otherwise law-abiding youth and emerging adults. The normalization of marijuana use, particularly in the form of blunts, as well as the potential of blunt smoking to deliver a desirable yet controllable high, were central to the popularity and acceptability of marijuana use among our respondents. Our respondents' accounts highlight the importance of blunts in controlling the dosage of the drug as well as the high that was subsequently achieved. Restrictive social norms concerning altered states of consciousness thus informed these youths' preference for blunts. Blunts helped users achieve a relaxing high, rather than one that was overwhelming and entailed a loss of control over one's emotions. As a result there was less risk of the negatively-valued sensation and attendant stigma of being "too high" compared to other drugs and even other forms of marijuana consumption. Blunts helped to further legitimize marijuana use by enabling the drug to be more effectively consumed in group settings. Because the blunt is more robust than joints and stays lit longer than pipes, it was said to be easier to pass around and consume among a group of smokers. This feature was also found to be important among blunt users in New York City (Sifaneck, Johnson, & Dunlap, 2005). For our respondents, this feature of blunts supported the perception that unlike other drugs which might be consumed by solitary users, marijuana should be shared among a group of users.

These representations of blunt smoking contrasted sharply with users' portrayals of use of drugs such as heroin, "crack" cocaine and "crystal meth," or smokeable methamphetamine. These drugs and drug use forms were familiar to our respondents from their social environment, yet as has been shown for members of the "blunts/marijuana generation" elsewhere (Benoit, Randolph, Dunlap, & Johnson, 2003; Furst, Johnson, Dunlap, & Curtis, 1999; Golub & Johnson, 2001; Ream, Johnson, Sifaneck, & Dunlap, 2006; Schensul et. al. 2000), blunt-smokers shunned the use of these substances. The reasons for this were instrumental as well as symbolic. Maintaining mental control and awareness were of particular importance for our respondents, but they described these qualities as lost by "crack heads" and "dope fiends," i.e. users of crack cocaine, heroin, and smoked methamphetamine. The negative images and emotions often mentioned in conjunction with pipe use may be largely due to the close proximity and frequency of encounters that our respondents have had with hard drug users.

Hip hop culture also likely informed the social meanings of drugs and drug users, as images of drugs and drug users have played prominent roles in rap music and other hip hop cultural expressions and media. Smith (1997) notes how substance use and the drug trade have been central tropes of rap music since its inception. In particular, the drug trade is often presented as a viable source for economic gain for young, low-skilled males living in disadvantaged areas. Primack et al. (2008) found that within a sample of the 279 most popular songs of 2005, dealing and trafficking drugs were only mentioned in rap music and were always associated with positive consequences (such as financial gain). Diamond, Bermudez, and Schensul's (2006) content analysis of ecstasy use in rap music found that overall, ecstasy is associated with a variety of consequences, including vulnerability, addiction, crazed behavior, and feelings of sexual prowess. Conversely, marijuana use is rarely portrayed in a negative fashion in rap or hip hop music.

Previous studies examining Southeast Asian youth and emerging adults in urban areas have noted the importance of hip hop cultural expressions in the construction and performance of their social identities. Second and subsequent generations of Southeast Asian youths and emerging adults living in urban settings have been found to adopt African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Reyes, 2005) and urban styles of dress, such as baggy clothing (Jeung, 2002). Such attributes may facilitate Southeast Asians' integration into the urban youth cultures and interaction with co-ethnic peers as well as individuals of other ethnicities and races (Staiger, 2005). These features, adopted from the youth subculture, provide symbolic resources in the construction of social identity for our respondents. They serve as barometers of authenticity and indicate the degree to which an individual is a competent practitioner of the urban youth culture. Such a distinction may have certain financial, practical, and status-related rewards for individuals, particularly among members of economically and socially marginalized groups.

Adopting practices of prevailing drug subcultures may, moreover, be an especially important method of positive identity formation among disadvantaged adolescents and emerging adults who lack strong ties to conventional sources of socialization that are present in more advantaged family, neighborhood, and school contexts. Adopting these practices can be even more important for young urban Southeast Asians because they are minorities within contexts that are culturally dominated by other ethnic minorities. The cultural attributes of older generations of Southeast Asians are far different from those of their co-resident peers. In our earlier studies many youths expressed difficulty attaining the standards set by their parents—both standards based on traditional norms, such as filial respect, and those developing in the diasporic context, such as educational achievement (Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2005). For many of our respondents, expressing features of urban youth subcultures helped to reflect positive identity characteristics to themselves as well as to their peers.

Substance use, as well as other forms of conduct that are typically associated with subcultural groups, may function as cultural capital that is recognized only within limited settings (Haines, Poland, & Johnson, 2009; Thornton, 1996). Though the social value of these forms of cultural capital is restricted to relatively few contexts (Jensen, 2006), it nevertheless helps to guarantee collateral social benefits (such as status attainment) for individuals who lack conventional, or more universally recognized forms of cultural and social capital. Comparative research that examines substance use practices across groups and individuals who vary in the content and quantity of their cultural and social capital could offer insight into how drug use intake methods function as boundary mechanisms and reinforce social hierarchies across contexts of adolescent interaction. This research can also contribute to the understanding of why adolescents continue to use drugs despite having knowledge of the harmful effects associated with substance abuse. This knowledge may increase the effectiveness of policy and preventative efforts that aim at alleviating harmful substance use among adolescents. Further inquiry into the process through which social meanings of drug-using practices and drug users develop in different settings will provide insight into the variety of reasons that adolescents and emerging adults use drugs.

Though our findings help to explain how urban cultural contexts inform the drug-using patterns of Southeast Asian marijuana users, the social meanings of marijuana and other drugs likely vary across rural and suburban contexts and other drug-using subcultures. Accordingly, it may be that our findings cannot be generalized to non-urban, and perhaps non-Southeast Asian drug users. Comparative research will help determine both the prevalence of blunt use among different social groups and uncover the nuanced ways in which drug intake methods inform individual and group social identities and drug-using patterns in different settings. Though blunt use in particular may not have the same symbolic

functions in different contexts, stylized drug intake methods are likely to be important features of drug use for adolescents in a variety of social settings.

Conclusion

Drug use is an illegal activity that may impair judgment and physical capacities, and thus may compromise adolescents' family, school and future work lives as well as their immediate health and safety. Marijuana continues to be the most commonly used and abused illicit drug in the U.S. (Compton, Thomas, Stinson, & Grant, 2007; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2009; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2009). Drug use among adolescents has been associated with increased rates and degrees of other problem behaviors such as juvenile crime and violent offending (Tubman, Gil, & Wagner, 2004) as well as increased risk of drug use and other adverse outcomes in adulthood (Fergusson & Boden, 2008; Patton et al. 2007). While the research on associations between marijuana use and poor health outcomes is at present ambivalent (Tashkin, 2009), recent research has yielded increasing evidence of an additive negative effect on lung health from the concurrent smoking of marijuana and tobacco (Tan et al. 2009). The nicotine content of blunts represented by the cigar shell, while generally not recognized as such by users (Moolchan et al. 2005), may increase the risk of marijuana dependence and abuse, as evidenced by recent studies comparing marijuana smoked in blunts versus other intake methods (Cooper and Haney, 2009; Ream, Benoit, Johnson, & Dunlap, 2008; Timberlake, 2009). These findings, as well as those from our study, highlight the need for further examination into the connection between marijuana use practices and adverse health and behavioral outcomes.

Regardless of the potential social, behavioral, or health outcomes, marijuana use was an important feature of our respondents' social identities. It appears on the surface that prevention efforts aimed at stigmatizing marijuana use could be effective at alleviating problematic use among adolescents. However, attempts at framing marijuana as harmful are sure to be hindered by both the pro-social meanings that are associated with the drug and perceptions of its relatively minor physiological and psychological effects. Furthermore, we believe that marijuana use is a positive feature of self-presentation for several of our respondents because they are embedded in socially-isolated neighborhood environments that lack resources that could otherwise promote the adoption of more conventional methods of social identity formation, such as scholastic achievement. More constructive policies must be cognizant of the importance of drug use in the formation of adolescents' social identities, particularly among those who lack economic and conventional forms of cultural capital as well as ties to conventional members of society. Programs and policies that aim to foster adherence to conventional means of identity formation may be more effective at alleviating problematic substance use than punitive and stigmatizing efforts that have and are currently being put forth.

Acknowledgments

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