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Drug Control Policy, Normalization, and Symbolic Boundaries in Amsterdam's Coffee Shops

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Introduction

It has been over twenty years since researchers initially proposed the “normalization” thesis (Measham, Newcombe, and Parker 1994; Parker, Aldridge, and Measham 1998; Parker and Measham 1994). In brief, this thesis suggests that the use (and sometimes sale) of illicit drugs such as cannabis, amphetamines, LSD, and ecstasy is undergoing a process whereby it is bleeding into social acceptability (Aldridge, Measham, and Williams 2011; Coomber, Moyle, and South 2016; Parker et al. 1998). Since its initial proposal by researchers in the United Kingdom (e.g., Measham et al. 1994; Parker et al. 1998), normalization has been explored among various populations in several nations, including Australia (e.g., Duff 2003, 2005), Canada (e.g., Duff et al., 2016; Hathaway, Comeau, and Erickson 2011), Denmark (e.g., Jarvinen and Demant 2011), Norway (e.g., Sandberg 2012), Sweden (e.g., Rodner Sznitman 2008), and the United States (e.g., Dickinson and Jacques 2019; Jacinto et al. 2008).

Expansions on the initial normalization thesis argue that the character of normalization in different populations is shaped by a complex interplay or “negotiated accomplishment” (Measham and Shiner 2009: 507) between macro-level cultural processes and structural forces and micro-level behavior and social norms among individuals and small groups (Duff et al 2016: 280; Pennay and Moore 2010). Research in this vein has focused primarily on how structural factors—such as socio-economic wherewithal and cultural norms surrounding gender, employment, and parenting—shape views of what constitutes “normal” drug use (e.g., Duff et al. 2016; Measham 2002; Measham and Shiner 2009; Pederson 2009; Rodner Sznitman 2007; Shildrick 2002). What has received less attention is whether and how the normalization process is shaped by legal control frameworks. No study, to our knowledge, examines the relationship between the decriminalization or legalization of some drugs, such as cannabis, and the process of normalization among the users and sellers of these drugs.

Extant research has also noted that many users and sellers of normalized “soft” drugs, most notably cannabis, distinguish themselves from persons that involved with “hard” drugs, such as cocaine and heroin (e.g., Coomber et al. 2016; Dickinson and Jacques 2019; Hathaway et al. 2011; Parker et al. 1998; Rodner Sznitman 2008; Taylor and Potter 2013). In addition, a second body of research has highlighted that these distinctions—or symbolic boundaries—play a key role in how drug users see themselves and their drug use as “normal” (e.g., Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams 2008; Dickinson and Jacques 2019; Rodner Sznitman 2008). But, to date, there has

been little research on how drug control regimes influence drug users' symbolic boundaries and, in turn, the role of these symbolic boundaries in normalization.

In this paper we address these lacunas by exploring the symbolic boundary work of "coffeeshop" personnel involved with selling cannabis in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We examine how their market's decriminalized status couches their construction of symbolic boundaries distinguishing their use of cannabis as normal and not threatening and "different" like involvement in hard drugs and predatory crime. In doing so, we also explicate the role of symbolic boundaries in the normalization process among these individuals. We conclude by discussing the theoretical implications of these findings for current understandings of normalization and symbolic boundaries and by suggesting a possible negative secondary impact of the relaxation of cannabis control policies: the further marginalization of the users of other illicit drugs.

Normalization and Symbolic Boundaries

Parker and colleagues (1998; see also, Aldridge et al. 2011) initially proposed the normalization thesis in a longitudinal study wherein they monitored the "leisure time and significance of drinking and drug taking" (p. 2) among a sample of young people growing up in the United Kingdom during the 1990's. Noting increasing availability and access to drugs, higher rates of drug initiation and usage, and more accepting attitudes towards drug use among the sample, along with the "cultural accommodation" or softening of views regarding drugs in the general population, they argue that illicit drug use is undergoing a process of "normalization." That is, they suggest the use of illicit drugs is being increasingly viewed by many people as akin to other "accommodated" deviant activities such as casual sex, excessive drinking, and smoking (Parker et al. 1998: 152). They emphasize that normalization applies exclusively to the "recreational" use of certain drugs, primarily cannabis, and does not extend to the dependent, daily use or abuse of addictive drugs such as cocaine and heroin.

Research focusing on the moral acceptance of drug use has highlighted how macro-level cultural and structural factors can shape this process in individual settings. This research has argued that, despite widespread social acceptance of the recreational use of drugs such as cannabis, factors such as familial and career role expectations and economic marginalization influence, one, the consumption patterns of drug users and, two, the ways they define their own drug use as normal (e.g., Aldridge et al. 2011; Duff et al. 2016; Measham and Shiner 2009; Pedersen 2009; Rodner Sznitman 2007). For

instance, a study of cannabis users in Toronto, Canada found that dominant role expectations regarding employment and parenting led these users to limit their cannabis consumption to certain times or places (Hathaway et al. 2011; see also, Duff et al. 2012). In controlling their use in these ways—and by contrasting themselves against others who do not do so—they are able to see their own drug use as “normal” and thereby resist stigma.

An examination of normalization among young drug users in Dublin, Ireland, found that socio-economic marginalization similarly shaped how they constructed their drug use as normal (O’Gorman 2016). Although their drug consumption patterns and views of substance use largely echo those of less marginalized drug users in other normalization studies (see, e.g. Parker et al., 1998), their drug use is still considered deviant by mainstream sources. This is due, in part, to their socio-economic position inhibiting their abilities to participate in the legitimate “leisure-pleasure landscape” (Parker et al. 1998: 25) of bars and nightclubs, wherein drug taking has been commodified (see also, Aldridge et al. 2011; Pennay and Moore 2010). It is also due to their position placing them in a context that conventional society associates with rampant heroin and cocaine abuse and puts them in interpersonal contact with the users of these drugs. To normalize their drug use and resist stigma, they contrast themselves against other drug users whom they see as far more deviant: heroin and cocaine users.

Of course, drug scholars have recognized for some time that drug users and sellers do not see themselves as homogenous group, despite often being treated as such by mainstream society and drug policy (see, e.g., Coomber et al. 2016; Dickinson and Wright 2017; Jacinto et al. 2008; Jacobs 1999; Jarvinen and Demant 2011; Radcliffe and Stevens 2008; Taylor and Potter 2013). For instance, Sutter (1966) noted more than half a century ago that some heroin addicts identify themselves as “righteous dope fiends” by contrasting themselves to more maligned “snatch-and-grab junkies.” Recent research has explicated the functions of such distinctions by drawing from the notion of symbolic boundaries. In short, symbolic boundary making refers to the process by which actors create conceptual distinctions between persons they see as like themselves and those that are different (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Somers 1994; Zerubavel, 1991). One key way that actors establish this sense of difference—and thus their group identity—is to cast “people like them” as superior to others in one or more ways (Tajfel and Turner 1985; see also, Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel 1981, 1982).

Copes and colleagues (2008) argue that drug users and dealers construct symbolic boundaries between themselves and other users and, by doing so, they resist stigma and maintain positive self-identities in spite of their participation in similar (i.e., stigmatized and illicit) behavior. They note that some crack cocaine users maintain positive self-views as “tough, capable, hustler[s]” by highlighting how their behavior differs from that of “crackheads” who are “weak” and “incapable” (Copes et al. 2008: 255). Symbolic boundaries perform similar functions among drug sellers (Dickinson and Wright 2017). Some identify themselves as “smart” by contrasting their own actions to those of incompetent police and other uncircumspect dealers and users. Symbolically “splitting” (Zerubavel 1991) themselves from those that are “stupid” facilitates their abilities to see themselves in a positive light.

These bodies of research highlight that macro-level forces can shape the “micro-politics” (Pennay and Moore 2010) of normalization by influencing what type and manner of drug use is seen as “normal.” They also demonstrate that drug users and sellers use symbolic boundaries as a method of distinguishing their use as acceptable or “normal.” To our knowledge, however, little research has investigated how drug policy may play a role in these processes. In this study, we perform such an investigation by examining how the decriminalization of cannabis in Amsterdam’s coffeshops shapes normalization among their personnel. More specifically, we explore how drug policies in Amsterdam guide the ways in which coffeeshop personnel identify hard drug users and predators as threats and the boundaries they construct distinguishing themselves from these persons.

Drug Policy in Amsterdam

Since the late 1970s, Dutch drug control policy and enforcement has permitted coffeeshops to be retail purveyors of cannabis (Leuw 1991; VanVliet 1990). Their sales are *de jure* prohibited but *de facto* legal and highly regulated. This policy has two primary goals nested in the principle of harm reduction. One is to separate the cannabis market from that in hard drugs, with the goal of reducing use of the latter (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs [NMFA] 2008; Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport [NMHWS] 2003; Wouters and Korf 2009). The other goal is to avoid the draconian punishment and stigmatization of drug use and to instead treat it as a public health problem (Engelsman 1989; VanVliet 1990).

The government dictates the “acceptable” sale of cannabis by coffeeshops through a series of rules (Jacques 2019; NMFA 2008; NMHWS 2003). No person may be sold more than 5 grams per day. There cannot be more than 500 grams on the premise at

any time. Nor can there be hard drugs, nuisance, or minors. Advertising is banned. The government enforces the rules by requiring semi-annual surprise police checks at each coffeeshop and punishing violations. Criminal prosecution and punishment can occur but usually sanctions are civil: coffeeshops are closed for period, sometimes permanently, depending on the number of rule violations and their severity (Jacques 2019).

In addition to the threat of formal control, coffeeshops are at risk of experiencing several types of victimization (Jacques et al. 2016). They are robbed; defrauded by suppliers, customers, and people posing as such; burgled and shoplifted; vandalized; and attacked by angry customers and persons who are refused entry. Research has examined how the legal status of cannabis in Amsterdam influences coffeeshops' victimization and responses to it, like calling the police or fighting back (Jacques et al. 2016). It has not, though, considered the interplay between the decriminalization of cannabis and the normalization process among coffeeshop personnel.

Data and Methods

As previously stated, our data is from interviews with 50 coffeeshop personnel working in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. These data were initially collected by the second author, hereafter referred to as the fieldworker. He collected the data as part of a larger research project conducted from fall 2008 to early summer 2010. The coffeeshops were located in an area about one square mile in size. It is the geographic center (1012 postal code) of Amsterdam's Centrum district. In addition to 84 coffeeshops (at the time of the research), the study area includes the Red Light District and a plethora of tourist attractions (e.g., Royal Palace, National Monument, Amsterdam Museum).

To obtain participants, the fieldworker began by making a population list of all coffeeshops within the study area. He did so by walking every street and personally identifying them; compared his list to online listings (e.g., coffeeshop.freeuk.com/Map.html); and, finally resolved inconsistencies between them (e.g., determined a listed coffeeshop was in fact permanently closed). He then began recruitment.

After sending an informative letter to coffeeshops that described the study and requested participation, the fieldworker personally visited them. He introduced himself to personnel as a "university researcher," described the study, the rights of research participants (per IRB approval of the study), and asked to schedule an interview with a

personnel member in exchange for €50. The sole criterion for participation was the person had work at the coffeeshop for at least 6 months. Personnel either agreed and followed suit; requested to follow-up with him/her; personally declined but suggested asking a colleague or owner to participate; or, declined on behalf of all personnel. If one of those middle options, the fieldworker continued the recruitment process until the first or last option happened. This sampling procedure netted interviews with 50 personnel working at 50 coffeeshops. Table 1 provides an overview of the participant's characteristics; table 2 provides that of all personnel at their respective coffeeshops.

(Insert table1 and table 2 about here)

Interviews lasted one to two hours. All participants were asked for permission to record the dialogue, but seven declined and one interview was conducted in a venue too loud to permit audio-recording. In these cases, the fieldworker made detailed written notes. Interviews were guided by a structured questionnaire that collected qualitative and quantitative data; this paper only uses the former, as the quantitative data does not bear well on our topic. Reflecting the project's foci, interviews delved deeply into victimization experiences, responses to them, and operating in the legal/regulatory context.

All personnel, including our interviewees, are obliged to follow the government rules, lest they risk detection by police and subsequent punishment. As a result, personnel are keen to identify people who jeopardize the business. They are also sensitive to the threat of victimization. Thus, personnel face risks from two fronts: police and victimizers. Following the rules of "acceptable" drug sales is literally a daily concern, as coffeeshops are open year round, seven days a week—or very close to it. Thus, we consider personnel to be valuable sources of information about how the decriminalization of cannabis by the state affects the "micro-politics" of normalization and, moreover, whether and how their symbolic boundary making plays a role in these processes.

Analysis

Data informing our research focus—how normalization and coffeeshop personnel's symbolic boundaries are shaped by cannabis decriminalization—were taken from their responses to questions such as "What do you think explains the number of victimizations here?" and "How do you recognize hard drug sellers and users (or minors or sources of nuisance)?" Throughout analysis, it emerged that personnel's

answers are based in their understanding of the legal landscape with respect to cannabis decriminalization.

Our analysis of the interview data is guided by a consideration of their accounts as representing two entwined types of information (see Miller and Glassner 1997). We first consider them as representative of the participants' actual experiences and actions (Brookman et al. 2011). We also regard the participants' *stories* as data in and of themselves, or as more than empirical description (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Frank 2010; Maruna 2001; Presser 2008). That is, we consider how participants frame their stories and present information as important because the way they do so can indicate how they see themselves in relation to how they see others (Miller and Glassner 1997; see also, McAdams 1993, 2001; Presser 2008).

We used NVivo, a qualitative software program, to organize the connections between the domains and subdomains in the data. The first analytic step involved comparing the participants' responses and comments within and across interviews. Similar statements were classified into broad, general domains (e.g., those about preventing victimization; statements about normalization). Next, domain content were classified into smaller, more precisely defined subdomains reflecting further similarities and dissimilarities (e.g., identifying predators; views of different substances; hard drugs are different). If a theme was found to exist across five or more interviews, the data were explored to determine if the theme also presented a narrative thread across the other interviews. Finally, negative case analysis was conducted on these themes (see Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1984; Silverman 1993). As this analysis netted no deviant cases (i.e., interview data countering the themes), the themes stemming from our domain analysis inform our findings.

FINDINGS

The participants talked about various experiences at their respective coffeeshops. While doing so, they revealed symbolic boundaries separating how they think of themselves—the types of people they consider themselves to be—from how they thought of others committing actions seen as unacceptable by the state or society in general. They did so first by noting their awareness of the rules defining acceptable cannabis sales and the risks of violating them. They also did so by describing how they characterize persons who might put them in violation of these rules or who might otherwise break the law by preying on them in some way. Participants emphasized these risky persons are dissimilar to them in that they: are inferior types of persons;

have differing mental states due to psychoactive effects from hard drug and alcohol use; and are inherently more aggressive and violent.

Legal Status and Normalization

Coffeeshop personnel's symbolic boundaries are intrinsically connected to the legal status of cannabis in Amsterdam. Participants continually made explicit and implicit references to how the decriminalization of cannabis affects how they view others in contrast to themselves. Unlike sellers and users of hard drugs and persons who robbed, stole, or hurt others—"predators," in a word—participants did not view themselves as engaged in immoral acts. Gijs put it this way, "Absolutely no criminals work with us." Furthermore, their comments indicated that, in their view, government officials and the general public see it the same way. Emma summed up this general sentiment: "We just sell weed here. It is normal."

This sense of normalcy first stems, as explained by the participants, from knowledge that their business (i.e., selling cannabis) is allowed by the government. This is formalized in a license from the "local government" (Finn) permitting them to break the law provided they abide by the rules. It also came from regular interactions with police. All spoke about the semi-annual visits by police, and some, when doing so, implied a friendly admiration of police because of their constant presence. For instance, Maud commented, "We have all the time the police just walking and we respect them and we always say, 'Hello, hi, how are you?'"

The participants' sense of normalization also drew from the "day-to-day operations" of their businesses as being exactly that—businesses—not black market drug enterprises. Like other legitimate operations, coffeeshops pay taxes, rent, and the other associated costs of running a business under the purview of the government. As Jana put it when discussing decriminalization: "[Y]ou have a business and you pay taxes, you pay rent, and [do] everything the police tell you [that] you need to do."

Finally, participants' view of their *de jure* crime as normalized is drawn from how they described their lives and personal experiences. Although all of them had worked in coffeeshops for at least six months, and many had done so for years, even decades, not one person mentioned being mistreated or maligned by others because of their job. Like many non-events, the absence of those problems cannot be shown but is important to understanding what happens (Lewis and Lewis 1980; for examples among drug dealers, see Jacques 2017; Jacques and Wright 2015).

Owing to formal permissiveness and lack of mistreatment, coffeeshop personnel garner a sense that their drug dealing is morally acceptable. This sense is further defined by their knowledge that some the actions of others—i.e., selling and using hard drugs, harming other people—are not *de facto* permitted by the government, nor looked upon favorably by others. Hence, the Dutch coffeeshop policy promotes a sense of moral righteousness among owners and employees of this business type. To them, the use and sale of cannabis—at least that which adheres to the “rules”—is normal, whereas the use and sale of other types of drugs and predatory crimes are not. The effect, in turn, prompts them to see other criminals as different. The paper now turns to how this works.

Rule Violators and Predators

To maintain this sense of normalcy, it was important for participants to avoid violating the rules set by the state dictating permissible cannabis sales and use. They all discussed the importance of adhering to the coffeeshop rules and the risks of not doing so. At the top of their mind was the possibility of being shut down by the government if caught violating the rules. As Finn put it, “[I am] allow[ed] ... to break the law, unless I break the [rules].”^[1] To avoid legal repercussions, participants enacted numerous measures to prevent violations from occurring. At a basic level, this simply involved doing as the rules stipulate; for example, not advertising and keeping 500 grams or less on site. Slightly more complicated is taking action meant to reduce the risk of violation, such as checking buyers’ ages on their identification cards.

One of the most difficult rules to enforce is the ban on hard drugs. James commented on this concern: “We don’t want to have street dealers inside,” he explained, “because if ... the police come in for a checkup ... and ... they ... search everybody[,] ... street dealers might have half a gram [of cocaine or heroin] ... inside ... [and] they [police] would close it [the coffeeshop] down.” This rule was particularly worrisome for the participants because, unlike other rules, they did not have either complete control over compliance with it and had limited legal means by which to enforce it. They cannot search people or their possessions for contraband. Jack summed up this problem: “Almost certainly [hard drugs have been] in people’s pockets ... This is the thing: we can’t search everyone coming in the door.” Joseph echoed this, stating, “I can’t search you, so I don’t know what’s in your pocket.” Because customers cannot be searched, coffeeshop personnel must use other means to distinguish “normal” cannabis users like themselves from these deviant others. They do so by assessing the appearances,

comportment, and mannerisms of customers for signs that they are different. More will be said of this process, shortly.

In addition to fears of formal punishment, all participants voiced awareness of victimization risk. As an individual, or the coffeeshop as a group, could fall prey to predatory or retaliatory acts (see Jacques et al. 2016; Jacques 2019). More than half of them recounted personal or vicarious victimization experiences. For example, many reported stories of people stealing tip jars, snatching cash from the register, or grabbing cannabis and running away without paying. Hanna described a time she experienced the latter:

Somebody came in, asked for a bag [of marijuana]. He wanted me to show him. He said he wanted to see it first so I gave him the bag, [which is] what I normally do with all the customers. And he took it from the bar and he just ran.

Though less common, participants also reported personal or vicarious experiences with being robbed of large amounts of cash and/or cannabis and physical assault. Referring to a robbery at another coffeeshop, Mike shared the following story:

They were about to close and were telling the customers they had ten minutes to go ... [T]his guy came inside ... with a gun, shouting ... The dealer gave him the cash out of the counter ... [He took] about 15 or 16 hundred [euros] in cash. [He] also took the weed, I guess about 430 grams.

Charlotte commented on an assault in which a customer “was trying to strangle a dealer” because he was “not happy with whatever the dealer said.” Lizzie shared a story in which a “guy pulled a knife” on a coworker. And James talked about a personal experience in which a “crackhead” punched him, putting his teeth through his lips.

Although some participants claimed they were “not scared” (Claire) of the victimization risk, everyone took steps to prevent it from occurring. These measures include making registers or tip jars less accessible to customers, limiting the amount of cannabis on hand to reduce their attractiveness as potential robbery targets, and maintaining friendly, tightly controlled atmospheres to reduce aggressiveness among customers (Clarke 2009). Additionally, participants described how successfully avoiding victimization was connected to their abilities to identify thieves and violent offenders. This process, as with identifying hard drug possessors, involved constructing symbolic boundaries separating “people like them” from threatening out-groups.

Symbolic Boundaries and Identifying Threats

When asked about how they identified potential hard drug possessors or victimizers or, in other words, persons whose behavior is not normalized like their own, participants answered that it begins when people enter their coffeeshop. “We do keep an eye on who is coming in,” said Claire. These statements were often followed by descriptions of how these assessments rested on intuition about who was a potential threat and who was not. Hassan described it this way: “I see someone and I don’t trust him when I have that feeling that my senses say, ‘Listen, this guy is not 100 percent,’ ... I don’t sell him stuff.” Finn commented similarly, stating that he and his employees avoid selling to anyone who they have a “very bad feeling” about. And Joseph said he “can just tell” when someone poses a threat.

Participants indicated throughout their comments that their confidence in identifying criminals is grounded in how they see themselves in relation to the types of persons who, in their eyes, are outside the realm of normality. When talking about these threats—hard drug users, drunks, and victimizers—the first way participants contrasted themselves was by stressing that they were generally different types of people. They referred to these persons with a host of derogatory terms. For instance, they called them “junkies” (Maud), “scum” (Finn), “shady” (Gwen), “dirty” (Emir), or “people from the street” (Stijn) (see also, O’Gorman 2016). This was contrasted with their comments referring to themselves or the “sorts of people” (Emir) they wanted in their shops. These types of people were instead “ok” (Gwen), “not like low-class” (Hassan), and “clean...from good families, good education” (Emir). In doing so, the participants implicitly suggest they view these persons as somehow less than themselves in some way (see Tajfel and Turner 1985; Wills 1981) and thus as qualitatively different.

Another way that participants symbolically contrasted themselves was by noting differences between the psychopharmacological effects of cannabis versus other drugs. When speaking about hard drugs, particularly cocaine, the employees stressed its effect on agitation and aggression. “If you use it,” James said, “you get anxious and you get stressed. And you are more likely to snap and rough handle and take things badly than if you are not on it.” This was contrasted with the way they spoke of cannabis. Using cannabis, according to them, led to a “more relaxed” (Emma) or “quiet” (Jasper) state. “When people smoke,” Imran stated, “they will never bother you.”

Participants similarly described the effects of alcohol versus cannabis. They emphasized that drinking alcohol was also associated with aggression and violence.

“With drinking, people get violent,” Elias observed. Hassan spoke similarly: “Drunk people do that shit all the time; they have a lot of fights.” Jasper echoed these sentiments: “Drinking makes you more pop—more easy to hit someone.” The effects of alcohol were also associated with non-violent crimes. “Drinking makes more crime,” Dean stated, “When people are drunk they walk on the street, they walk into cars or they kick some cars or kick some windows.” Jens put it this way: “[When drinking] alcohol ... you are more inclined to do stupid things.” To be clear, this is a matter of heavy drinking, or a large “dose” of alcohol, not a glass or two (see Felson and Staff 2010). As with cocaine and other hard drugs, participants also clarified their views of the effects of alcohol by contrasting it with those of cannabis (see also, Sandberg 2012). In Joseph’s words:

People drinking alcohol are more harmful than people smoking because smokers are usually very timid, very cool, when they are stoned they sit quietly, but when people are drunk they are fucked and do a lot of stuff that is not necessary.

Despite alcohol’s legal status, some of the employees likened it to hard drugs due to its psychopharmacological effects. “Alcohol is a hard drug,” James said, “I think it is a hard drug.”

The participants extend their views on the psychopharmacological effects of drugs to persons involved with them and, in particular, how the repeated use of these drugs led to lasting personality changes. They emphasized that hard drug use could make someone aggressive and violent and thus unlike most people “like them” in the coffeeshop scene: calm, reflective “stoners.” Maud commented that her ex-boyfriend was “using hard drugs [and] ... acting like a different person” and that, over time, this had led to him “becom[ing] a different person.” Olivia described a similar situation with a neighbor: “We saw him deteriorate, just doing more and more [hard] drugs, just getting stranger in his head, just getting weird.” These changes were also associated with the addiction and constant need for cash associated with long-term use (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Goldstein 1985; Hoffer 2006; Wright and Decker 1994). Gijs’ illustrates that point:

Coke and heroin, if you use it on a daily basis, and you get headaches with it and a gram a day is not enough..., particularly when you go shooting or free basing, you probably need 5 or 10 grams a day, meaning that you have to get 500 euros a day or 250 euros or whatever. If your body is craving for something and you don’t have the money, then the craving is stronger than your morality.

Drinkers were spoken of in similar terms by participants. They were also deemed more likely to be aggressive or to commit crimes. Yet, here, there was a subtle difference in how participants spoke about drinkers compared to hard drug users: the effect of alcohol was not cast as extending beyond its time (at a relatively high prevalence) in the blood stream. By extension, the symbolic boundaries between drunk persons and the participants were more temporally limited. This time difference is evident in participants' frequent use of the term "when" whilst describing drunk people's behavior. Recall the comments from Dean and James. Referring to drinkers as being aggressive, they did so with the statement "when they get drunk." This shows that the participants only see drinkers as different—as threatening—when under the influence of alcohol. This subtle difference was also seen in accounts of their personal experiences using alcohol. Consider the following comment from Sophie: "When I drink," she said, "I turn into a Tony Montana kind of person. I start a fight with everybody." Here, she points out that she can be an aggressive person, much like the coke-fueled drug lord played by Al Pacino in the film *Scarface*, but stresses this is only when drinking.

Discussion

In this study, we find Dutch drug policy informs coffeeshop personnel's notions of what comprises morally acceptable drug use and sales. By adhering to the rules set by the state, the personnel we interviewed identify their involvement with cannabis as normal. Conversely, these rules also help them define what is morally unacceptable: using hard drugs or committing predatory crimes. To follow the rules—and thus see themselves as normal—coffeeshop personnel must identify potential rule-breakers and criminals. To do so, they symbolically differentiate themselves these others on the basis of, one, the varying psychopharmacological effects of cannabis versus hard drugs or alcohol; and, two, their physical and behavioral characteristics.

Prior research has argued that normalization is a micro-level social process influenced by macro-level cultural and structural conditions (e.g., Duff et al. 2016; Pennay and Moore 2010; Shiner and Measham 2009). We add to this research by highlighting how drug policy—here, the decriminalization of cannabis in Amsterdam—shapes the normalization process. Like economic marginalization and cultural mandates regarding working and parenting, drug policy also informs whether and how drug users and sellers view themselves as "normal." By following the rules, coffeeshop personnel understand their involvement with cannabis as morally acceptable.

Additionally, these rules also provide them a framework by which they can symbolically define deviants.

Our findings further specify symbolic boundary making in the normalization process by highlighting how drug users and sellers normalize their actions. They do so by contrasting themselves against persons committing acts that are not “culturally accommodated” by the general public *and* against those participating in activities that have been, such as drinking alcohol. Coffeeshop personnel framed their own actions—and thus themselves—as normal by differentiating themselves from hard drug users and criminals. But they also did so by emphasizing that the consumption of cannabis was responsible for less personal and social harm than the legal consumption of alcohol. In effect, here they “neutralize” any moral reprehensibility coloring the use and sale of cannabis. This is accomplished by arguing that it should not be viewed as deviant if it leads to less negative effects than a substance that is already legal and seen as morally acceptable by most of the population (see, Sykes and Matza 1957; Cromwell and Thurman 2003 on “techniques of neutralization” and “justification by comparison,” respectively). While prior research among cannabis users has noted they normalize their use by likening their lifestyles and actions to those of other “normal” persons (Duff et al. 2016; Hathway et al. 2011), here we demonstrate that normalization can also involve contrasting one’s group against what is seen as “normal.”

That coffeeshop personnel distinguish themselves against persons intoxicated by large amounts of alcohol also adds to understanding of the fluidity of symbolic boundaries. Scholars argue that symbolic boundary making is a dynamic process in which persons constantly negotiate and renegotiate their identities in relation to others (see, e.g., Copes et al., 2016; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Taylor 1983; Somers 1994). We further this discussion by noting that this negotiation can occur along short-acting psychopharmacological lines, in addition to those as previously considered in research, including community or national identity (Borneman 1992; Erikson 1966; Suttles 1968), scientific rigor (Gieryn 1999), professional status (Abbott 1988; Collins 1979), and class identity (Bourdieu 1984). Recall that the coffeeshop employees only distinguished themselves from persons using alcohol (and identified them as threatening) *when* they are under its influence; once sober, the difference evaporates. This suggests that actors classify themselves and others through temporally limited characteristics, such as intoxication, as well as through long-term or permanent characteristics like age, gender, or race.

Following previous research, we also find that illicit drug dealers create symbolic boundaries distinguishing how they see themselves from other “maligned categor[ies]” of persons (Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008: 264; Marsh, Copes, and Linnemann 2017; Sandberg and Tutenges 2015; Webb, Deitzer, and Copes 2016). Scholars studying symbolic boundaries more broadly have long noted how these conceptual distinctions permit individuals to feel superior to others in one or more ways and thus create and maintain positive self-identities (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Tajfel 1981, 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Among the interviewees, their positive identities were partially based on not seeing themselves as threats to others. Thus, we add to prior work by showing that boundary work among persons involved in illicit drug trade—whether *de jure* or *de facto* prohibited—can also act as a means for identifying potential formal and informal threats (see also, Dickinson and Wright 2017; Jacques and Wright 2015; Jarvinen and Demant 2011; see generally, Wills 1981; Taylor 1983).

Actors’ behavior is thought to follow from how they distinguish themselves from others (Goffman 1967; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Stets and Burke 2000; Zerubavel 1991). Interaction studies argue this happens by shaping their perceived susceptibility to the risks posed by others (Goffman 1959, 1971; Lofland 1969). For example, if an actor sees someone as a threat, he or she may engage in counteractions. Prior work on offender decision-making posits that criminals are guided by their perceptions of risks (e.g., Bachman, Paternoster, and Ward 1992; Paternoster and Simpson 1996; Piliavin et al. 1986). Our study adds to these bodies of work by specifying a mechanism that may influence drug traders’ perceptions of risk and their attendant actions: their symbolic boundary work.

Extant research has demonstrated that cannabis users experience residual stigma despite perceptions of cannabis use being morally accommodated by the general population (see, e.g., Duff et al. 2016; Hathaway 2004). Our study adds to this research by noting that lingering feelings of stigma also persist among cannabis users and sellers operating in a decriminalized context (see also, Reinerman and Cohen 2007). Like the participants in prior studies, coffeeshop personnel indicate and manage this stigma by symbolically contrasting themselves with hard drug users (e.g., O’Gorman 2016). This finding has important implications for the outcomes of the decriminalization and legalization of cannabis in other contexts.

Over half a century ago, Goffman (1963) argued that stigmatized individuals have a “tendency to stratify [their] own” and, in an effort to become more allied with

“normals,” they will further stigmatize those whom are “more evidently stigmatized” (p. 107). If taken alongside our findings, this suggests that cannabis users and sellers in decriminalized and legalized contexts may see themselves, due to cannabis’s former fully illicit status, as potentially categorized by the general public as similar to the users and sellers of other types of drugs. To resist this categorization—and any stigma potentially leading from it—they may privately and publicly denigrate and vilify persons using these other types of drugs.

If that process occurs on a large scale, it may solidify and reinforce negative public opinions about the users of drugs such as cocaine and heroin. This, in turn, may limit public support of programs centered on harm reduction and may encourage criminal justice approaches to inhibiting illicit drug use. Users of physically addictive drugs such as cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, and heroin, who may already be disproportionately drawn from marginalized populations with less access to drug treatment (Fiorentine 1993; Foster 2000; Hartnoll 1992; Wu et al. 2016), may then be further discouraged from attempting to obtain treatment or other health services due to stigma or fears of involvement with law enforcement (Room 2005). Thus, while decriminalization and legalization of cannabis may succeed at limiting the social marginalization of cannabis users (e.g., VanVliet 1990), it may have the unintended secondary impact of increasing marginalization and its associated negative impacts among other drug users.

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Tables

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics

Participant Name (#)	Coffeeshop	Position	Tenure	Age	Race/Ethnicity	NL Born
Adam (41)	Howling Man	Dealer	<1	30	White	Yes
Amani (30)	Stop	Owner	24	48	Black	No
Amir (21)	Mirror Image	Dealer	1	30	Arab	Yes
Anna (22)	Maple Street	Manager	2	40	White	Yes
Charlotte (43)	Nick of Time	Server	<1	23	White	No

Claire (14)	Sun	Dealer	<1	28	Multi	No
Dean (39)	Dollar Room	Manager	<1	32	White	Yes
Elias (32)	Passage	Dealer	2	34	White	Yes
Emir (4)	Walking Distance	Dealer		40	Arab	No
Emma (19)	Purple Testament	Manager	7	38	White	Yes
Fabian (46)	Most Unusual	Dealer	5	30	White	No
Finn (26)	Execution	Owner	23	53	White	No
Gijs (6)	Escape Clause	Manager	2	46	White	Yes
Guus (36)	World of His Own	Dealer	20	48	Multi	No
Gwen (29)	Like a Child	Manager	1.5	32	White	Yes
Hanna (47)	Meek	Dealer	<1	31	White	No
Hassan (5)	Shrine	Manager	4	25	Arab	Yes
Helen (18)	Last Flight	Manager	<1	38	White	No
Imran (42)	Eye of the Beholder	Owner	15	45	Multi	No
Jack (25)	Alike All Over	Manager	3.5	35	White	No
James (37)	No Return	Dealer	4	31	White	No
Jana (23)	World of Difference	Dealer	6	26	White	Yes
Jasper (44)	The Hour	Manager	5	28	White	Yes

Jens (28)	Nice Place to Visit	Dealer	1.5	28	White	Yes
Joseph (11)	Open Sky	Manager	6	55	Black	No
Kamila (15)	Arrow in the Air	Server	2	32	White	No
Keven (13)	Four of Us	Dealer	10	39	White	Yes
Lizzie (50)	Whole Truth	Manager	3.5	35	White	Yes
Lola (17)	Fever	Server	9	30	White	Yes
Luca (7)	The Lonely	Dealer	5	38	White	Yes
Lucia (3)	Doomsday	Server	<1	20	White	No
Luuk (2)	Angels	Owner	16	50	White	Yes
Maikel (40)	Thing	Owner	4	38	Black	Yes
Mara (27)	Wish	Owner	6	35	White	Yes
Maud (8)	At Last	Dealer	1	27	Asian	Yes
Max (1)	Everybody	Manager		37	White	Yes
Mike (10)	Judgment Night	Dealer	<1	19	White	No
Noah (12)	What You Need	Dealer	5	35	White	Yes
Noortje (48)	Dust	Dealer	10	34	White	Yes
Olivia (20)	Elegy	Dealer	3	24	White	Yes
Omar (49)	Back There	Manager	8	25	Arab	Yes
Ruben (35)	The Mighty	Dealer	10	45	White	Yes

Selma (38)	Man in the Bottle	Dealer	<1	27	Multi	Yes
Sophie (16)	Hitch-Hiker	Server	2.5	25	Multi	Yes
Stefan (34)	After Hours	Dealer	5	40	White	No
Stijn (33)	Mr. Bevis	Dealer	8	35	White	No
Thomas (45)	Buzz	Manager	3.5	32	White	No
Victor (31)	Chaser	Dealer	<1	30	Multi	Yes
Willem (9)	Perchance	Owner	1.5	27	Asian	Yes
Wouter (24)	Live Long	Dealer	<1	44	White	No
Modal Category or Average	-	Dealer	5	34	White	Yes

Note: An empty cell denotes “Don’t know.” “#” refers to participant’s order in study, from first interviewed (1) to last (50). “Tenure” reflects a participant’s time serving in a specific position at the coffeeshop, not their total time working there or other coffeeshops. “NL Born” shows whether each participant was born in the Netherlands. Overall averages may be slightly different from those reported in Jacques et al. 2016 due to rounding. To calculate average tenure, employees with less than 1 year in the position are counted as 0.5 year, or 6 months.

Table 2. Personnel Characteristics of Interviewed Coffeeshops

Coffeeshop	# Personnel	# Male (%)	Age Range	# White (%)	# Immigrant (% NL Born)
After Hours	11	5 (45)	21-40	10 (90)	1 (91)
Alike All Over	11	4 (36)	24-50	11 (100)	4 (64)
Angels	D/k	11 (D/k)	20-44	14 (D/k)	14 (D/k)

Arrow in the Air	7	4 (57)	24-40	7 (100)	7 (0)
At Last	4	2 (50)	21-34	2 (50)	1 (75)
Back There	6	6 (67)	25-41	5 (83)	1 (83)
Buzz	7	7 (100)	23-43	6 (86)	3 (57)
Chaser	9	9 (100)	D/k	5 (56)	D/k (D/k)
Dollar Room	12	11 (92)	22-36	12 (100)	2 (83)
Doomsday	D/k	4 (D/k)	18-36	18 (D/k)	14 (D/k)
Dust	9	6 (67)	32-45	8 (89)	0 (100)
Elegy	13	7 (54)	24-49	12 (92)	12 (8)
Escape Clause	9	8 (88)	25-46	9 (100)	8 (11)
Everybody	19	11 (58)	20-45	19 (100)	1 (95)
Execution	12	7 (58)	25-53	12 (100)	6 (50)
Eye of the Beholder	8	7 (88)	22-46	4 (50)	6 (25)
Fever	5	4 (80)	25-33	3 (60)	4 (20)
Four of Us	7	6 (86)	27-50	7 (100)	0 (100)
Hitch-Hiker	17	12 (71)	21-52	14 (82)	1 (94)
Howling Man	15	12 (80)	20-51	12 (80)	2 (87)
Judgment Night	23	15 (65)	19-50	D/k (D/k)	6 (74)
Last Flight	19	10 (53)	20-38	10 (53)	10 (47)
Like a Child	20	9 (45)	18-44	18 (90)	10 (50)

Live Long	7	7 (100)	22-50	7 (100)	0 (100)
Man in the Bottle	4	3 (75)	27-41	4 (100)	3 (25)
Maple Street	9	4 (44)	23-42	9 (100)	2 (78)
Meek	4	1 (25)	21-46	3 (75)	3 (25)
Mirror Image	D/k	2 (D/k)	30-33	3 (D/k)	3 (D/k)
Most Unusual	5	0 (0)	30-60	5 (100)	5 (0)
Mr. Bevis	18	2 (11)	19-50	8 (44)	14 (22)
Nice Place to Visit	18	9 (50)	21-43	14 (78)	4 (78)
Nick of Time	13	9 (69)	23-44	13 (100)	12 (8)
No Return	9	9 (100)	28-47	8 (89)	4 (56)
Open Sky	3	3 (100)	33-55	1 (33)	3 (0)
Passage	3	3 (100)	25-34	3 (100)	2 (33)
Perchance	4	3 (75)	27-32	2 (50)	3 (25)
Purple Testament	5	2 (40)	20-38	2 (40)	3 (40)
Shrine	6	5 (83)	22-36	4 (67)	2 (67)
Stop	2	2 (100)	48	0 (0)	2 (0)
Sun	9	2 (22)	25-50	8 (89)	8 (11)
The Hour	21	13 (62)	20-40	20 (95)	1 (95)
The Lonely	D/k	6 (D/k)	32-40	7 (D/k)	0 (D/k)
The Mighty	9	8 (89)	20-46	8 (89)	9 (0)

Thing	4	3 (75)	21-38	1 (25)	1 (75)
Walking Distance	4	4 (100)	31-48	0 (0)	4 (0)
What You Need	11	6 (55)	21-50	11 (100)	0 (100)
Whole Truth	27	7 (26)	21-43	25 (93)	10 (63)
Wish	8	5 (63)	24-41	8 (100)	3 (63)
World of Difference	15	10 (67)	23-50	12 (80)	15 (0)
World of His Own	10	6 (60)	21-60	1 (10)	8 (20)
Average	10	6 (60)	24-44	8 (80)	5 (50)

Note: “D/k” denotes do not know. “% NL Born” shows percent of personnel born in the Netherlands. Overall averages may be slightly different from those reported in Jacques et al. 2016 due to rounding and number of cases in denominator. Here, overall average percentages are calculated by dividing the variable’s mean by the average number of total personnel across coffeeshops, which is 10. Especially for coffeeshops with more personnel, these numbers may not perfectly reflect the actual characteristics because they are based on interviewees’ knowledge and recall.

Note

[1] Ellipses represent words or utterances that have been removed for the sake of clarity. Bracketed sections represent words or phrases that have been inserted to increase clarity.