

Depicting the Pirates of the Emerald Triangle: An
Ethnographic Content Analysis of Articles on
Marijuana Growers Appearing in the *San Francisco
Chronicle*, 1982-1995

By

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Abstract

The role of the news media in the definition of drugs as a social problem has been well documented. This paper rests on the premise that the image of marijuana became *more deviant* during the 1980's. The goal of this project was to investigate how the image of marijuana growers manufactured and portrayed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* may have contributed to that social process in Northern California. While the coverage of marijuana growers was substantial in terms of the total amount of marijuana stories, the image of pot farmers was decidedly negative. This negative slant seems to be driven by the fact that the majority of stories were framed episodically -- episodic framings were much more likely to characterize growers negatively than their counterparts. The dominant themes that emerge from the coverage of marijuana farmers in the *Chronicle* are of greedy, violent, anti-social criminals who are producing enormous amounts of a dangerous psycho-active substance; images of the growers as reasonable, peaceful persons engaged in a rational moral and/or economic endeavor were clearly in the minority. It appears that the reliance upon episodic framings predisposes the print news media to characterize the criminal behaviors of drug offenders as illogical, immoral, and perhaps pathological. The negative slant of the episodic stories is indeed unsettling for one who desires objective news, but it conforms nicely to the conservative criminal justice agenda that has been championed over the past twenty years. As a nation we are currently reliant on a punishment-oriented approach toward drugs which is predicated on the idea that all those associated with illicit drugs -- users, producers, or dealers -- are unbalanced, irrational, and immoral deviants. Alternative explanations for such behaviors, especially those which deem them rational and understandable in light of social conditions, are incompatible with present political reasoning and policy and are largely absent from public discourse.

Introduction

In the 1980's, an aggressive campaign against domestic marijuana cultivation was undertaken by federal, state, and local authorities. In terms of typical law enforcement practices, fairly radical strategies were employed. The federal government encouraged cooperation amongst federal, state, and

local agencies and contributed military hardware and intelligence towards the fight against marijuana. During the campaign against marijuana cultivation, the federal government encouraged the use of U2 spy planes and even satellite photos to wipe out marijuana patches; raids on marijuana patches were conducted in para-military fashion with officials using helicopters, flak jackets and assault rifles. Surely, helicopters were used due to the remote location of many marijuana gardens, but these sorts of raids were a fairly extreme shift in policy considering there was a long list of influential organizations and individuals in support of marijuana decriminalization as late as the 1970's. The roster included the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, President Carter, state and federal legislators (including then US Representative Dan Quayle), and the Director of National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (Zimmer and Morgan, 1997: 153-155). Furthermore, the penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana had lessened in many states in the 1960's and 1970's; "By 1977 all but eight states had reduced marijuana possession from a felony to a misdemeanor" (Zimmer and Morgan, 1997: 155). However, by the early 1980's, a growing anti-marijuana movement was underway that had even convinced the Director of NIDA to change his stance on marijuana (Zimmer and Morgan, 1997); in 1982 President Reagan declared a "War on Drugs" (Glasser and Siegal, 1997: see endnote #7) and domestic marijuana growing became one of the main targets of this new social campaign (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 1, 1982: 1).

Clearly, the deviant image of marijuana made a pretty dramatic turnaround in a very short period of time. At the end of one decade there was support for lessening criminal penalties associated with marijuana, but the start of the next saw calls for increased law enforcement pressure on the drug. While certainly it could be argued that marijuana's image was always deviant due to the fact that it remained illegal throughout this period despite the noted leniency in penalties, this paper rests on the assumption that marijuana became *more deviant* over the time period of this study. In the span of a few years, marijuana became a substantial social problem, especially in Northern California, which has long been considered one of the epicenters of domestic marijuana cultivation.

The task of this paper is to explain how newspaper descriptions of marijuana growers in the San Francisco Bay Area may have contributed to the construction of marijuana as a social problem there. Ethnographic content analysis is used to analyze the depictions of marijuana growers as presented in the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1982 to 1995. Ethnographic content analysis differs from strict quantitative content analysis, where categories always precede data analysis, in that "quantifiable categories of analysis are supplemented by qualitative categories that are allowed to emerge from the data

themselves" (Jerrigan and Dorfman, 1996: 175). Five questions were asked in the present study: 1) How did the *Chronicle's* coverage of marijuana in general and marijuana growers specifically fluctuate over the time under study? 2) Did the stories that portrayed growers tend to be framed episodically or thematically? 3) Qualitatively speaking, were the growers portrayed in a morally positive or sympathetic, negative or unsympathetic, or neutral fashion? 4) What relationship, if any, exists between the framing of a story and how marijuana growers were characterized? and 5) What are some of the major themes which emerged from the coverage of marijuana growers? It is hoped that this analysis will add to our understanding of the study of social problems research in general and specifically of "contextual" social constructionism (Best, 1993) of drug scares or drug wars (Morgan, Wallack, and Buchanan, 1990).

Literature Review

There has been considerable study of the media's role in defining drugs as a social problem (Becker, 1963; Brownstein, 1991; Gitlin, 1989; Himmelstein, 1983; Iyengar, 1991; Jerrigan and Dorfman, 1996; Morgan, 1978; Morgan, Wallack and Buchanan, 1988; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Reinerman and Levine, 1989 and 1997). Morgan (1978) mentions the role that increased press coverage played in the formation of opium smoking as a social problem and immoral activity in California during the late 1800's. She claims that laws against opium smoking are best understood in the context of anti-Chinese sentiment in labor unrest during a severe economic recession in which White workers scapegoated Chinese immigrants for worsening economic conditions. She argues opium smoking was popularly assumed to be a Chinese dominated habit and the emergence of new laws against it are best viewed as a way for dominant segments of society to exert social control over a threatening or dangerous class group (Reinerman and Levine, 1997a). Gitlin (1989) comments upon the relatively uncritical manner in which the media replaced coverage of the Cold War with a "new holy war" -- the War on Drugs -- in the mid 1980's (Gitlin, 1989: 17). Reinerman and Levine (1989 and 1997) analyze the tremendous amount of media coverage given to the "crack epidemic" in the latter half of the 1980's and argue that the claims of a "crack crisis" were not accompanied by an epidemic of illegal drug use; they instead suggest that it is essential to understand the construction of crack as social problem in the context of the renewed support for conservative moral and political ideologies during the 1980's. Brownstein (1991) examines the role of the print media in constructing the image of an epidemic of random drug violence in New York City. Orcutt and Turner (1993) examine the way in which some members of the media distorted national survey statistics to bolster their claims of alarming increases in adolescent drug use (specifically cocaine) in the late 1980's.

Numerous authors have noted how media descriptions have helped create and manipulate the popular image of marijuana. Considerable attention has focused on the importance to the passage of both the federal *Marijuana Tax Act of 1937* as well as state and local anti-marijuana legislation of lurid press accounts circulated by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) (Becker, 1963; Himmelstein, 1983; Herer, 1990; Morgan 1990). Becker notes that the number of articles about marijuana appearing in the popular press reached an all-time high at the close of the FBN's campaign against marijuana (Becker, 1963:141) and helped form a very negative moral image of marijuana and marijuana smokers. Himmelstein (1983) traces the changing ideological images of marijuana and its users from the 1870's to 1970's using a systematic sample of media articles. He claims that our assumptions about the dangers of marijuana have changed dramatically during this century alone. Marijuana was viewed as a dangerous drug that incited violence and aggression until the mid-1960's when it was paradoxically alleged to cause passivity and amotivational syndrome.

This paper borrows a theoretical concept used by Iyengar (1991) whose content analysis of television news stories separates news reports into two classifications: episodic and thematic. Episodic stories focus upon single events; thematic framings attempt to place events and issues in a broader social context (Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996). Iyengar found the majority of news stories about crime on the television news were framed episodically, while other subjects (such as unemployment) tended to be covered thematically. Iyengar also reported that the framing of the story had specific effects upon viewers. Episodic framings made viewers more likely to assign responsibility to the individual while thematic framings tended to make viewers assign responsibility to society or governmental agencies. Jerrigan and Dorfman (1996) applied Iyengar's concepts to television news coverage of the drug crisis in 1990 and found that the majority of drug stories (71%) were framed episodically; from this they concluded that TV news was sending a very clear message to viewers that the roots of the drug problem could be traced to individuals rather than structural factors or governmental policies.

The Social Context of the Emerald Triangle Region of Northern California

The coastal mountain area of Northern California was one of the premiere front-lines in the war against marijuana growing. This region, eventually dubbed the "Emerald Triangle" ¹ by law enforcement officials, became one of the epicenters of the domestic marijuana industry during the 1970's and continued in this capacity into the early 1980's. At the time, California was regarded by law enforcement organizations and marijuana advocacy groups as a leader in domestic production. The potent seedless strains of sensimilla cultivated in the region were considered among the finest pot in the world -- the *Dom Perignon* of marijuana -- and were highly prized by connoisseurs willing to pay premium prices.

It is beyond the scope of this project to provide a comprehensive discussion of all of the factors that contributed to the proliferation of marijuana cultivation in Northern California during the 1970's and early 1980's, but two historical incidents stand out. Paradoxically, the domestic marijuana cultivation industry received a boost from the attempts of the federal government to reduce marijuana trafficking in America. Secondly, the physical, social, and economic dynamics of Northern California were favorable to the growth of the marijuana cultivation industry.

In 1969, the federal government launched "Operation Intercept" -- a drug interdiction program to reduce the flow of drugs across the US - Mexico border. At the time, the main sources of marijuana for the American market were Mexico and South America (Adler, 1993; Pollan, 1995; Rafael, 1985). While Operation Intercept was short lived, increased interdiction efforts against ground smuggling across the border caused a temporary shortage of marijuana in the US as well as a gradual transition within the international drug smuggling industry. Effectively, the stepped up efforts at the border weeded out the less professional smuggling crews and indirectly contributed to the growth of cocaine smuggling (Adler, 1993). Drug importers who had the foresight and resources switched to more sophisticated and logistically demanding air or water routes and held an advantage in the marketplace (Adler, 1993). Also cocaine began to be in demand domestically and had several qualities that made it more attractive financially to this new breed of smugglers -- it was less bulky, odorless, and pound for pound more profitable than marijuana. Throughout the 1970's, many smugglers reduced or abandoned entirely their marijuana operations in favor of cocaine importation (Adler, 1993). Effectively, a void was created in the marijuana supply.

Enter the Bay Area and Northern California. Throughout the 1970's Northern California experienced a significant influx of migrants from the metropolitan Bay Area. Many of these people were veterans of the

hippie movement and a big part of their progressive lifestyle was marijuana smoking (Rafael, 1985). Northern California's mild climate, long growing season, and isolated countryside made it a very good place to cultivate marijuana. The economy in the region also happened to be severely depressed, struggling from a declining fishery and the loss of a logging industry that had seen its heyday in the early part of the century. As these new migrants soon discovered, the area offered bleak economic opportunities (Rafael, 1985). In the meantime marijuana was still an integral part of the drug scene, and thus in demand, in the Bay Area. Growing marijuana provided a much-needed economic boost to these struggling migrants and eventually the region. These two apparently unrelated historical dynamics created a favorable climate for the growth of the domestic marijuana cultivation industry in Northern California.

"CAMP" -- California's Marijuana Eradication Program

The roots of California's marijuana eradication program, *"Campaign Against Marijuana Planting"* or CAMP, can be traced in part to a 1982 US government program dedicated to marijuana eradication. The federal program eventually made resources available to states to conduct eradication operations. Transferring resources to the states allowed for an expansion of eradication efforts, as the US government's power to conduct anti-marijuana operations was limited to federal property.

Initiatives such as CAMP, which began in 1983, dramatically changed the nature of the domestic marijuana cultivation industry (Pollan, 1995). Marijuana growers gradually shifted to indoor gardens, which increased the costs of production (in terms of capital). Indoor growing also allowed for complete control of the growing environment, which led to unprecedented leaps in potency and yield. In the 1970's and early 1980's, outdoor growing in the Emerald Triangle produced a mature plant that was between six and 15 feet tall and took several months to "flower."² By the 1990's indoor growers were able to produce extremely potent "dwarf" plants (approximately three feet tall) that could be harvested every few months (Pollan, 1995). Marijuana eradication programs such as CAMP contributed to an evolution in the marijuana cultivation industry that effectively dispersed the marijuana industry both domestically and internationally (as indoor growers "manufactured" their environment), made marijuana more potent, more expensive, and more risky to grow (Pollan, 1995). As CAMP started up its activities in the early 1980's, a considerable amount of media attention in the metropolitan Bay Area was given to the activities of CAMP and their counterparts -- marijuana growers. This paper is a content analysis of the media depictions of marijuana growers that

occurred in the Bay Area from the early 1980's to the present.

Data and Methods

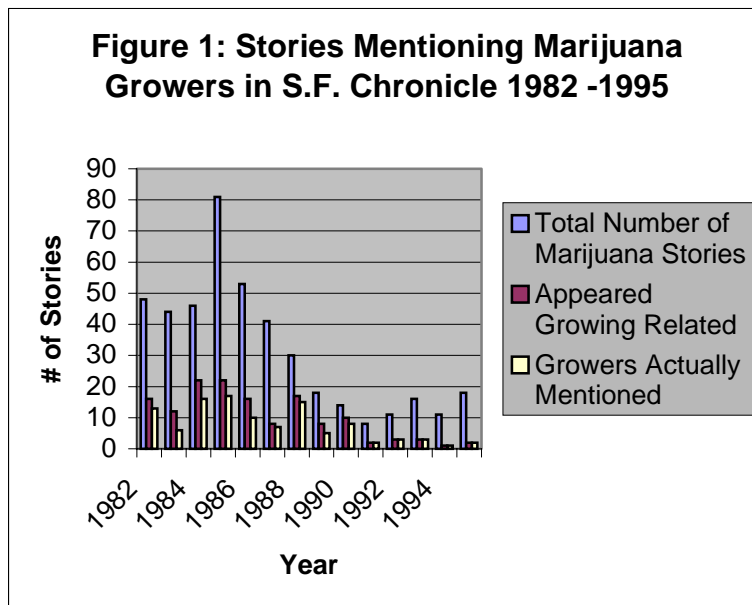
The data are drawn from articles appearing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1982 to 1995. The *Chronicle* is the largest daily newspaper³ in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Bay Area is the largest and closest metropolitan area to the famed Emerald Triangle region of the state, considered one of the centers of the marijuana cultivation industry in the US in the early 1980s (Raphael, 1985). The *Chronicle* was the only source used because it was the only California newspaper that was available at the University of Hawaii at Manoa library where the research took place. The year 1982 was chosen as the starting point as it is the year the US government launched the "War on Drugs," the predecessor to California's initiative, CAMP, which began in 1983. At the time of data collection (Fall 1996), 1995 was the last full year available for analysis.

For each of the years under study, summaries of all articles under the subject heading "marijuana" in the *Annual Index to the San Francisco Chronicle* were examined (N=439). Articles that appeared to be related to any aspect of the marijuana cultivation industry were read by the author (N=142). All that specifically mentioned or characterized marijuana growers in California⁴ were photocopied and analyzed as described below (N=108). (See Table 1 and Figure 1)

The 108 articles that provide the data for the present analysis were read at least four separate times. The first reading was to determine whether the article specifically characterized or mentioned marijuana growers. Following Iyengar's (1991) and Jernigan and Dorfman's (1996) content analysis of television news stories, the second reading categorized articles into thematic or episodic framings. Episodic framings focus on a single episode or event while thematic stories place events and issues in a broader context (Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996). As such, a *qualitative judgment* was made by the author to categorize the stories into one of the two categories: articles that focused on a unique event or series of events without *specifically attempting* to place them in some sort of broader context were coded episodically. Those that attempted

Table 1: Stories Mentioning Marijuana Growers in *S.F. Chronicle* 1982 -1995⁵

	Total Number of Marijuana Stories	Appeared Growing Related	Growers Actually Mentioned
1982	48	16	13
1983	44	12	6
1984	46	22	16
1985	81	22	17
1986	53	16	10
1987	41	8	7
1988	30	17	15
1989	18	8	5
1990	14	10	8
1991	8	2	2
1992	11	3	3
1993	16	3	3
1994	11	1	1
1995	18	2	2
totals	439	142	108



to place incidents or a series of occurrences in a larger social context were judged to be thematic. On the third reading, all articles were examined to determine how marijuana growers in Northern California were depicted. The author made a *subjective qualitative decision* based upon the overall theme and tone of the article and coded the depictions of marijuana growers in each article in one of three ways: positive or sympathetic characterization, negative or unsympathetic characterization, or neutral characterization.

Of course, this coding process was a highly subjective undertaking by the author, but a set of criteria was used. Becker (1963) notes that the social construction of deviance requires the emergence of a specific moral viewpoint and the rise of such a conception is an active enterprise. Clearly, all of the marijuana growers depicted in the *Chronicle* were engaged in an activity that was officially defined as illegal, which has moral implications, but the coding strategy purposefully avoided making decisions based upon that fact. Therefore, the author assumes that the moral legitimacy of the military search and destroy type of raids on marijuana patches had to be constructed by moral entrepreneurs. And while marijuana growing was and is officially illegal, the coding process acknowledges that the legitimacy of the increased law enforcement response to marijuana cultivation (as well as the very notion of treating it as a criminal activity) was a contested issue in the San Francisco Bay Area and Northern California during the time period of this study (Raphael, 1985; also see qualitative findings here). In short, the moral high ground on the issue had to be earned and was socially constructed by various claims makers, and the news media was one of the forums for this "moral debate." Thus, the author attempted to see how the overall tone and theme of the articles depicted the moral legitimacy of marijuana cultivation. If the tone and theme of the article seemed to depict marijuana growers as morally wrong, irrational, or corrupt (in an unsympathetic light), it was coded as negative; if it depicted growers in a sympathetic fashion, it was coded as positive. Finally if the article seemed to be devoid of moral judgment or the moral themes were more or less balanced, it was coded as neutral. Following the principles of ethnographic content analysis mentioned above (Jerrigan and Dorfman, 1996), the articles were read a fourth time to analyze them for broader themes pertaining to the portrayal of marijuana farmers. It is also hoped that the multiple readings allowed themes to emerge that would not have been apparent from a single reading.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Judging by the number of articles listed in the *Annual Index to the San Francisco Chronicle*, it is clear that marijuana's prominence as a news subject peaked in the mid 1980's and dropped very sharply after 1988. (see Table 1 and Figure 1) Although the popularity of marijuana as news rose and fell earlier than other substances (notably cocaine and crack), this pattern of a quick rise in media coverage in the mid 1980's is indicative of the general trend of media attention given to illicit drugs during the time period under study⁶ (Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996).

Although they drop off heavily in 1994 and 1995, as a percentage of the total number of marijuana stories, reports specifically mentioning marijuana growers remained relatively consistent throughout the years under study; on average roughly one quarter of all marijuana stories mentioned growers in some fashion, as indicated in Table 2. In terms of the articles about marijuana, it appears the *Chronicle* devoted a considerable amount of attention to marijuana growers.

Table 2: Percent of Marijuana Stories Mentioning Growers in *S.F. Chronicle* 1982 -1995

Year	Total Number of Marijuana Stories	Growers Actually Mentioned	% of total
1982	48	13	27%
1983	44	6	14%
1984	46	16	35%
1985	81	17	21%
1986	53	10	19%
1987	41	7	17%
1988	30	15	50%
1989	18	5	28%
1990	14	8	57%
1991	8	2	25%
1992	11	3	27%
1993	16	3	19%
1994	11	1	9%
1995	18	2	11%
totals	439	108	
		mean	26%
		mode	27%
		median	23%
		skewness	1.214314
		kurtosis	1.131578

The Framing of the Stories

The stories characterizing marijuana growers were more likely to be framed episodically than thematically. There were a few years when the coverage was more or less balanced and one that was tipped slightly in the other direction; however, on average about three quarters of all stories were framed episodically. (see Table 3) This finding is consistent with the discoveries of Iyengar (1991) and Jernigan and Dorfman (1996). The vast majority of the episodic stories were related to coverage of the law enforcement activities of the "War on Drugs," such as eradication efforts, busts of growers, and violent incidents somehow connected to marijuana growing.

Table 3: Thematic Classification of Stories
Characterizing Growers in *S.F. Chronicle* 1982-1995 as
a Percentage of the Total Number of Stories for the
Year

	Growers Actually Mentioned	Episodic Framing	%	Thematic Framing	%
1982	13	11	85%	2	15%
1983	6	5	83%	1	17%
1984	16	10	63%	6	38%
1985	17	7	41%	10	59%
1986	10	9	90%	1	10%
1987	7	5	71%	2	29%
1988	15	8	53%	7	47%
1989	5	4	80%	1	20%
1990	8	5	63%	3	38%
1991	2	1	50%	1	50%
1992	3	3	100%	0	0%
1993	3	2	67%	1	33%
1994	1	1	100%	0	0%
1995	2	2	100%	0	0%
totals	108	73		35	
			75%	mean	25%
			76%	median	24%
			100%	mode	0%
			-0.1523	skewness	0.1523
			-1.1128	kurtosis	-1.1128

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 as a result of rounding.

Most of the thematic stories were written by columnists or were feature articles that provided a more in-depth look at the ways in which the fight against marijuana planting affected the lives of the residents and law enforcement officers of the Emerald Triangle.

The *Chronicle* tended to characterize marijuana growers in a negative or unsympathetic fashion. On average, growers were less likely to be portrayed positively (mean = 13% of all stories) or neutrally (mean = 18%) and most likely to be portrayed negatively (mean = 69%). (see Table 4)

For the time period under study, there was a strong relationship between the framing of a story and the manner in which marijuana growers were characterized. Articles with an episodic framing were far more likely to characterize growers negatively than thematic stories. Thematic framings promoted a far more balanced picture of marijuana farmers, with growers having a roughly equal chance of being portrayed in each of the three ways. Although the Chi Square test, shown in Table 5, cannot provide statistical evidence for the above statements, it does indicate that it is very unlikely that the two

variables have an independent relationship.

Table 4: Characterizations of Marijuana Growers in *S.F. Chronicle* 1982-1995 as a Percentage of the Total Number of Grower Related Stories for the Year

	Growers Mentioned	Positive %	Negative %	Neutral %			
1982	13	4	31%	7	54%	2	15%
1983	6	0	0%	4	67%	2	33%
1984	16	3	19%	12	75%	1	6%
1985	17	5	29%	8	47%	4	24%
1986	10	1	10%	8	80%	1	10%
1987	7	1	14%	5	71%	1	14%
1988	15	0	0%	11	73%	4	27%
1989	5	0	0%	4	80%	1	20%
1990	8	2	25%	4	50%	2	25%
1991	2	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%
1992	3	0	0%	3	100%	0	0%
1993	3	0	0%	2	67%	1	33%
1994	1	0	0%	1	100%	0	0%
1995	2	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%
totals	108	17	71	20			
		mean	13%		69%		18%
		median	5%		69%		18%
		mode	0%		50%		0%
		skewness	1.1		0.487		0.5
		kurtosis	0.5		-0.567		0

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 as a result of rounding.

Table 5: Chi Square Contingency Table for Framing of Story by Portrayal of Growers

value (expected value)	PORTRAY			
	negative	neutral	positive	row totals
FRAMING				
episodic	59 (48.6)	10 (13.2)	6 (13.2)	75
thematic	11 (21.4)	9 (5.8)	13 (5.8)	33
column totals	70	19	19	108

Pearson Chi Square = 22.636 (df=2) p<.001

Themes from the coverage

Violent Marijuana Growers. The dominant theme that surrounded marijuana growers was the image of the violent, anti-social criminal who was willing to protect his illegal profits with extreme measures.⁷ Growers were characterized as greedy, fringe-element desperadoes who guarded their plants with automatic weapons and Vietnam-era booby traps. The California Department of Fish and Game issued a pamphlet warning those who frequent remote areas in Northern California:

The seven-page, green and white pamphlet put Mendocino and Humboldt counties at the top of a list of 10 'high risk areas' in Northern California. Then the pamphlet warned backwoods enthusiasts to 'take precautions' against miniature minefields and gun traps. 'Watch for trip wires along trails or anything else that looks out of place,' it said. 'bear traps, dead-falls, and snares are sometimes found along trails leading to a garden. Fishhooks (are) sometimes strung on fishing line at eye level across trails' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 3, 1986: 4).

A federal official, the director of the Bureau of Land Management, characterized the interactions of his employees and growers on federal land:

Employees have not only been threatened with rifles, but have actually been shot at. In addition, booby traps constructed with pipe bombs, hand grenades, land mines, shotguns, and punji sticks have been discovered, as have other traps such as fishhooks at eye level (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 1, 1982: 1).

Growers were accused of usurping parts of the backcountry, making them unsafe for ranchers, government workers, hikers, and hunters. Speaking to the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors, the commander of CAMP was quoted by the *Chronicle*: "'Certain parts of this county have been taken over' by marijuana growers making it unsafe for hikers to go in the woods. 'An unwritten goal of our program is to recapture territory for the United States'" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 10, 1984: 3).

In essence marijuana growers were accused of creating an *increasingly* lawless and chaotic environment. Stories about grower intimidation, beatings, shootings, and even murder were run by the *Chronicle*. This report ran in 1984:

Mendocino County may declare a state of local emergency because of its problems with marijuana growers. The county Board of Supervisors formed a committee yesterday to look into the possibility of the emergency declaration, which normally only applies to floods, fires, or civil disturbances...The county has been plagued recently with harvest season violence, including one killing, two other shootings and a beating in the past three weeks. Supervisor Dan Hamburg has called violent pot farmers "gangsters" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 10, 1984: 3).

News reports characterizing marijuana growers tended to portray them as big commercial types that were more like gangsters and terrorists than business owners or the more peaceful "mom and pop" growers. A *Chronicle* excerpt:

"Greed begets violence, and people are getting greedy," said Charlie Bone, a Mendocino County sheriff's deputy assigned to narcotics investigation. He concedes that he's very nervous about entering outlaw country. The increasing violence is scaring off many of the old "mom and pop" growers, the hippie refugees from San Francisco who supported their families with their small plots (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 14, 1984: 1).

A sportsman who formed a group to rid growers from public lands:

"There's a lot of money and a lot of fear going around," he said. "We're not talking about hippies growing a few plants. We're talking about big-time operators, hard-nosed syndicate types. They're ruining the land and harassing people" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 2, 1989: E2).

One report had growers siding with organized crime in an effort to intimidate ranchers whose land was being used without permission to grow marijuana (*San Francisco Chronicle* Nov. 27, 1984: 63).

Growers Producing Huge Amounts of Dangerously Potent Pot. Another theme in the coverage of growers was the idea that the farmers of this illegal weed were producing increasing amounts of dangerously potent marijuana. New strains of marijuana were characterized in testimony by one member of Congress as so "potent" as to be capable of creating "stupefying blasts of intoxication" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 20, 1983: 24). Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials claimed domestic production of this dangerous drug was "exploding" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 1, 1982: 1). The editors of the *San Francisco Chronicle* characterized growers as "engaged

profitably in a multi-billion dollar industry that supplies tons of the illicit and dangerous substance on unwary American users" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1984: B8). A considerable amount of the articles in the *Chronicle* were devoted to reporting the seizure and eradication triumphs of law enforcement officials. Statistics depicting the amounts of marijuana were often reported in tons and street values of the weed in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. This is consistent with Best (1989) who found that as a rule of thumb for effective claims making, bigger numbers are better than smaller numbers and big numbers provided by government officials or experts are best of all. Curiously, a White House official even reported a surge of marijuana production coupled with a decline of use (*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 20, 1983: 4). In essence growers were being accused of producing increasing amounts of a powerful and harmful drug while public demand was on the decline.

The "Mom and Pop" Marijuana Grower. Although it was decidedly a minority theme, the *Chronicle* did depict marijuana growers as "normal" people trying to make a living, rather than violent outlaws. Coverage sympathetic to the plight of marijuana farmers portrayed the growers as ordinary and hard-working people who were simply engaged in a rational economic endeavor. Instead of violent criminals or dead beats, they were characterized as self-employed respectable business owners. A marijuana advocacy group's annual report was quoted by the paper:

"Unemployed and underemployed people use marijuana profits to feed their families and keep their finances above water," the report said. "Farmers facing the loss of their farm and reading of the high value of marijuana are willing to risk growing a small number of plants in the hope of saving the family farm" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 11, 1986: 1).

The publisher of a small newspaper in Northern California stated:

Of course, there are some crazy growers who would shoot at planes. And it would be foolish to ignore that. On the other hand, the vast majority of people growing pot in the hills are peaceful families with children...Here we are in an era where a joint is no big deal and yet we have agents in the woods armed and camouflaged as if they were fighting in Vietnam. And yet there are thousands up here who used to be on welfare and now grow pot. They don't feel like criminals. They are producing what this country wants (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 7, 1982: B9).

A small store owner said, "I would say most of the growers are good people. They shop here, they raise families. It's not Mafia-type guys coming in here to make a killing" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 17, 1984: 1). Images such as these equate the marijuana growers' business as rational and morally respectable in classical American terms. A quote from a marijuana wholesaler:

Marijuana is the only agricultural commodity in the country produced and sold in a truly free market. There are no government regulations, taxes, import quotas, subsidies. We're actually doing what they tried to teach us in college about free enterprise (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 17, 1984: 1)

The following depicts marijuana growers as conscientious members of the community:

They are active in environmental and alternative energy groups and their money has helped get several politicians elected. Without marijuana, a little town like Max's would probably decompose and blow into the ocean. It isn't exactly thriving as it is. The discount food store went belly up. So did the pharmacy and the stationary shop. One of the place's two doctors bailed out this year. And winter storm wiped out the wharf. The school auditorium was condemned. It is common knowledge that grower generosity helped keep the senior citizen center open and the health food store alive (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 17, 1984: 1).

The last image provides a modern day fable that stands in opposition to the dominant law enforcement depiction of the violent, greedy, anti-social grower; marijuana farmers are portrayed as the saviors of a destitute community and symbolic protectors of the old and feeble.

Discussion

The role of the news media in the definition of drugs as a social problem has been well documented (Becker, 1963; Brownstein, 1991; Gitlin, 1989; Himmelstein, 1983; Jerrigan and Dorfman, 1996; Morgan, 1978; Morgan, Wallack and Buchanan, 1988; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Reinerman and Levine, 1989 and 1997; Sharp 1992). This paper analyzed the depictions of marijuana growers by the largest major daily newspaper in the metropolitan area closest to the center of marijuana production in Northern California from the inception of a federal program to combat marijuana cultivation to the present. This paper rests on the premise that the image of marijuana became *more* deviant during the 1980's. The goal of this project

was to investigate how the image of marijuana growers manufactured and portrayed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* may have contributed to that social process in Northern California. Clearly, any generalizations to the overall media image of marijuana growers in the Bay Area from the present study are not possible. The inferential power of these data is *significantly limited* by the fact that the information comes from a single newspaper.⁸

While the coverage of marijuana growers was substantial in terms of the total amount of marijuana stories, the image of pot farmers was decidedly negative. This negative slant seems to be driven by the fact that the majority of stories were framed episodically -- episodic framings were much more likely to characterize growers negatively than their counterparts. The dominant themes that emerged from the coverage of marijuana farmers in the *Chronicle* are of greedy, violent, anti-social criminals who are producing enormous amounts of a dangerous psycho-active substance; images of the growers as reasonable, peaceful persons engaged in a rational moral and/or economic endeavor were clearly in the minority.

As a popular news event, the media coverage of illicit drugs was greatest during the mid 1980's and virtually disappeared after 1992 (Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Orcutt and Turner, 1993; Jernigan and Dorfman, 1996). The frenzy of coverage is understandable in light of Sharp's⁹ (1992) findings: two presidents declared a national "War on Drugs" at two separate times during the decade; President Reagan did so in 1986 and President Bush revived his predecessor's battle cry in 1989. However, academic research concerning the media treatment of the "drug crisis" or "War on Drugs" of the 1980's centers on cocaine, crack, or illicit drugs in general. Judging by the coverage in the largest newspaper in the Bay Area, it appears that marijuana's popularity as news followed the general pattern of other illicit drugs. However, marijuana differs from other substances in that its notoriety crested a bit earlier in the decade. In this sense, the marijuana drug scare (Morgan, Wallack, and Buchanan, 1988) that occurred in the early 1980's can be considered as the first "battle" of the War on Drugs.

Over the period of study episodic stories about marijuana growers outnumbered thematic stories by a factor of about two to one. This finding is consistent with other research in the area (Jerrigan and Dorfman, 1996; Iyengar, 1991) and provides further evidence that the media tends to cover crime-related stories in an episodic fashion. Furthermore, if Iyengar's (1991) findings regarding the relationship between type of framing and assignment of responsibility for the social problem are applicable to the print news media, the general reporting in the *Chronicle* certainly depicted marijuana growers as irresponsible and immoral deviants. However, one should not automatically view media workers in the

same manner. A possible explanation for the present discoveries could be due to the economic factors related to the production of news. Clearly, it is cheaper, more efficient, and simpler for news organizations to cover episodic events (which often only require running a story off the AP or UPI line or sending a reporter to a news conference staged by law enforcement agencies) than spend the time and resources on in-depth feature stories which tend to be thematic in nature. Of course, another possible explanation for this result is that the framings of the stories were not categorized correctly in this research. Assuming that there was no systematic bias in the researcher's judgment, the economic constraints of the news business are considered to be the most salient explanation for this finding.

While it is noteworthy that the vast majority of stories depicted growers in a negative fashion, perhaps the most interesting qualitative finding of the present study is the relationship between the framing of a story and the manner in which marijuana growers were portrayed. Episodic framings were much more likely to portray growers in a negative and immoral fashion than their counterparts. Thematic stories presented a much more balanced picture of marijuana farmers. Given that episodic framings outnumbered thematic framings by a factor of two to one and that there was a relationship between the framing of the story and its moral portrayal of marijuana growers, this provides some support for Iyengar's assertion that, due to their reliance on episodic framings, media stories about crime tend to assign individual blame for criminal behavior. However there are at least three other alternative explanations. First, journalists are likely to rely heavily on law enforcement officials for information on crime for very logical reasons. As mentioned above, the production of news exists in a competitive industry and law enforcement officials are not only very credible sources who provide "official information," but they are quickly and easily accessible (i.e. "efficient") as well. It is logical to assume that law enforcement officials would portray marijuana growers (who are after all criminals) in a negative fashion. Secondly, this finding could be attributed to an editorial bias on the part of the individual publication. In the Bay Area, the *San Francisco Chronicle* is popularly considered to have a conservative editorial inclination and this could have influenced the way in which the newspaper covered the issue. Clearly, a project that investigated the media coverage of marijuana growers using a wider range of news publications could have avoided this shortcoming. Lastly, these findings could have been systematically influenced by the subjective manner in which these important variables were coded by the researcher. However, if this finding that media coverage tends to depict crime as a function of individual moral weakness is considered valid, it should be disturbing for criminologists and other social scientists who

desire more complicated public discourse on the causes and nature of criminal behavior.

Conclusion

It appears that the reliance upon episodic framings predisposes the print news media to characterize the criminal behaviors of drug offenders as illogical, immoral, and perhaps pathological. Following Iyengar's results regarding assignment of responsibility, readers of the *Chronicle* would have been more likely to view marijuana growers as pathological, immoral criminals rather than rational economic actors. The "real" truth about these drug offenders is not the issue; rather, the concern is the way in which our news media relies upon a limited explanation of deviance and crime. The negative slant of the episodic stories is indeed unsettling for one who desires objective news, but it conforms nicely to the conservative criminal justice agenda that has been championed over the past twenty years. As a nation we are currently reliant on a punishment-oriented approach toward drugs which is predicated on the idea that all those associated with illicit drugs -- users, producers, or dealers -- are unbalanced, irrational, and immoral deviants. Alternative explanations for such behaviors, especially those which deem them rational and understandable in light of social conditions, are incompatible with present political reasoning and policy and are largely absent from public discourse.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The "Emerald Triangle" refers to three California counties (Humboldt, Trinity, and Mendocino) which attracted the initial state and federal marijuana eradication efforts in the state. Eradication activities expanded to other areas but the term stuck as a quick way to refer to the marijuana growing regions of Northern California.
- ² The flowering tops of the marijuana plant -- "buds" in marijuana argot -- are the most potent and thus the part of the plant most prized by consumers.
- ³ According to its circulation manager, the *Chronicle* has been the most widely read paper in the Bay Area since the 1960's. Since 1982, the *Chronicle's* circulation has hovered around 500,000; its closest competitor, the *San Jose Mercury News* has a circulation of approximately 300,000. The other papers in the region have circulations well under 200,000 (Hyams, 1996).
- ⁴ Only one of the 108 articles analyzed mentioned marijuana growers outside of Northern California.
- ⁵ Obviously, for most of the years, there were many articles that appeared to be growing related but did not specifically mention growers. For example, in 1988 there were 30 total articles listed under the heading "marijuana;" 17 of these appeared to be growing related and were read, but only 15 of the 17 actually mentioned marijuana growers. Only these 15 articles are included in the analysis for that year. Therefore the middle and far right columns should not be totaled.
- ⁶ The years 1986 and 1988 were national election years and, as Morgan, Wallack, and Buchanan (1990) note, drug wars or drug scares always include an increase in media coverage and often occur around election times.
- ⁷ Almost without exception, the marijuana growers depicted in the *Chronicle* were male.
- ⁸ This analysis was limited to the single source due to geography and resources available at the University of Hawaii library. Had other news publications in the Bay Area been available, they would have been included in the data. The reader is asked to keep this limitation in mind.
- ⁹ Sharp demonstrates how the President's access to the media greatly affects public agenda setting with regards to drugs and policy.