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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The privileged normalization of marijuana use – an analysis of Canadian newspaper reporting, 1997–2007

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The objective of this study was to systematically examine predominant themes within mainstream media reporting about marijuana use in Canada. To ascertain the themes present in major Canadian newspaper reports, a sample ( $N=1999$ ) of articles published between 1997 and 2007 was analyzed. Drawing from Manning's theory of the symbolic framing of drug use within media, it is argued that a discourse of 'privileged normalization' informs portrayals of marijuana use and descriptions of the drug's users. Privileged normalization implies that marijuana use can be acceptable for some people at particular times and places, while its use by those without power and status is routinely vilified and linked to deviant behavior. The privileged normalization of marijuana by the media has important health policy implications in light of continued debate regarding the merits of decriminalization or legalization and the need for public health and harm reduction approaches to illicit drug use.

**Keywords:** drugs; public policy; media

#### Introduction

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit substance in Canada. The 2012 United Nations World Drug Report revealed that Canadians have one of the highest prevalence rates for cannabis use in the world, after Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, 45% of adult Canadians report having used marijuana at least once in their lifetime (Adlaf, Begin, and Sawka 2005). In 2004, 12.2%–14.1% of Canadians 15 years of age and older reported having used marijuana at least once in the past year (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse 2004), which is double the rates reported in 1994. Despite high rates of use among Canadians, public debate about marijuana has remained polarized, with calls to decriminalize possession and to expand medical use of marijuana, conflicting with calls for more stringent penalties for people who use and distribute the drug (Jones and

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Hathaway 2008). Between these two extremes are those who advocate for a public health approach to marijuana use, to minimize the harmful or negative consequences stemming from its use (Fischer et al. 2009, Hall 2009).

As interest groups from varied perspectives attempt to influence drug policies, media coverage of the marijuana issue is an important component of the national discourse on drug use. However, to date, few studies have been conducted to systematically ascertain the changing tone and predominant themes within the mainstream media, to consider how these might influence public debate and advocacy for public health policies. To fill this gap, we conducted an analysis of representations of marijuana in major Canadian newspapers over the course of a 10-year period to ascertain dominant messages about marijuana use.

## **Background literature**

### ***Marijuana policy in the Canadian context***

To contextualize our study, we provide a short history of the social and legal status of marijuana in Canada. Marijuana was first criminalized in Canada in 1923 following the publication of magistrate and activist Emily Murphy's (1922) book *The Black Candle*, which described marijuana as the 'new [drug] menace.' Since then, marijuana has remained an illegal substance. Recreational marijuana use has been widely debated in Canada since the 1960s, when marijuana's association with 'hippie' counterculture shifted the status of the drug to a symbol of non-conformity for white, middle-class youth (Boyd 2009, Courtwright 2001). A government-sponsored inquiry into the non-medicinal use of drugs followed these social changes and, in 1972, led to the recommendation that cannabis be decriminalized and federally regulated. This recommendation was ignored by the government (Commission of Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs 1972). Similar government reports were issued in 2002 and 2004 that resulted in proposed cannabis decriminalization bills, though these bills did not become law. In 2001, the Liberal Government succeeded in passing legislation that allows citizens with specific chronic diseases to apply for permission to use government-regulated marijuana, making Canada the first country to adopt a medicinal marijuana program (Health Canada 2011). This program sparked intense public debate in Canada regarding the therapeutic benefits of marijuana as well as the social and health harms of marijuana use (Graham 2004). Today, although medical marijuana use is sanctioned for some, marijuana production, distribution, and use remain illegal. Those documenting Canadian drug policy have framed the story of the country's marijuana policies as one of repeated lost opportunities because any movement toward more liberal policy has been thwarted by political pressures from conservative forces within and beyond Canada who are aligned with an American-style 'War on Drugs' approach (Erickson 1992, Fischer et al. 2003, Martel 2006). In more recent years, intense debates have taken place in Canada and internationally regarding the legal regulation of marijuana. Some US states have legalized possession of marijuana and are developing plans for regulation, and countries such as Portugal have decriminalized the possession of all illicit substances (Greenwald 2009). Although similar changes have not occurred in Canada, there is a thrust towards more progressive drug policy in growing recognition of the futility of prohibiting marijuana use (Hathaway, Comeau, and Erickon 2011).

### ***Research about the framing of marijuana by the news media***

Newspaper coverage related to marijuana has been shaped generally by its status as an illicit substance and by the established patterns of reporting criminal behavior, a staple of news content in North American media (Bright et al. 2008, Young 2005). Research exploring how marijuana use is framed in news reporting suggests that while there have been examples of a balanced and ‘deliberately non-sensationalist’ approach to issues such as cannabis reform (Lenton 2004), media coverage generally contributes to the ‘symbolic shaming’ of marijuana users (Cross 2007). Charges of sensationalism are not unique to stories about substance use: mainstream health reporting has been cited for exacerbating social and political power differentials (Kline 2006), and for contributing to the stigma associated with illness, and for portraying certain conditions as threats to ‘normalcy’ (e.g. mental illness) (Seale 2003). As argued by Taylor (2008), media reporting has more than just discursive effects because its representations of illicit drug use primarily as a criminal choice, rather than as a public health concern, have contributed, in part, to the social exclusion of drug users from mainstream society.

Until recently, large-scale studies focused exclusively on marijuana in news media have been limited. Boyd and Carter (2010) analyzed 15 years (1995–2009) of Canadian reporting about marijuana grow operations and illicit drug discourse in one national and three provincial newspapers. Focused primarily on representations of the people who grow and sell marijuana, their analysis of the truth claims made by local spokespersons (i.e. law enforcement personnel and politicians) suggests that newspaper stories neglect the structural causes of illicit drug selling, and instead present the issues through a narrow ‘law and order’ discourse that lends itself to calls for harsher legal penalties (Carter 2009). Acevedo (2007) analyzed media messages regarding the UK government’s re-classification of cannabis in 2004 and 2005. In describing typical discourses present in the media reports, she concluded that these policy discourses revolved around a binary characterization of marijuana as either poison or remedy, and created a new characterization of the marijuana user as psychotic, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations related to cannabis use. Finally, Lewis and Proffitt (2012) analyzed the media’s framing of American Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps’ marijuana controversy in contrast with the framing of other athletes’ marijuana cases, particularly that of US National Football League player, Michael Vick. They found that Phelps’ case was minimized and excused while Vick’s situation was framed as criminal activity and proof of his deviant nature. The authors characterized this framing as a function of racism whereby black athletes’ crimes are typically portrayed as an enduring trend while white athletes’ crimes are treated as unique incidents. Lewis and Proffitt argued that the news reports’ authors tended to identify with Phelps and therefore defended him, and thus described an important way in which racialized discourse informed the discursive framing of athletes’ marijuana-related incidents.

Although not specific to marijuana use, Manning’s (2006) research about media and substance use described how representations of drugs and the individuals who use them are constructed in particular ways based on symbolic meanings and associations. In the context of media reporting on drug use, symbolic frameworks function to ‘construct particular substances in particular ways, by associating such substances with certain social groups or identities rather than others, and by mobilising particular forms of language, and symbolism’ (Manning 2007, 4). Manning’s concept of the symbolic framework is based on four dimensions that he argued shaped discourses about substance misuse in media: location (spaces and places where drug use occurs), behavior and

identities (associations with particular types of substance users), substance images (signifiers of substance use, such as drug paraphernalia), and causes and consequences (symbols that suggest particular explanations for why drug use occurs). This framing of drug use is implicitly linked to power and status; for example, solvents are typically used by less privileged people (Manning 2006). The symbolic framing of drugs in the media draws on discourses of social inequality and builds upon historical associations between substances and marginalized groups to ‘frequently identify certain social groups with which to symbolically associate drug consumption and “risk”’ (Manning 2006, 50). We employed Manning’s symbolic framing approach to illuminate issues of power within news stories about marijuana and to unpack some of the assumptions and stereotypes about marijuana users that appear in mainstream Canadian reporting.

Manning’s conceptualization of symbolic framing underscores how news media constructs drug users as immoral or deviant, and also suggests how different substances are comparatively more stigmatized based on the social location of their users. Likewise, proponents of the normalization thesis within the sociology of substance use (see: Measham, Newcombe, and Parker 1994, Parker 2005, Parker, Williams, and Aldridge 2002) have challenged the premise that illicit drug use is essentially deviant in contexts where prevalence of use is widespread and recreational use has become expected amongst adolescents and young adults. We also drew on Measham and Shiner’s (2009) work about the normalization of ‘sensible recreational’ drug use, in which normalization is seen not as a population-level phenomenon, but rather as part of a ‘contingent process negotiated by distinct social groups operating in bounded situations’ (502). This perspective helped us to probe the ways in which marijuana might be normalized differently for different groups of people. While our use of the term privileged normalization was primarily informed by Manning’s concept of symbolic framing, we acknowledge the theoretical contributions of the normalization literature for illuminating the social construction of drug use and challenging punitive approaches to drug prevention and policy.

## **Methods**

The analysis reported here was part of a larger project to describe the dominant messages and trends related to marijuana in a population of Canadian national newspaper stories published over a 10-year period. The method occurred in four sequential stages: (a) use of the Factiva™ online news database to search for articles about marijuana in Canadian newspapers published between 1997 and 2007; (b) use of a computer-assisted approach to identify articles that made explicit reference to marijuana (or to a related relevant term including ‘pot,’ ‘weed,’ or cannabis) (Voth et al. 2013); (c) a cluster analysis of term co-occurrences to construct the sample of articles; and (d) a multi-step qualitative analysis to code and identify the dominant themes framing the stories in the sample of articles. Each of these stages is described in detail below.

### ***Newspaper and article selection***

Many media analyses do not use representative samples of stories. To overcome this limitation we used the Dow Jones Factiva® database (version: search 2.0, 2007) to search for articles that contained messages about marijuana and that were published in major English Canadian newspapers between 1 January 1997 and 31 December 2007. The following full-text query, consisting of terms that often refer to marijuana, was used

to search the database: (marijuana OR marihuana) OR (cannabis OR canabis) OR (hashish OR hashesh OR hasheesh) OR (reefer) OR (charas) OR (pot) OR (weed). The Factiva Intelligent Indexing™ system was used to limit the search to English Canadian newspaper articles within the above date range that contained stories about Canada. This search resulted in a sample of 41,462 potentially relevant articles; we limited that initial sample to 37,288 papers that were published in 10 Canadian newspapers, including eight major regional newspapers (The Calgary Herald, Edmonton Journal, Montreal Gazette, Ottawa Citizen, Hamilton Spectator, Toronto Star, Vancouver Sun, and the Winnipeg Free Press) and two national newspapers (National Post and the Globe and Mail).

### ***Article filtering***

Our computer-assisted approach has been described in detail elsewhere (Voth et al. 2013). Briefly, the complete text of all potentially relevant articles was imported into a custom-developed computer system that facilitated the ascertainment of the in-context meaning of the ambiguous search terms (i.e. pot and weed) based on their co-occurrences with neighboring terms. The initial group of articles were classified as relevant or not relevant based on the use of particular combinations of terms with increased semantic specificity (e.g. articles using the term ‘in the pot business’ were classified as relevant and those using the term ‘pot lights’ were classified as not relevant). When the relevance remained uncertain, the articles were reviewed manually. Through this process, 16,549 relevant articles (excluding duplicates) were identified within the initial group.

### ***Developing a sample of articles for qualitative analysis***

The number of relevant articles was too large for in-depth qualitative analysis. A sampling procedure was implemented to reduce the sample to a manageable number of articles while maximizing the diversity of story content and minimizing the oversampling of the same story described in more than one newspaper. This was facilitated by a multivariate statistical technique, cluster analysis, which was specified to divide the sample into no more than 2000 relatively homogenous subsets (i.e. clusters) of similar articles. This analysis resulted in 1999 clusters, and the number of articles per cluster ranged from 1 to 46. One article was randomly selected from each cluster; thus, the total sample of 16,549 relevant articles was reduced to a heterogeneous sample of 1999 articles.

### ***Qualitative analysis***

A set of codes were developed to assist in uncovering the dominant themes contributing to the symbolic framing of Canadian news stories about marijuana. The qualitative coding occurred in three phases: (a) after introductory reviews of the sampled articles and in-depth team discussions, eight broad codes were developed to categorize the major themes or discourses present within the stories (i.e. *Gender, Othering, Place, Health, Crime/Violence, Politics/Legislation, Popular Culture, and Professional Sports*); (b) the team members were assigned one of the codes and instructed to elaborate the broader meanings and themes embedded in the respective articles by writing coding memos and a general summary. The resultant summaries were examined and similarities across codes were discussed in team meetings; and (c) Manning’s concept of symbolic framing

was employed to further probe the data and to structure the analyses of the coding memos.

### **The symbolic framing of marijuana in Canadian newspaper reporting**

The analysis of the stories revealed several overlapping discourses that speak to a symbolic framework of privileged normalization of marijuana use in Canadian newspaper stories. This framing was reflected in the specific discourses that informed the way marijuana use was sanctioned for particular groups, how the negative consequences of use were associated with violence and crime, and how particular Canadian 'values' and perspectives suggest a progressive view that marijuana use is acceptable in the 'right' circumstances.

#### ***Elite privilege: reporting marijuana use by celebrities and athletes***

We examined the types of social groups and individuals with whom marijuana is associated. In the articles associated with the *Popular Culture* or *Professional Sports* themes, it was apparent that a type of moral double standard was at play, whereby marijuana use was normalized for social elites, typically men, including musicians, professional athletes, and other celebrities. Although some stories of use by high-status persons were toned as if to diminish their reputation, this was the exception, and stories often focused on celebrities who did not fit the social script of the elite (e.g. English singer Amy Winehouse). Many stories were framed in such a way so as to condone or even celebrate celebrities' marijuana use. Indeed, some celebrities discussed their use as if it were an essential aspect of their public persona. For example, an article discussing Tommy Chong of Cheech and Chong, an American comedy duo of the 1970s and 1980s (and well known as marijuana advocates), quoted Chong as saying, 'Everything I am, I owe to that good ol' pot' (Calgary Herald, 12 November 2005). Another article quoted Snoop Dogg, an American hip hop artist and actor, describing his favorite aspect of working in Vancouver, Canada: "'It's the weed,'" he said, "You know I'm a dedicated bonghead'" (Financial Post, August 6, 2001). News reports also referred to the well-known use of marijuana by music icons, including the Beatles and Bob Dylan. There was also reporting about popular song titles and lyrics that promoted marijuana use, such as 'Because I Got High' by rapper Afroman (Winnipeg Free Press, Jun 26, 2007) and 'Hits from the Bong' and 'Legalize It' by the hip hop group, Cypress Hill (described as being 'pro-marijuana performers') (Globe and Mail, March 10, 2006). These artists were not only expected to smoke marijuana, they were seen as ambassadors of its use. From our readings, the frequent references to marijuana use within celebrity social circles and Hollywood culture symbolically linked marijuana with wealth, success, and fame.

Discussions of marijuana use by athletes, particularly male athletes in football, hockey, and basketball, were also strong features of the discourse of elite privilege. The association between marijuana use and the elite masculine sporting world is epitomized by a quote from Hamilton Tiger-Cats (Canadian Football League) defensive lineman, Adriano Belli when he spoke about American football player Ricky Williams: 'I've seen some of the best players I've ever played with addicted to marijuana – or other drugs, or painkillers, or whatnot. It's football, it's not badminton' (Calgary Herald, June 1, 2006). This comment portrays the acceptance of marijuana use (and of drugs, generally) in male-dominated sports and illustrates how the discourse supports gendered

narratives. Ross Rebagliati received a great deal of media attention as the Canadian snowboarder who almost lost his gold medal after testing positively for marijuana during the 1998 Winter Olympics, which he claimed was the result of being exposed to second-hand marijuana smoke. In news stories, he was often celebrated as a ‘Canadian pot hero’ and pro-pot advocate, particularly because his case was perceived as a victory for the decriminalization movement (marijuana was not on the list of banned substances and the medal was reinstated).

It is important to note that drug use by celebrity figures was not always ‘celebrated’ or portrayed positively by the media. Articles about entertainers and athletes being charged or arrested for marijuana possession followed a ‘fallen hero’ script wherein high-profile men were chastised for their drug use, which was represented as a weakness or character-failing. Although these reports often stigmatized the celebrity, they also perpetuated an image of marijuana as edgy, rebellious, and an acceptable – or at least expected – aspect of celebrity culture. This apparent contradiction suggests how the discursive effects of privileged normalization are simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary in relation to the status and identities of the marijuana user, with the result that some identities are subject to ‘othering’ while the marijuana use of other groups is sanctioned. Our analysis also suggests that in addition to being masculinized, privileged normalization, as present in news stories about celebrities, is also racialized. For example, older, white male celebrities (e.g. country musician Willie Nelson) were able to use their status as a ‘positive’ platform to advocate for the reform of marijuana laws, while younger, black men in the hip hop genre were cast in a negative light for supposedly glorifying illicit substance use in their music. It is notable that almost all of the reported use by celebrity athletes and entertainers was by men; women’s use of marijuana was positioned as comparatively more stigmatized than men’s.

### ***Gender privilege: gender-bias in stories about women’s marijuana use***

Aligned with a framework wherein marijuana use is sanctioned for those with social privilege, a similar symbolic framing underpinned how news stories about marijuana were gendered. With the thematic code *Gender*, we predetermined that the simple mention of a man or a woman in a story was not sufficient to warrant an article’s inclusion in the thematic analysis. Instead, we were interested in identifying discourses that focused on particular aspects of men’s or women’s roles or identities with respect to marijuana use. This included reading stories for content about masculinities, femininities, and gender relations. In some cases, the gender discourse was subtle, with specific expectations and norms being merely hinted at; in others, the discourse was patent. What our analysis revealed was the ways in which, in general, women’s marijuana use was portrayed as an exceptional activity, and therefore a phenomenon of interest.

Several of the sampled stories situated women as intermediaries in marijuana trafficking. Often these women were portrayed as having low social status. For example, a woman charged with trafficking marijuana in Bali who was pleading for her life was described as a ‘former student beautician,’ a superfluous reference to her occupation implying a lack of education and sophistication (Calgary Herald, April 29, 2005). In another article, women were described as having agreed to act as ‘mules,’ smuggling hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of marijuana across borders in exchange for travel opportunities. In stories such as these, the women were portrayed as naïve, ignorant, or gullible. There was an associated discourse about women’s need to care for



others; for example, girlfriends and wives were described as having been discovered smuggling marijuana into prisons for their incarcerated partners. The implicit message was that being female makes women increasingly vulnerable to the moral corruption and 'lawlessness' that is symbolically linked to marijuana use; part of a cultural narrative wherein 'women who fall from grace were seen as more criminal and deviant than their male counterparts' (Boyd 2009, p. 54).

This discourse centers on the theme that only 'bad' girls and 'monster' mothers, who are morally problematic, smoke marijuana; they are not presented as women but instead represented as stereotypes. One woman who had committed a crime while under the influence of marijuana was described, in court, as 'the personification of an evil blonde' (Edmonton Journal, July 24, 2006). Another example is the story of a young girl who was on trial for murder. Her consumption of marijuana and alcohol was part of the context and the headline read, 'I am not a Monster' (Financial Post, July 8, 2004). A young woman charged with selling cookies containing marijuana was quoted as saying, 'I am a good girl, and my lawyer's happy' and was described by the reporter as a 'diminutive woman who keeps her hair in pigtails' (Financial Post, March 21, 2005), infantilizing the woman and suggesting that her feminine naiveté was to blame for her marijuana involvement. This discourse also centers on representations of mothers, which is an additional layer of gendered stigmatization ascribed to women; women who are parents and who use marijuana or other substances are often vilified (Reid, Greaves, and Poole 2008). One way to discredit a woman who is a mother is to mention the fact that she has smoked marijuana. A woman whose children had been murdered by an arsonist found herself on the defensive because she had smoked marijuana. She recognized that she was being criticized and asked of the journalist, 'How is this relevant to them killing my kids?' (Financial Post, May 24, 2006). It is revealing that the mother's guilt became the focus of the story, rather than the arsonist's. The story of a woman running a children's day-care center with a marijuana grow operation in the attic unmistakably portrayed the woman as someone who placed children at risk, with the headline, 'Pregnant Woman will do Jail Time for Selling Pot: Baby Expected Behind Bars' (Financial Post, June 2, 2005). These women were implicitly characterized as lacking feminine qualities of nurturance and moral integrity, and societal expectations of motherhood were uniquely applied to demonize these and other mothers who use substances.

Several sampled stories detailing crimes related to sexual assault or sexual risk were noted. In these stories, marijuana was described as a contextual factor that can 'dope' women and make them vulnerable to sexual predators. Teens were described as having been bribed with marijuana for sexual favors. Young women were described as having been given marijuana and alcohol and then sexually exploited. Abusive relationships were often said to be 'fueled' by marijuana use. At times, this discourse was subtle; the seizure of marijuana was mentioned almost in passing in relation to the reporting of a sex crime. In other articles, marijuana use was positioned in ways that contributed to gendered 'victim blaming,' especially when it was mentioned as an explanation or justification for violence perpetrated against women. By mentioning that an abused or murdered woman smoked marijuana or was involved in the selling of marijuana, the implication was that an assault could be rationalized, as if this type of treatment is to be 'expected' for women who are drug users.

In parallel to the discourse of women and marijuana use, there is a corresponding discourse that aligns men's marijuana involvement or use with aggression. Men's marijuana use was often cited as a cause of vandalism, physical assault, and even murder.

Weapons were frequently featured in these stories. Marijuana grow operations were situated as the cause of gang (viz. masculine) violence. For example, Andy, a young boy who was the victim of bullying and who frequented a skateboard park where he smoked marijuana was described as killing two people and wounding three others because ‘the deadly signs’ of his potential for violence were missed (Hamilton Spectator, November 21, 2005). In some instances, a relationship between aggression and the consumption of marijuana was casually alluded to: the perpetrator of the aggression was described as ‘possessing marijuana’ or marijuana was simply a part of the backdrop of the story. For example, the following is a reporter’s description of a docudrama: ‘The male characters, as portrayed here, smoke marijuana, drink liquor, insult each other, get into occasional fights and drive dangerously’ (Montreal Gazette, January 12, 2007). Hell’s Angels, the Banditos, and other (male-dominated) organized crime groups were mentioned frequently in this discourse.

### ***Defining the ‘underclass’: the othering of marijuana users in news reporting***

In contrast to the discourse related to elite and gender privilege, there were several stories that vilified or ‘othered’ specific groups of users. It was clear from these stories that marijuana use was not appropriate for particular groups, or that use by particular groups was problematic. ‘Othering’ describes practices of marginalization based on apparent differences, often race or ethnicity, and is ‘a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream,’ which ‘can reinforce power and reproduce positions of domination and subordination’ (Johnson et al. 2004, 253). We identified othering discourses in the news reporting on marijuana when we noted discriminating statements that set persons apart because of their race or ethnicity, age, social status or so-called outlaw or subcultural group membership. This included the presence of generalizing statements within a story that made claims about groups or individuals that were not substantiated, and the tendency to use a person’s race, class, or other irrelevant characteristic to position him or her as different, problematic, or ‘other.’ For this analysis, we drew initially on the articles coded in the *Othering* theme, but our analysis revealed considerable overlap with articles in the *Crime/Violence* theme because of the pejorative association between marijuana use and specific groups or individuals in relation to criminality. In addition to the expected othering of criminals, the newspaper reporting we sampled also contained stigmatizing portrayals of particular ethno-racial groups and of youth.

The othering of marijuana use by so-called ‘criminals’ occurred in complex ways across the sampled stories. Many of the stories about criminality were not primarily about marijuana. For example, several stories about homicide and murder cases in Canada mentioned the use of marijuana by the perpetrators, especially youth perpetrators. An example of this arose in the stories published about the bullying and murder of 14-year-old Reena Virk in 1997, near Victoria, Canada; the teens involved in the murder were described as having smoked marijuana. Implicit in many of the descriptions of these non-drug-related crimes is the idea that marijuana smoking disinhibited individuals, reduced their moral threshold, and facilitated their criminal activity.

There were articles about drugs, in general, and marijuana specifically, that ‘othered’ gang members and other criminals directly involved in the drug trade. The groups censoriously associated with marijuana in this way primarily included biker gangs and ‘ethnic’ gangs composed of racialized groups. For instance, a story about police arrests of a drug trafficking ring in Quebec quoted a police source describing the drug

distribution group as ‘a mix of Italian and Asian gangs,’ but then added ‘nine of those arrested are French or English Canadian, however’ (Montreal Gazette, March 22, 2006). The ethnic groups most often othered in this way were lumped together as ‘Asians.’ Specific groups mentioned in the stories were mostly South Asian and Vietnamese people, especially in stories originating in British Columbia. A computerized search for the word ‘gang’ in all the stories coded as *Othering* revealed that in 90% of the stories where the word was found, a reference was made to a racialized group. Thus, the very notion of ‘gangs’ appears to be racialized; the tone of these stories almost always alluded to negative race-based stereotypes in relation to criminal activity. What is striking about these stories is how few are non-racialized. A story entitled ‘Race and Crime’ was the only piece that explicitly addressed the racialized discourse and is worth quoting at length:

There is no denying that along with every other nation of immigrants, we do, at intervals, experience mini crime waves that can be traced to specific points of origin. Much so-called ‘black crime,’ for instance, might be better described as ‘Canadian-Jamaican’ crime ... But that doesn’t make criminals out of the vast majority of immigrant Jamaicans, and the same holds true for other minorities. A sizable chunk of the huge marijuana-growing industry in British Columbia, for instance, is operated by individuals of Vietnamese origin. *All of these transient patterns have much to do with ethnically rooted social networks, and nothing to do with race.* But one thread that does connect so-called ‘black crime,’ at least in Toronto, is economic deprivation. A full 45 per cent of the city’s black community is currently estimated to be living below the poverty line, and as in almost any society, poverty breeds hopelessness and crime. (Globe and Mail, September 10, 2001, emphasis added)

Among the stories coded under this theme, this article was the only one that attempted to address the issue of social inequity in connection to marijuana-related crime. Other stories offered little explanation or analysis and merely referenced people’s ‘race’ without any explanation as to why this was relevant.

In addition to race, othering occurred in relation to age. Prominent in these newspaper stories were statistical reports indicating that greater numbers of teenagers smoke marijuana compared with teenagers of past decades. Although factual in tone, the headlines were sometimes sensational and meant to appeal to a mainstream adult readership; for example, stories with headlines such as ‘Stoned, Fried, High. ... Do You Know if your Kids are Using Drugs?’ (Hamilton Spectator, December 16, 2005) and ‘The Allure of Marijuana’ (Hamilton Spectator, December 17, 2005). This age-based othering was evident in stories linking young people’s marijuana use with crime. As noted previously, young people that use marijuana (especially young women) were often painted as victims. At the same time, in the stories about youth, drug use was portrayed as evidence of their inherently violent nature, fueling their participation in drug-addled crimes. For example, in a story about the murder of a Vancouver teenager, the attackers were described as being ‘from three separate groups of young men ... bound together by pent-up anger and fuelled by marijuana and alcohol’ (Globe and Mail, November 5, 2005). There were a few stories in this theme that seemed to be geared towards middle-class parents because they addressed how to stop the apparent rise of marijuana use by youth. In an article describing a study of factors that may prevent youth from using drugs (Family Dining Overrated: Meatloaf won’t Solve Obese Kids, Drug Addiction), the writers suggested that family meals may curb risky behavior (Edmonton Journal, November 11, 2005). Stories such as this offer a return to ‘family values’ as a way to keep youth away from drugs, including marijuana. This is another example of a

discourse that attributes drug use and drug prevention to individual factors, and fails to consider the structural barriers to healthful, routine family dining.

***Canadian identity: marijuana use as linked to Canadian values***

Discourses about marijuana use and Canadian identity were seen in the articles coded under *Othring*, *Politics/Legislation*, and *Place*. When coding the stories for discourses about *Place*, we sought explicit references to marijuana in relation to a setting or location of some social significance and not the mere mention of a place. The stories coded within this theme addressed marijuana as an aspect of Canadian national identity in reporting about politics and drug policies, and, in particular, by drawing comparisons between Canada and the USA. In this sense, the symbolic framing of marijuana in the reporting of Canada's national drug policies was discursively linked to a supposedly more liberal and progressive set of 'Canadian' values in contrast to the values of the USA. The stories that invoked this trope suggested that marijuana use in Canada was more normalized to the extent that it differentiates Canadians culturally and socially from their neighbors to the south (Grayson 2008).

The newspaper stories frequently addressed marijuana policy within the context of Canadian–USA relations. There were many stories about the spill-over effects of America's War on Drugs, in Canada, and many noted the more stringent marijuana laws in the USA and how this might influence internal drug policy. The discourse about Canada as a more progressive nation with comparatively liberal drug policies stood in stark contrast to stories about criminal activity (as discussed previously) where marijuana use was typically linked to a more conservative, 'tough on crime' stance. Many stories raised the possibility of Canada's relationship with the USA being jeopardized if the federal Cannabis Reform Bill (Bill C-17) introduced in 2004 to amend Canada's *Contraventions Act* and *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* was passed (the bill died when a federal election was called three months later). The emphasis in these stories was on how these downgraded relations would have important and adverse effects on Canada. For example, then US Ambassador to Canada (appointed by President George W. Bush), Paul Cellucci predicted that Canada's liberalized pot laws would result in 'longer border tie-ups,' which was understood by many as a threat of an economic boycott (Financial Post, December 2, 2004). The sampled articles contained several stories about the US government's disapproval of Canadian drug policies, pressures on Canadian law enforcement from American authorities to 'crack down' on cross-border trafficking, and Canadians known for promoting marijuana use. For example, one article began with the headline, 'Washington Wants Crackdown on Drugs: New Report by US Urges Canada to Take Action on Narco-Trafficking' and discussed a US report that characterized marijuana production in Canada as 'a thriving, low-risk pursuit, due in part to low sentences meted out by Canadian courts' (Edmonton Journal, March 15, 2006). In the context of these stories, there was virtually no critique of the infringement of sovereignty involved or any discussion about how it might be problematic if America's approach to the 'War on Drugs' were to spill over into the Canadian policy realm. Implicit in this discourse is the notion that Canada is a danger to the USA because of marijuana-related laws and policies that are comparatively lenient. This again reveals the contradictory nature of privileged normalization as a discursive frame in that tolerance towards marijuana was at times lauded as a 'Canadian' value, in newspaper reporting, and yet stories about marijuana use by non-white, female and relatively young Canadian citizens routinely linked their use to deviant and undesirable identities.

## Discussion

Our study is one of the first large-scale media analyses to critically examine newspaper reporting of marijuana use in Canada. In our analysis of reporting about marijuana, we uncovered discourses of privileged normalization that symbolically frame this type of substance use. Normalization refers to social processes through which ideas and actions become taken-for-granted or ‘natural’ in everyday life (Hathaway, Comeau, and Erickson 2011, Measham and Shiner 2009). This symbolic framing may not be evident in the context of every single story, but is a subtle reinforcement that occurs across many articles, a repetition of particular symbols and themes that becomes apparent by reading across the newspaper coverage over time and in several sources.

The themes we have discussed are important to consider because they can play a role in shaping how the public and policy-makers think about marijuana, and the tone of debates about marijuana as a crimino-legal and public health issue. Although not a direct, causal influence, there is a reciprocal relationship between policy and the media; policy developments shape news stories and, in turn, public responses to news stories may shape policy. This is particularly the case when substance use is framed as an individual-level addiction and moral failing; where drug users are portrayed as irrational, and as a social threat. As Blackman (2004) noted, ‘Government policy promotes images suggesting that drug users are unreliable figures. This uncertainty is then used by media to demand constant surveillance of drug deviants. Therefore punitive policy towards drug issues is deemed rational, necessary and possessing public support’ (143). To this end, it was somewhat surprising that the overall tone of reporting on marijuana had *not* shifted considerably over the course of the 10 years we considered, especially in light of evidence to suggest that the prevalence of use among Canadians had grown substantially during the period covered by our analysis.

Within the Canadian context, calls for the decriminalization or legalization of marijuana have occurred against a media backdrop wherein various researchers, activists, and government officials have simultaneously promoted the medicinal merits of marijuana and yet warned against the potential adverse effects of long-term use. In more recent years, there has been increased media attention to the health and public safety risks involved in the production of marijuana, particularly the ostensible dangers associated with marijuana grow operations, creating a confusing picture of marijuana’s health effects and the risks posed to the Canadian public (Boyd and Carter 2012; Carter 2009). Although Canadian policy initiatives such as establishing a medical marijuana program and the decriminalization of simple possession are often touted as ‘progressive,’ those involved with drug trafficking are routinely vilified in popular media and portrayed in such a way as to link drug-related deviance with ‘non-Canadians’ (Boyd 2008; Grayson 2008).

In countries such as Canada, policy debates regarding marijuana are typically simplified as a false dichotomy between legalization of a ‘harmless’ substance and the continued criminalization of a drug that is harmful to some users, which prevents an evidence-based appraisal of the adverse effects of marijuana use (Hall 2009). As Hall (2009) argued, media framings of health research about marijuana play a role in maintaining a policy status quo that favors prohibition by drawing selectively from scientific findings and presenting arguments that emphasize the potential for more pronounced health and social harms. A public health framework that addresses marijuana would involve evidence-based primary and secondary prevention, and treatment and enforcement strategies that are targeted at high-risk or problematic patterns of use, which are

mainly associated with early-age initiation and excessive use (Fischer et al. 2009, Hall 2009). With this approach, the emphasis shifts from reducing or eliminating drug use, to limiting the potential for health and social harms. Although Canadian public health approaches have been successfully implemented with respect to licit substance use, such as alcohol (e.g. preventing impaired driving) and tobacco (limiting exposure to environmental tobacco smoke) and to an extent illicit drug use (e.g. needle exchange programs), marijuana use has been ‘conspicuously exempted’ from such strategies (Fischer et al. 2009, 101).

In the context of mainstream newspaper reporting, our analysis suggests that marijuana’s status as an illicit substance has precluded discussion of strategies to reduce the potential for health and social harms associated with its use. There are barriers to the provision of balanced, meaningful, relevant reporting about marijuana use because Canadian newspaper stories reflect a somewhat moralistic ‘us and them’ tone, with a tendency to stigmatize everyday people (e.g. those without elite privilege) who use marijuana. This perspective does not apply contemporary critical analyses to the use, control, and discussion of marijuana, but rather contributes to cultural perspectives of marijuana users that are limited and ‘stuck in the past.’ It may be true that ‘public health strategies are inevitably connected to the state of knowledge and morality of the day’ (Weed and McKeeown, 2003 in Musso and Wakefield 2009, 18), yet Canadian newspapers’ reporting of marijuana use is still framed as morally permissible only for those with power and social status. Accordingly, we conclude that identifying or naming this symbolic frame of privileged normalization and its functions as a gendering, othering, and stigmatizing discourse can provide an important first step towards shifting the long-standing debate on marijuana use in Canada as a crimino-legal issue to focus more appropriately on health and public health concerns.

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