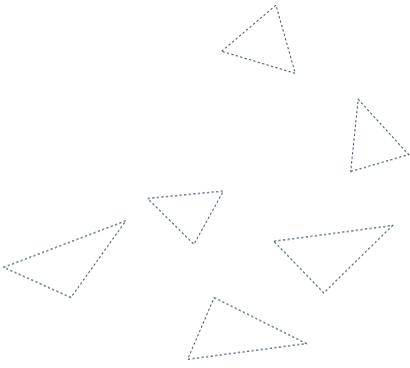




*Cannabis Changes. Understanding Dynamics of Use and Dependence*  
N. Liebrechts



Cannabis changes. Understanding dynamics of use and dependence.

Summary

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Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug worldwide, including The Netherlands. The main patterns of cannabis use are well-known. Most of the people that ever use cannabis, only use it infrequently and/or during a short period in their life. Others continue their use over a longer period, ranging from occasional and selective to frequent or daily use, and some become cannabis dependent. Cross-sectional studies show that frequent cannabis use generally peaks in younger age groups and is much less prevalent in the older age groups. This indicates that transitions in cannabis use predominantly take place during young adulthood. However, very little is known about how and why transitions into and away from frequent cannabis use and dependence occur. Young adulthood is not only a stage in life during which changes in cannabis use are common, it is also a period characterized by other and often significant life changing events in various domains. It is not unlikely that these events influence transitions in cannabis use and dependence, and vice versa. This makes young adults a specifically fascinating group to study the dynamics of cannabis use and cannabis dependence, and to gain a better insight into and understanding of the factors and processes involved in transitions in cannabis use and dependence. Why do young adult frequent cannabis users increase, decrease or quit their cannabis use, why do some develop dependence and others not, and why do some recover (or: desist) from dependence and others not? These are the questions addressed in this thesis. Our central question was: *What are the processes and mechanisms underlying transitions in the natural course of frequent cannabis use and cannabis dependence, and how can these be understood?*

### **The CanDep study**

In order to answer this question, we conducted a longitudinal study (CanDep), combining quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative study, at baseline 600 frequent cannabis users ( $\geq 3$  days cannabis use per week in past 12 months) aged 18-30 years were recruited via coffee shops and by respondent-driven sampling (RDS), and interviewed. Nearly half of the participants (42%) met DSM-IV criteria for cannabis dependence in the 12 months prior to the interview. After 1.5 years (first follow-up) and 3 years (second follow-up), they were re-interviewed.

In addition to the quantitative part of the CanDep study, we carried out a qualitative study among a selection of the participants. After the first follow-up interview in the quantitative study, 48 participants were randomly selected based on their transition state with regard to cannabis dependence with an equal number ( $n=12$ , 8 males, 4 females) from each of the four dependence trajectories: non-dependent at baseline and first follow-up, dependent at baseline and first follow up, shift from non-dependent to dependent, and shift from dependent to non-dependent. Participants in the

qualitative study were interviewed in-depth twice shortly after the standardized follow-up interviews from the quantitative study with an intermediate period of 1.5 years. One participant was lost at the second follow-up, leaving a total group of 47 participants in the full qualitative study. Their narratives formed the empirical foundation for most part of this thesis.

### **The research themes and theoretical perspectives**

The central question was translated into sub questions, which generally reflected different life domains: social relationships (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), occupational life (Chapter 4), and leisure (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 was focused on a more individual level. In this chapter, different aspects from preceding chapters were more comprehensively analysed, by comparing desistance and persistence in frequent cannabis use. Various theoretical notions from social science, criminology in particular, were used to describe and understand the processes involved in the transitions in cannabis use and cannabis dependence. The life course perspective was used as the theoretical framework in several chapters. Life course theory has been applied to deviant behaviour, crime and delinquency in particular, but less to illicit drug use. In short, life course theory explains changes in deviance within the context of age and maturation, and life events such as changes in relationships, education and work are considered potential turning points in explaining desistance from deviant behaviour. Other theoretical insights also guided the questions and analyses, including peer processes of selection (people select associates similar in behaviour to themselves) and socialization (peers influence each other's behaviour in interaction), and the normalisation thesis, which argues that cannabis use has become a mainstream leisure activity among youth rather than a sign of deviance or sub cultural values. Finally, we used several notions from theories on desistance from crime, including the role of identity and agency (an individual's self-efficacy, the ability to be self-reflexive and a sense of feeling in control over one's life) to understand the processes underlying changes in cannabis use and dependence.

### **Social relationships**

Drug use is often a social activity that occurs with other users, and cannabis use might be a factor that would unify peers in a social network. Drug use in social settings include informal rules and norms regarding use, and violating these rules could lead to social sanctions, perhaps eventually exclusion from the group. Chapter 2 departed from the larger quantitative CanDep sample (n=600) to explore how cannabis use characteristics and cannabis dependence play a role in the social networks of frequent cannabis users. RDS

referrals were understood as a proxy for social networks and were used to explore peer associations and social exclusion.

Findings showed that cannabis use characteristics and the presence of cannabis dependence (versus non-dependence) are not unifying factors in the social networks of frequent users: with whom, where and when cannabis is used plays a role, but not a decisive one. However, within segments of networks some clustering of cannabis dependence was found, indicating that cannabis dependent users were not fully socially excluded from/by other cannabis users, but tended to flock together as sub-groups within social networks of frequent but non-dependent users.

The subsequent chapters focused on the qualitative sample (n=47). During the three-year follow-up period, while patterns of use and dependence trajectories varied, there was an overall declining tendency in cannabis use and in cannabis dependence, including some participants (n=7) that stopped using cannabis altogether.

In line with life course theory, influences of peers and partners on cannabis use were generally considerable, while parents had little impact in this stage in life (Chapter 3). Peer influence occurred both through mechanisms of selection and socialization, and the ones they spent most of their time with influenced participants the most. However, colleagues and fellow students were only indirectly influential: interviewees generally avoided using cannabis at work or at school (Chapter 4). In fact, cannabis use was largely restricted to leisure time, and then social relationships were quite important, as most participants spent their leisure time with peers and/or partners (Chapter 5). Users made rational choices about whether, where and when to use or not to use cannabis, and preferred using at home and not in the company of non-users.

Peers and partners also appeared very important in the processes of desistance and persistence (Chapter 6). For desisters (participants that stopped using cannabis during the study), social relationships could help in the process of identity reconstruction and subsequent behaviour change, which in turn could be strengthened by social feedback. Contrary, for persisters (participants that were still using cannabis regularly despite a persistent desire to quit or cut back but had unsuccessful attempts to do so and reported from baseline onwards), social relationships often contributed to failed quit attempts.

### **Occupational life and leisure**

Participants' narratives indicated a reciprocal relationship between (events in) occupational life and frequent cannabis use and dependence: changes in

occupational activities could lead to changes in drug use/dependence and changes in drug use could lead to changes in occupational activities. Frequent cannabis use often went quite well together with studying and/or being employed, but rules and norms were applied: users did not use cannabis just anytime and anywhere. In general, cannabis use appeared to be a leisure activity. More specifically, it was one of their leisure activities, and, with few exceptions, cannabis was not used during work or study time.

However, dependent, especially persistent dependent interviewees assigned a more central role to cannabis in their leisure time, by planning their leisure activities around cannabis use, and being inclined to prioritize cannabis over other leisure activities. Nevertheless, similarities between dependent and non-dependent users prevailed: both limited their cannabis use to their leisure time and both seemed to make conscious choices about their use, considering other responsibilities, their company and the situation.

This study shows that both dependent and non-dependent users are very 'normal' people, living a 'conventional life' quite similar to other young adults, as expressed in their social activities, romantic relationships, study, work and sports. Cannabis use appeared one of many facets of participants' lives, not one that (completely) defined their identity or lifestyle. Although they sometimes showed delinquent behaviour, this referred mainly to minor offences, generally neither related to nor induced by cannabis, and subcultural membership was rather absent. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the frequent users in our study occasionally felt stigmatized, and for fear of being judged or labelled they carefully selected settings for use.

### **Meaning-giving, identity and agency**

The narratives of desisters and persisters were rather different. Desistance from frequent use was generally induced by life events that became turning points. Interestingly, persisters did experience largely similar events, yet lacked goals and strategies and held external factors responsible for their life course and failed quit attempts. In the course of the study, desisters mainly exhibited increasing agency and goal setting, established strategies to achieve these goals, and envisioned another self. Identity change appeared to be at the core of desistance from frequent cannabis use, and the meaning ascribed to life events and experiences is essential. Agency appears to be a necessary ingredient for desistance, develops over time and through action, and leads to a new drug-free identity with desistance in turn increasing agency.

### **Life events and turning points**

Life events could (objectively) be categorized as positive or negative, but their (subjective) meaning depended on how they were evaluated by the person

experiencing them. Although life events did not necessarily affect participants' cannabis use, and the effect would depend on the life domains, several patterns concerning life events and cannabis use trajectories were found. Life events with a longstanding impact on cannabis use were rather gradual than abrupt, such as building new friendships with non-users and simultaneously diluting friendships with users, that eventually lead to decreased use. Negative life events generally went together with more use, whereas positive events went together with less use. More specifically, events leading to less leisure time (e.g. getting a job) led to decreased use, whereas events coupled with more leisure time (e.g. job loss) led to increased use. Changes in cannabis use were also influenced by the person with whom leisure time was spent, yet the effects of life events were (partly) moderated by level of agency. Life events patterns were also associated with transitions in dependence trajectories. Spending much leisure time at home (homebodies), spending much time gaming alone, and often using cannabis alone were related to (shifts to) cannabis dependence. Contrary, transiting from study to work, or progressing with study, having a party phase, travelling (to foreign countries), and moving in with a partner were associated with (shifts to) non-dependence. Interestingly, gender was associated with transitions in both use and dependence: females remained or became dependent more often than males (Chapter 3). This effect was (partially) explained by the underlying mechanisms of romantic partnerships, primarily through selection and through secondary socialization processes. Beyond these patterns, this study disclosed that for an event to be influential on cannabis use and dependence, it must have some specific features. First, contrast and timing are important for events to generate a change. Second, and in a similar vein, to be influential the event should impact the (amount of) leisure time, as cannabis use commonly is a leisure activity.

## Conclusions

This thesis shows that young adult frequent cannabis users are generally rather 'normal' people, generally living a conventional life, including social and romantic activities, jobs, education, sports, and incidental minor (cannabis-unrelated) delinquency. Although our data generally support the normalisation thesis, it is questionable whether frequent but non-problematic cannabis use is socially accepted in the wider society. This study also calls for refined distinctions within the concept of cannabis dependence. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that contemporary Dutch cannabis policy with coffee shops as the most striking feature does not necessarily lead to 'uncontrolled', rampant use. Apparently, a policy that with regard to users does not focus on legal control of the users does not preclude frequent users from reducing their cannabis use.

Finally, this study indicates that trajectories of frequent cannabis use and dependence are very dynamic and tend to decline over time. Moreover, it uncovers the reciprocal relationships and mechanisms involved in cannabis trajectories and life (events) of young adult frequent users. Social relationships, work and study, leisure and life events have different meanings for individuals, even when they are similar, yet what matters eventually is the action that is taken by individuals. Agency appeared to be a necessary ingredient for desistance and in the process of life events becoming turning points in cannabis trajectories. Moreover, frequent cannabis use appeared not inevitably inherent to cannabis dependence, and neither did cannabis dependence appear to be irreversible. In fact, cannabis dependence was often a temporary stage in the natural course of cannabis use and frequent cannabis users were often greatly in control of their use. Over time, either gradually or abruptly, cannabis use and dependence can change, and so do the lives of young cannabis-using adults.