

# High times: The Effect of Profanity on Attitude Change about Marijuana Legalization

Contact information:  
shaans06@hotmail.com  
savoysc@sfasu.edu  
estradas@sfasu.edu



Shaan Shahabuddin, Sarah Savoy, & Steven Estrada  
Stephen F. Austin State University

## Introduction

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the country and it has become increasingly popular among young adults in recent years (O'Connor, 2012). Although California Proposition 19 (the Regulate, Control & Tax Cannabis Act) did not pass by a majority of voters, more than 15 states have enacted laws to legalize marijuana for medical purposes. Diverging from political views, what is the attitude of an average college student towards the drug? Our study tested whether initially held attitudes toward marijuana could be altered when participants read a text that included profanity.

Profanity has become very acceptable in today's society. Before the 1960's, foul language was rarely used in television shows or movies, and was only spoken out loud in certain places by certain people (Fine & Johnson, 1984). Profanity was mostly used by men until after the 1960's, when it became common to hear curse words from women as well as the younger generation.

Scherer & Sagarin (2006) found that when participants watched a video of a speaker arguing to lower tuition and the word "damn" was placed in different sections of the speech, attitudes significantly increased in favor of the speaker's argument.

Our study tests a similar concept but uses text stimuli instead of video and incorporates a controversial topic, the legalization of marijuana.

## Hypothesis

**Hypothesis 1:** Participants in the pro-attitudinal, profanity condition will report their attitudes toward marijuana as more favorable than the pro-attitudinal, non-profanity condition, supporting Scherer & Sagarin (2006).

**Hypothesis 2:** Participants in the profanity condition will rate profanity as less disturbing and will report using profanity more often than in the control condition.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 31 (6 male, 25 female) undergraduate students from Stephen F. Austin State University who were fulfilling a partial course requirement for their General Psychology course. The participants' ethnicity was closely related to the university student body (52% Caucasian, 42% African American, and 6% other). Only students who were 18 years old or older were allowed to participate in the study (Mean age = 19.48,  $SD = 1.36$ ).

## Measures

**Attitude towards marijuana.** Participants answered 5 items ( $\alpha = .94$ ) on a 7-point topic scale (Scherer, 2006) that related to their attitude of marijuana (e.g., 1= bad/ foolish/ harmful/ objectionable/ poor, 7= good/ wise/ beneficial/ acceptable/ excellent). Total scores were summed together with a higher number indicating a more positive attitude towards marijuana. Profanity and speech type were calculated as separate variables.

**Profanity attitudes and usage.** Participants indicated on 3 items ( $\alpha = .74$ ) the extent of how often they use profanity through the course of an average day, how often they use profanity in a ten minute conversation with friends, and the extent of disturbance they feel when someone else uses profanity.

## Procedures

Participants completed the measures listed above two times over the course of the study. Time 1 indicates that the measures were completed as part of an online prescreening before participants signed up for the laboratory component of the study. Time 2 indicates that the measures were completed at the end of the laboratory session, after the manipulation.

Participants were randomly assigned to read a 2 ½ page, double-spaced, text that either argued for why marijuana should be legalized (pro-attitudinal) or why it should remain illegal (counter-attitudinal) in the U.S. The text either did or did not contain a profanity word (e.g., "fuck") three times throughout the passage.

## Results

A 2 (profanity) x 2 (speech type) x 2 (time) repeated measures ANOVA resulted in a main effect of profanity on attitude about marijuana when collapsing across Time 1 and Time 2,  $F(1,27) = 5.31, p = .029$  (see figure 1). Participants in the non-profanity condition had more favorable attitudes toward marijuana ( $M = 34.63, SD = 3.64$ ) compared to the profanity condition ( $M = 24.27, SD = 11.58$ ).

There was also an interaction between argument type and time,  $F(1,27) = 10.66, p = .003$ , indicating that attitudes toward marijuana became more positive for the pro-attitudinal argument type from Time 1 to Time 2 and did not change for the counter-attitudinal speech type (see figure 2).

When analyzing whether participants in the profanity condition rated profanity as less disturbing, no significant effects as well as no interaction effects were found. Participants did not change their attitude towards profanity and did not report higher use in any condition.

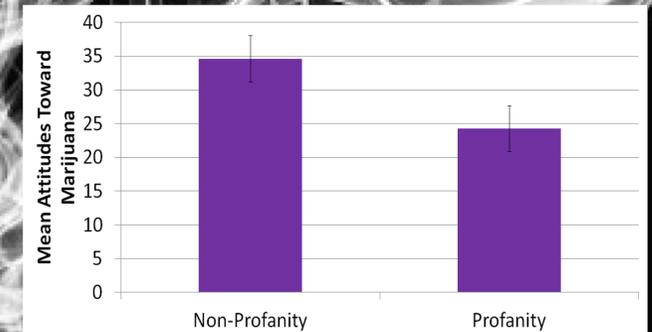


Figure 1. Effect of profanity on attitudes toward marijuana.

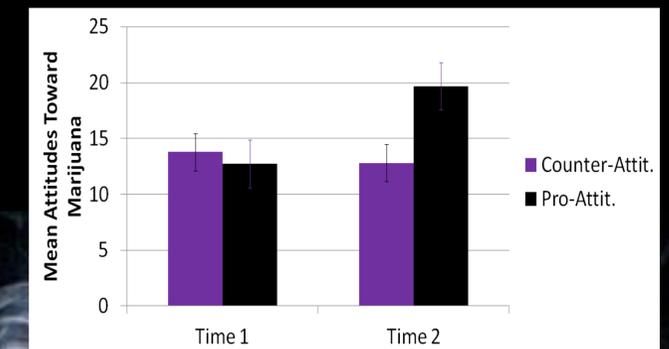


Figure 2. Speech type across time and attitudes toward marijuana.

## Discussion

The results of our study suggest that attitude towards marijuana in the pro-attitudinal condition became more positive from Time 1 to Time 2. The use of profanity resulted in less favorable attitudes toward marijuana, but this was only when collapsed across time.

Scherer (2006) found similar results to our first finding when studying the effect of a weak profanity word on two different speech type conditions. In the pro-attitudinal condition, several speaker characteristics resulted in significant effects, however there were no effects found in the counter-attitudinal condition.

It is suggested that attitudes change when arguments are "in favor" of the audience, but further research needs to be conducted to determine this assumption.

## References

- Fine, M.G. & Johnson, F.L. (1984). Female and male motives for using obscenity. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 3, (1), 59-74. doi: 10.1177/0261927X8431004.
- O'Connor, A. (2012, January 11). Marijuana smoking does not harm lungs, study finds. *New York Times*. Retrieved January 20, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Scherer, C.R. (2006). *Indecent influence: What mediates the relationship between swearing and persuasion* (Doctoral dissertation, Northern Illinois University). Retrieved from <http://www.web.ebscohost.com>.
- Scherer, C.R., & Sagarin, B. (2006). Indecent influence: The positive effects of obscenity on persuasion. *Social Influence*, 1, 138-146. doi: 10.1080/15534510600747597.