

PLAYING THE GAME: MARIJUANA GROWING IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Playing the Game: Marijuana Growing in a Rural Community

Karen August

This study is an in depth examination of marijuana growers within a rural community context drawing on interviews designed to chronicle the life experiences of marijuana growers and their connections to the broader community. Using grounded theory analysis the study explores patterns and trends in the growing community by examining the practices enacted by growers in their daily lives. Multiple dimensions are explored highlighting divisions of labor, gender, social networking, and elements of power and class. The study aims to provide a rich and highly textured portrait of various individuals and their working crews as they operate within a legally ambiguous economy. Though the federal government continues to judge marijuana cultivation and distribution to be illegal, the marijuana industry thrives in the progressively tolerant California state environment where it is emerging as a significant source of commerce.

Key Words: marijuana, grower, gender, cultivation

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## INTRODUCTION

Twilight was just turning to night. The evening was comfortably cool and the sound of laughter rose over the melody of guitars and a piano. The audience filled the small amphitheater to capacity and the audience spread out on lawn chairs and blankets. The concession window sold beer to a rather long line that extended past the porch where the window was centered. As the lights dimmed, I could not help but notice the diversity of the group that had come together to watch *Mary Jane: The Musical*. There were senior citizens who'd obviously been early arrivals – their lawn chairs were in the front rows. There were families with small children bundled against the evening chill as they sat on adult laps. There were thirty-something's sipping beer while they watched and laughed. Dreadlocked hippies were sprinkled throughout and tended a table on the sideline designated for marijuana activism.

Words rose above the laughter as the star danced lightly on her feet across the stage, "I'm going to the Emerald Ball, I'll be the envy of them all, very carefully cultivated, fertilized and mold-abated, high, high, higher, highest!!! 'Cause I'm the diva, your Queen Sativa, roll me, shred me..." sang Mary Jane, Queen of the Emerald Ball (Fields 2011).

The play described above, was written and performed during the summer of 2011 by a theater company deep in the Emerald Triangle of northern California, famous for locally grown high quality marijuana (Leeper 1990). This play underscores the subtle acceptance and tacit support from the local community when it comes to the marijuana

industry in the area. Marijuana holds a long and rich history in Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity Counties, the three counties comprising the Emerald Triangle in northern California (Marois & Palmeri 2011). The steep and rugged topography of the land lends itself to private forms of entrepreneurialism that can only flourish in an environment facilitated by the larger local community.

Local historians and authors time the emergence of marijuana growing in the Redwood Empire with the arrival of back-to-the-land movements in the late 1960's and 1970's (Anderson 1990; McCubbrey 2007; Raphael 1985). These counter culture groups discovered growing marijuana to be a reliable source of income in an economically depressed area where failing timber and fishing industries once flourished (Leeper 1990; Mallery 2011). At the same time the back-to-the landers were discovering the financial power of their crops, the federal government was solidifying the War on Drugs, extending and expanding the prohibition of marijuana spearheaded by Harry Anslinger and the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act (Grinspoon 1971; Katel 2009; Schlosser 1994). The 1970 Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act classified marijuana as a Schedule I substance having no medical value and a high propensity for abuse (Mallery 2011). Continuing the rebellious trail of their parents, the children of the counter culture generation and thousands of newcomers came to participate in an industry that is acknowledged to be the largest cash crop in California, exceeding even the wine grape industry (Baume 2011; Ma 2010; Mallery 2011; Noeding 2010; Stateman 2009).

The 1996 passage of Proposition 215, legalizing medical marijuana in California, has ramped up the number of marijuana growing operations in the state and created *de*

*facto* legalization (Mills 2011; Regan 2012; Weisheit R. 2011). There is a proliferation of indoor growing operations (otherwise known as “grows”) as well as larger outdoor operations that are often on public lands (Mallery 2011). National media attention has focused on the Emerald Triangle area as have many state media outlets. Most recently, Proposition 19 appeared on the November 2010 state election ballot and proposed legalizing recreational use of marijuana as well as small, individual grows. California is leading the nation by innovating medicinal properties and fostering more relaxed attitudes concerning recreational marijuana use (Khatapoush & Hallfors 2004). Since the 1996 passage of California’s Compassionate Use Act, 15 additional states and the District of Columbia have followed California’s lead and passed their own versions of medical marijuana legislation.

### **Significance of this Study**

“This is ground zero for marijuana. Nobody produces any better marijuana than we do right here.”

Special Agent Dan Offield, Drug Enforcement Administration  
(*Marijuana, Inc., Inside America's Pot Industry* 2009)

Although marijuana cultivation has a long history in northern California there has been little research conducted surrounding the subculture of marijuana growers. Since the 1996 passage of California’s Proposition 215, the number of marijuana growers has likely increased and accordingly this group represents a larger proportion of the population than ever before (Ma 2010). Recent national media attention in the form of news exposes such as *Marijuana Inc.*, and *Pot City, USA* have constructed the marijuana



industry in Mendocino and Humboldt Counties as a lucrative business opportunity that has exploded since emergence of the marijuana industry in 1996 (Marijuana, Inc., Inside America's Pot Industry 2009; Pot City, USA 2009). Localized print media sources provide another perspective, often focusing on the hazards in residential grow houses created by growers, yet neither source of information is representative of the growers themselves. Marijuana growers are community members and have created a significant economic niche for not only themselves but a host of peripheral industries marketing everything from growing supplies to clothing. As the size of the grower population and diversity of roles increases, it is essential that we better understand their experiences in order to critically examine assumptions around the deviance ascribed to this subculture. The counties and local governments have struggled since 1996 to implement medical marijuana guidelines and may face legalized recreational use in the future; knowledge about growers and their subculture will be invaluable as new legislation, ordinances and guidelines are developed. As the November 2010 election demonstrated with Proposition 19, legislation that would have legalized recreational use of marijuana, California is setting the stage for marijuana consumption and production to enter mainstream discussion, positioning growers to become legitimate operators.

My research seeks to understand the lived experiences of growers as they operate on the fringes of a mainstream community in a market that is illegal under federal law and legal under California law, thus creating an array of tensions for growers. Many growers fulfill a variety of roles in addition to pot farming. They are parents, grandparents, business owners, teachers, lawyers, retirees, health care workers, students,

volunteers and philanthropists as well as being marijuana growers. Occupying these many roles require the growers to develop a personal balancing act that is tailored to their circumstances. They must decide how to present themselves in different settings and develop a front that permits them to emphasize or deemphasize particular characteristics that could potentially identify them as growers and stigmatize their identities within their communities (Allan 2006).

One example that illustrates this conflict well is that of parents whose school age children are required to complete the DARE<sup>1</sup> program in schools while their parents are growing marijuana. These grower/parents must decide how best to ensure their children will not comply with requests made by DARE officers to report family members who use or are involved with drugs. The challenge for parents is to negate the DARE concept that they [the parents] need to be helped without their children exposing home circumstances that would incriminate their families. In this case parents must create a front to address the issue with their children and a completely different front when dealing with the school officials.

Another example of such conflict can be found among retirees who grow and are primarily dependent upon their Social Security income. They are well aware they risk losing all federal benefits they may be receiving, such as Food Stamps or Section 8 housing, should they be arrested for cultivation. This group is torn between being criminalized for their growing activities and making ends meet on retirement incomes

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<sup>1</sup> Drug Abuse Resistance Education is an education program founded in 1983 and is part of the U.S. War on Drugs instructing school age children to recognize, resist and report drug abuse.

with increasingly reduced purchasing power. In some cases, growers must carefully decide in whom to confide, as their legitimate jobs in the community would be jeopardized if it became known they also grew marijuana. The balancing acts I have described require growers to manage their community image so as to avoid stigma that may accompany being known as a grower. This management strategy is tailored to each grower's unique set of circumstances and level of acceptable risk. My research aims to understand how growers maintain these balancing acts in their everyday lives.

I open this work with a review of the literature focused on marijuana growers. This will illustrate how little is known and expose significant gaps in the literature. The third chapter will explain the research methods I used to document my work and provide context to each of the three methods. My data analysis procedures are the focal point of chapter four and will explain my coding schemes. In chapter five I report my findings in discussion format. I finish with chapter six as an overall summary of my work and recommendations for further studies.

## **MARIJUANA AND MARIJUANA GROWERS IN THE LITERATURE**

There is a sizeable body of research around marijuana policy especially as it relates to the War on Drugs (Carter 2008; Goode 2004; Katel 2009; Khatapoush & Hallfors 2004; McCrystal & Winning 2009; McCubbrey 2007; Reinerman 2009; Schlosser 1994; Turnball 2009). At the core of this discussion are two extremes on a continuum ranging from “strict criminal punishment to outright legalization” (Goode 2004: 24). Judicial laws and guidelines around mandatory drug sentencing have been studied from various perspectives including the appropriateness of life imprisonment sentences to the various costs associated with long sentences (Schlosser 1994). The impact of marijuana eradication policy has been evaluated for its impact on specific communities, suggesting that community development may have been more effective in addressing the marijuana problem (McCubbrey 2007). Since the legalization of medical marijuana has been established in over one quarter of the states, debates rage as to whether this has become “back door legalization” (Katel 2009). Studies have been focused on the effects of decriminalization and have found some interesting features that accompany more tolerant marijuana laws. One of the most notable is where marijuana is available legally users are less likely to consume other drugs, indicating legal access effectively creates a market separation between marijuana and other drugs (Reinerman 2009). Another interesting study found that even though California legalized medical marijuana, use did not increase significantly but citizens were less likely to see marijuana as a dangerous drug (Khatapoush & Hallfors 2004). Two studies conducted in England

specifically looked at the impact of cannabis reclassification in 2004 from a Class B<sup>2</sup> substance to Class C and then the reclassification back to Class B (McCrystal & Winning 2009; Turnball 2009). An interesting study from Canada looks at the “superdeviant” status assigned all marijuana cultivators as one of the strategies to create a crisis around residential grow houses and justify more extreme forms of social control around marijuana (Carter 2008: 3). One more area that policy studies address frequently is the concept of harm reduction and its effectiveness when weighed against punitive sanctions (Hathaway & Erickson 2003). As of this writing, no consensus has been reached and the United States continues using punitive sanctions when dealing with drug offenders.

There is an equally substantial body of research pertaining to marijuana use (Borchers-Tempel & Kolte 2002; Brook, Richter, Whiteman, & Cohen 1999; Hammersley, Jenkins, & Reid 2001; Hathaway A. 2004; Hathaway A. D. 2004a; Reilly, Didcott, Swift, & Hall 1998; Van Ours & Williams 2007; Wells, Degenhardt, Bohnert, Anthony, & Scott 2009). Studies investigating marijuana consumption commonly look at long-term users and have found that over time consistent users moderate their consumption as their careers lengthen (Hathaway A. 2004). The relationship between marijuana use and marijuana prices has been explored, finding that low prices may lead to younger people using marijuana (Van Ours & Williams 2007). Others have looked at

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<sup>2</sup> Drug classification in the United Kingdom lists cannabis as a Class B substance along with amphetamines, methylamphetamine, barbiturates and codeine with maximum penalties of 5 years imprisonment for possession and life imprisonment for supply. Class C substances are temazepam, anabolic steroids, valium, ketamine, methylphenidate (Ritalin), gamma-hydroxy butyrate with maximum penalties of 2 years imprisonment for possession and 14 years imprisonment for supply. House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee. (2006). Drug classification: Making a hash of it? Fifth report of session 2005-6.

the contexts of consumption and found that marijuana use is often a part of everyday life and is an integral part of social interaction for long-term users (Reilly, Didcott, Swift, & Hall 1998). Marijuana use has also been linked to the social identity of users and suggestions have been made to extend the linkage further when developing social policies around marijuana (Hammersley, Jenkins, & Reid 2001). Comparison studies looking at the patterns of use in different areas have established user types and patterns of purchase (Borchers-Tempel & Kolte 2002). Still others have looked at adolescent use in relation to the assumption of adult roles, especially unconventional roles such as unemployment and having children out of wedlock (Brook, Richter, Whiteman, & Cohen 1999). Geographical clustering of marijuana use has been studied and found users are indeed clustered in neighborhoods (Wells, Degenhardt, Bohnert, Anthony, & Scott 2009). Of particular interest is a study that found that marijuana use has become so widespread any stigma once associated with its use may be dwindling or relegated to those users who fear arrest or being caught obtaining marijuana, indicating marijuana use may be becoming normalized (Hathaway A. D. 2004a). This may be in part due to the widespread recognition that the outrageous claims of danger around marijuana made in the Anslinger era have proved to be untrue (Anslinger 1937).

Marijuana production estimates and markets have likewise been well studied (Bouchard 2008; Hakkarainen, Kainulainen, & Perala 2008; Maddox & Williams 1998; Malm, Kinney, & Pollard 2008; Tremblay, Bouchard, & Petit 2009; Van Ours & Williams 2007). Accurate methods to give production estimates are needed since most estimates are commonly based on seizure data and are believed to be understated due to

errors around how seizures are measured. Bouchard illustrates this with his research where yield estimates by law enforcement range from 12.5 ounces to 37.5 ounces per marijuana plant. In another study, production was estimated in Finland based on self-reported user consumption over a period of one year (Hakkarainen, Kainulainen, & Perala 2008). One production and market study focused on the involvement of criminal organizations and determining the level of success through market penetration (Tremblay, Bouchard, & Petit 2009). Using this method, researchers determined the Hells Angels successfully gained control of the marijuana and cocaine markets in the Canadian province of Quebec using technology (hydroponic marijuana growing), expanding membership by starting new chapters and their violent reputation (Tremblay, Bouchard, & Petit 2009). One methodologically progressive study analyzed the relationship between marijuana growing operations, social contacts and home residence in an attempt to establish a model of crime prediction and could represent new trajectories in suppression (Malm, Kinney, & Pollard 2008). Researchers also addressed the cultivation rates as they relate to decriminalization and found that decriminalizing personal cultivation may reduce the black market volume around marijuana (Maddox & Williams 1998).

Since California legalized medical marijuana, there is an increasing research focus on the medical marijuana industry and its components (Beato 2007; Chapkis & Webb 2008; Cohen 2009; Grinspoon 1999; Lucas 2009; Ma 2010). Research has documented that the medical marijuana industry is much larger than just the dispensaries that sprang up after California voters approved the medical use of marijuana in 1996. In

addition to the dispensaries that sell marijuana to patients legally, there exists a sizeable “microeconomy” that encompasses physicians, grow supply stores, attorneys, chefs and consultants (Ma 2010:1). Others have researched the potential of marijuana as medicine from a scientific perspective (Grinspoon 1999). Research has also been done around the presumption of illicit intentions around the use of medical marijuana (Lucas 2009). Still other research has examined the conflict between political ideology opposed to medicinal use and the actual implementation of policy allowing medicinal use with a focus on whether policy should be driven by popular opinion or scientific evidence (Cohen 2009; Room, Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter 2010). There is a focus on how dispensaries navigate the ever-changing landscape of city and county ordinances that govern their operations and vary significantly throughout the state (Chapkis & Webb 2008). The findings show dispensaries strive to comply with local ordinances but remain in defiance of federal laws (Beato 2007).

There has, however, been scant scholarly attention paid to marijuana growers as a subculture. What is known about growers is largely based on those who have been caught or is derived from information associated with the criminal justice system, such as seizure records and incarceration data (Bouchard 2007; Shepard & Blackley 2007; Weisheit R. 1992). What is currently known about growers demands to be updated or is anecdotal evidence from those involved in the industry and underscores the significance of my research. The first research specific to growers was collected during the 1980’s in California and Illinois and later in Kentucky (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998; Katz & Whitaker 2001; Raphael 1985; Weisheit R. 1992). Peripheral data on growers, often



demographic in nature, can be extracted from some other studies but those are generally focused on separate dimensions, such as environmental impacts of outdoor growing, the carbon footprint of indoor growing, Mexican Cartel operations or the implications of marijuana gardens on public lands (Hamaji 2010; Mallery 2011; Mills 2011; Olsen 2011).

I continue this review with a brief history of marijuana. This historical account will provide a legal and cultural context in which the current status of marijuana will be better understood. I then review the typologies of growers (Weisheit, R. 1992) that were developed in prior research to provide a loosely structured and general description of growers. I will follow with what motivates them to risk their reputations and property for the sake of growing an illegal plant. Next I move to the communities where growers reside as the communities are an integral part of their success. The communities provide the foundation of silent approval necessary where unspoken, clandestine activities are prevalent over a period of years. I go on to look at gender in the drug world by examining what is known about female roles in marijuana production and the drug world. This will provide a general context for women in marijuana production. Finally, I give a short overview of the marijuana plant. This will give some insight to the growers' perspectives of the plant. I conclude this review with an overview of the sociological theories I used to provide the lenses of my analysis: deviance, stigma and feminist social theory.

## **Marijuana in History**

Although marijuana can be traced back to 10,000 B.C. on the island of Taiwan, the first hemp appeared as cloth and paper during the Chou Dynasty (1122-256 B.C.) in China (Weisheit R. 1992). There are indications the Chinese viewed marijuana as medicine as early as 2737 B.C. and it was recommended as medical treatments for rheumatism, pain and many other ailments (Weisheit R. 1992: 12). The Chinese were aware the plant had psychoactive properties as were those in India, where it can be traced to 2000 B.C. and has been described as the first marijuana culture (Weisheit R. 1992). The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission issued a report in 1894 arriving at the conclusion “that moderate use of these drugs is the rule, and that the excessive use is comparatively exceptional” (Zeese 1999: 339). The report went on to recommend that total prohibition of a cultivation, manufacture and sale of hemp drugs is “neither necessary, nor expedient in consideration of their ascertained effects...” (Zeese 1999: 339). Marijuana migrated to the remaining continents and it is believed recreational use arrived in the United States in the early 1900’s with Mexican laborers (Weisheit R. 1992). Once it arrived, marijuana was portrayed as the devil behind brutal murders, and linked primarily to jazz musicians of color and Mexican migrant workers and prohibition took the form in the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 (Sloman 1979). Graphic pictures of murder and brutality attributed to perpetrators high on marijuana, combined with propaganda campaigns claiming marijuana to be dangerous to the nation’s youth, targeted the American population, socialized to accept government information as both accurate and absolute (Room,

Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter 2010; Sloman 1979). Recreational use in the United States surged during the 1960's and 1970's and was part of the social rebellion of the hippie era despite its illegal status. The emergence of recreation use signified a shift in the social definitions of marijuana and where it was once viewed as killer weed was now blamed for amotivational syndrome (Himmelstein 1983). The 1970 Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act classified marijuana as a Schedule I substance having no medical value, a high propensity for abuse and fortified the prohibition stance taken by law enforcement (Grinspoon 1999; Mallery 2011). The designation of marijuana as a Schedule I substance placed it alongside heroin and LSD, where it remains today despite its widespread popularity and use (Zeese 1999). The most recent development was the approval of California's Proposition 215 in 1996 legalizing the medical use of marijuana for patients having a physician's recommendation (Proposition 215, 2010). Subsequently, 15 more states and the District of Columbia have passed similar legislation.

In addition to marijuana being used for its medicinal or psychoactive properties, the hemp form of marijuana arrived in the United States from England well before the Revolutionary War. It was the primary material used for ropes, fabrics, linen, canvas and paper from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 banned all uses of marijuana. State legislation commanded farmers to plant industrial hemp in Massachusetts in 1631 and in Connecticut in 1632 and in fact during shortages, non-compliant farmers could be jailed in Virginia (Herer 2007). So common was the use of industrial hemp, early drafts of the Declaration of Independence were printed on hemp

paper (Weisheit R. 1992: 11). Hemp production remains illegal; however, there are efforts to legalize industrial hemp production in the United States such as those of the Native American Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota (Finley 2003; Weisheit R. A. 2011).

### **Grower Typologies**

Marijuana growers have been classified in the research. They have been described as back-to-the-landers (Anderson M. S. 1990; McCubbrey 2007; Raphael 1985), hustlers (Weisheit R. A. 1991), pragmatists (Weisheit R. A. 1991), communal growers (Weisheit R. A. 1991), low-lives (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998), a new breed (McCubbrey 2007) and the businessman (Ma 2010). They primarily live in rural areas and are community oriented. New breed and businessman growers are entrepreneurs with savvy marijuana market skills. I begin with back-to-the-landers.

Early reports on marijuana growers of the Emerald Triangle from the 1980's depict many growers as social refugees of the 1960's and 70's who migrated from the chaos of social change dominating the country (Anderson M. S. 1990; McCubbrey 2007; Raphael 1985). The Emerald Triangle composed of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity Counties in Northern California provided a remote backcountry setting perfect for the alternative communities the newcomers were seeking (Anderson M. S. 1990; Leeper 1990). These migrants came with a distrust of law enforcement and authority in general. The country was deeply involved in the Viet Nam War and many had faced squads of police in riot gear during protest actions. The motivation for their exodus from urban

areas was based on their yearning for a stable, tranquil lifestyle that would ultimately develop into a strongly bonded community. Anderson relates the following from Jentri Anders, one of the early members of the Mateel community, “I certainly was hoping for a better life. I was hoping for a community that would try to find a better way to life” (1990: 69). Back-to-the-landers, as they were called, found themselves bound to the land on remote and rural land parcels struggling to succeed in subsistence lifestyles when they discovered marijuana growing could help provide necessities such as wood stoves, Christmas gifts or even vehicles. The opening of charter schools and community centers came from the efforts of early marijuana growers to create their own alternative community. Early marijuana growers in the Emerald Triangle created a cohesive sense of unity among members aligned in their traditional rural anarchy as the community navigated the entry of outsiders and the eradication efforts of C.A.M.P<sup>3</sup>. Raphael offers the following anecdote:

But even now, I think we all realize that since we’re outlaws, we still depend on our neighbors to protect us. We all know that if things were otherwise we could be turned in by any one of our neighbors. We do depend on our neighbors in a very real sense-maybenot hand-to-mouth, but hand-to-handcuff (1985: 149).

These early growers were homesteaders and developed deep connections to their land. There was a common theme of protecting “Mother Earth” and they believed peaceful, simplistic living would further that philosophy (Raphael 1985: 150). They leaned on each other through tough times and the discovery of marijuana as a cottage industry strengthened community ties. Their concern for community was not lost when

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<sup>3</sup> California’s Campaign Against Marijuana Planting is a multi-agency task force created in 1983 dedicated to the eradication of marijuana growing. <<http://www.chp.ca.gov/programs/camp.html>>

money began rolling in from the marijuana nor was the concern always visible as Anderson writes, “Sure you might winter in Cancun, but before you left you might make a generous donation to your local volunteer fire company or school or environmental group” (1990: 75). Parents sent their children to play at other homes when the harvest season would bring the plants home for trimming and in turn watch other children when their families were trimming. In the early days of C.A.M.P. operations families gathered together at pre-designated places to weather the siege and keep the children out of the fray. As the C.A.M.P. operations intensified, the community bonded even more, reporting low-flying helicopters and officers who conducted illegal raids. Unity coalesced into an outlaw community comprised of “a few scraggly growers on some scraggly hills pitted against the strongest government in the world” (Raphael 1985: 130). Family and community values were at the forefront of the outlaw communities as they played cat and mouse with government intruders.

The literature is not limited to the subsistence farmers Raphael describes but includes typologies developed from interviews with arrested and convicted growers in the Mid West during the 1980’s. Three typologies identified by Weisheit were hustlers, pragmatists and communal growers (1991). Hustlers are business oriented individuals seeking an entrepreneurial lifestyle wherein risk may or may not be part of the attraction (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 510). This group is likely to be just as successful in other business areas. Pragmatists seek not to become wealthy but to meet economic needs (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 511). These growers are not necessarily tolerant about drug use but see it as a way to compensate for lost or shrinking farm incomes. In contrast, communal growers

proved to be the largest group and grow as part of a lifestyle in which marijuana plays a big role (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 512). This typology resembles the back-to-the-landers Raphael (1985) and Anderson (1990) describe in that a harmonious community, family and environment are important elements that occupy a large part of daily life for these growers. Communal growers are described as ordinary individuals, independent and often interacting with other growers to share success strategies. The Mid West growers, once arrested for growing, expressed high levels of concern for their personal and family reputations in their home communities (Weisheit R. A. 1990). They were equally disturbed by damage done to the reputations of their communities once they were arrested and convicted for cultivation. In 2011 Weisheit expanded his typology descriptions to include newcomers to the industry adding Mexican and Asian drug trafficking organizations along with medical marijuana producers. These newcomers represented a break from earlier grower descriptions wherein all or most were white and United States citizens (Weisheit R. A. 2011). The medical marijuana producers have emerged in California since the legalization of medical marijuana. These include large scale growers who supply dispensaries and individuals with physician's recommendations who grow for personal consumption (Chapkis & Webb 2008). The Mexican and Asian drug trafficking operations are very different from each other. Mexican operations are running large scale outdoor operations, mostly in northern California, with easy access to public lands and a large immigrant population ready to work. The Asian groups are largely in the southern portion of California and operate large scale indoor grows. Their operations usually are in large houses, gutted to

accommodate hydroponic gardens and in upper-class suburban neighborhoods. Asian operations have also been found in Colorado, Ohio, Georgia and Texas (Weisheit R. A. 2011:151).

Studies in Kentucky have identified another typology, called “low-lives” in Appalachia (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 191). As experienced growers age out of the business or are incarcerated for their activities, outsiders, labeled low-lives by established growers, have begun to fill these voids. Where kinship ties and historical partnerships were necessary to enter the marijuana industry, outsiders or low-lives are increasingly “gaining influence” (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 191). The new participants are younger, more violent, less respected and if not outsiders, often have familial ties that occupy a lower status on the social hierarchy of the area. This group has brought strong cocaine ties to the industry and workers are increasingly requesting cocaine as payment for their labors (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 201). Low-lives do not receive the level of community support accorded to long established growers but command their respect through fear as the following quote demonstrates, “Clearly, rural residents (whether active participants or not) distrust low-lives and have significant fear of not only violent reprisals for small affronts, but also fear betrayals with the law” (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 202).

A more recent study looking at the impact of C.A.M.P. operations in rural northern California describes a “new breed of grower” (McCubrey 2007: 66). For these growers, marijuana is a high risk, big business operation. They are growing strictly to amass large amounts of cash for themselves and their workers. Their large scale outdoor



marijuana gardens are designed to deter thieves with booby traps and armed guards, although the booby traps are generally created for the deer and rodents who eat the tender marijuana leaves. Avoiding crop seizures by law enforcement is seen by these growers as an ever shifting game of strategy and interestingly, some members of this group are second generation growers, children of back-to-the-land migrants.

In contrast to the grower type described by McCubbrey (2007) are the well educated, clean cut growers who are unremarkable in their appearance and are as devoted to their vocation as the more aggressive group previously discussed (Ma 2010). This group of growers often holds a college degree and is dedicated to the connoisseur marijuana smoker. They are frequently connoisseurs themselves. These growers seek potent strains to grow organically for specific customers and desire quality over quantity. They often have previous employment histories in legitimate positions but prefer to be their own boss with flexible schedules allowing them to maintain a relaxed lifestyle.

### **Why They Grow**

It is easy to assume marijuana growers are strictly motivated by the immense profits that a series of successful crops may fetch. It may also be thought growers are marijuana consumers themselves and wish to grow their own to avoid paying market prices. To the contrary, the literature identifies additional reasons growers risk their reputations, property and even freedom to grow marijuana.

In Kentucky and other areas of Appalachia, it is thought that growing marijuana evolved as a natural progression from moonshining (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998; Katz &

Whitaker 2001). In some ways, it has filled the gap left by the demise of prohibition and the current level of success growing marijuana can be attributed to techniques learned from the moonshining era, such as detection avoidance strategies (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 189; Katz & Whitaker 2001: 300).<sup>4</sup> They are experienced in discouraging outside interests and operating within underground economies. Appalachian growers are described as responding to the economic conditions of poverty and exploitation often found in coal mining communities. These are primarily coal communities where workers face ineffective government regulations around safety and their environment. Residents are often the victims of environmental poisoning resulting from destructive mining activities and there is a high rate of Black Lung disease among the miners (Katz & Whitaker 2001: 297). Researchers have characterized these growers as committing crimes of resistance and accommodation against those perpetrating the exploitation of their labor and environment (Katz & Whitaker 2001). Appalachian growers have been described as shifting their practices with the influx of outsiders and the emergence of cocaine as a preferred form of payment in the underground markets (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998). These changes have impacted the community drawing an undesirable criminal element to growers that were previously not involved with any other drugs (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998: 204).

While many Appalachia marijuana growers are motivated to grow purely for cash (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998; Katz & Whitaker 2001), Weisheit found that marijuana

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<sup>4</sup> In 1996 Kentucky ranked third in the United States behind first ranked California and second ranked Tennessee for the amount of marijuana produced by the state and was valued at over \$1 billion. <<http://www.drugscience.org/Archive/bcr2/domstprod.html>>

growers enter the business for several other reasons (1991). He identified three types of motivations for growing: intrinsic, spiritual and social. Weisheit found that many growers obtain pleasure from producing high quality, potent marijuana for personal use and to share with friends, a motivation he labeled intrinsic (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 517). Growers found to have intrinsic motivation experience joy in producing plant life – getting their hands in the dirt so to say. Spiritual motivation appears as a type of reverence towards the growing process itself and an appreciation for interacting with nature (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 515). On the other hand, social motivation can be seen in social circles when growers compare the potency and appearance of their crops amongst themselves (Weisheit R. A. 1991: 516). The social motivation creates acknowledgement of a grower's successful crop and a reputation is established for producing high quality marijuana. This could be further described as pleasant rivalry between growers.

### **Growing in Rural Communities**

Regardless of the research focus, the majority of academic work around marijuana growing speaks to the nature of the communities where growers live (Anderson M. S. 1990; Hafley & Tewksbury 1998; Katz & Whitaker 2001; McCubbrey 2007; Raphael 1985; Weisheit R. A. 1993; Weisheit R. A. 1998). The communities are often economically depressed following the collapse of resource intensive industries such as logging, mining or fishing (Katz & Whitaker 2001; Leeper 1990). The collective populations are usually reeling from the loss of jobs, benefits and public services, making their populations more susceptible to illegal sources of income. They are closed

communities - meaning outsiders are viewed with hostility and suspicion. Government agencies and representatives are usually met with resentment in regions where personal property and individual rights are exercised with enthusiasm in the rebellious act of growing marijuana. Nearly all residents in the region quietly acknowledge the economic benefits are not limited to the growers but support local businesses as well. The underground economy is an unspoken but well protected secret in what has been called an outlaw community (McCubbrey 2007; Raphael 1985). Hafley and Tewksbury give this assessment, "Not only does marijuana provide a relatively stable and lucrative economic base, but the marijuana industry also enjoys rather widespread public support in many communities" (1998: 189). Furthermore, people linked by the marijuana industry are mutually supportive. Katz and Whitaker write, "This production is also often a community-supported event involving family members, neighbors and acquaintances, leading to the production of the next generation of marijuana growers" (2001: 300).

In Northern California, these communities faced dilemmas that accompany the illicit marijuana economy. Local residents who were not part of the marijuana culture experienced a boost in their own incomes as a result of the industry's success and the underground economy began to assume an important role for the community which continues to this day (Raphael 1985: 87). Many changes in the community emerged as marijuana cultivation came to dominate much of the informal as well as the formal dimensions of North coast culture. Family farmers did not match the evil picture delivered by media and law enforcement ever present during the late summer and early

fall harvest season for marijuana that is grown outdoors. When growers in the area did get busted they were embraced by the community as the following excerpt illustrates, “People who got busted here received community support, not community censure. I was at choir practice one night when a couple of people walked in. They had gotten busted that day and everyone stood up and applauded them” (Anderson M. S. 1990: 103). Yet as early as 1985, the local business community recognized the volume of the underground marijuana economy and assessed how to manage the conflict of illegal proceeds and economic survival. Business owners expressed concern about the threat of Federal subpoenas of their accounting records in the Federal efforts to eradicate marijuana, bust growers and seize properties based on tax and income laws (Raphael 1985: 99). A high school principal spoke of the difficulty for students during harvest time, when tensions are high and the family income depends on getting the crop in the bag (Raphael 1985: 84). Of equal importance here is student stress when the family farm has been raided by CAMP or thieves and the income is never realized. Parents created a world of dual values when they are called to school regarding marijuana activities on campus, yet, involve the same children in the farming efforts. As one child said, “It didn’t bother me, ‘cause a lot of other kids had the same secret. It was a general secret. Everybody kind of knew already, but we weren’t supposed to talk about it” (Raphael 1985: 55). Still, for those willing to assume the risks, marijuana growing is seen as “... the perfect embodiment of a people’s capitalism” (Raphael 1985: 171).

## **Women in Drug Economies**

Traditionally women are seen in the ‘lesser’ roles of illicit drug economies, often the romantic partners of powerful males and at times victimized as a result of their position (Adler 1993; Anderson 2005; Denton & O'Malley 1999; Pettitway 1987; Weisheit 1991). These lesser roles may mean street level dealing as opposed to supplying the dealers on the streets, being the female companion of male dealers, or being an addict forced to sell drugs or themselves to support their habit. Even those participating in drug markets are seen as holding relatively low status positions and portrayed as incapable of fulfilling a male role. These portraits of women for the most part have been generated in more urban settings than those of rural marijuana producing communities. However, the women may share some of the characteristics seen among the women observed and interviewed for my research.

Generally speaking, inquiries around gender roles in drug economies have portrayed males as power and decision making centers and women in the industry as ineffective business operators, victims in their involvement or as powerless girlfriends enticed by lavish and hedonistic lifestyles of male operators (Adler 1993; Weisheit 1992).

Adler (1993) offers the following description of the women in her ethnographic work on upper level cocaine dealers in the coastal towns of Southern California:

The majority of women in Southwest County’s drug world took a more passive role, however. A crowd of dope chicks formed part of the entourage which surrounded big dealers and smugglers. Universally beautiful and sexily clad, they served as prestigious escorts, so that dealers could show them off to other members of the community (1993: 91).

Adler found the women were regarded as sex objects and were frequent participants in what she described as a “casual sex scene” and though many of the male dealers were married, engaging in extra-marital sex was common. Many of the women moved from one dealer to another when their relationships had lost their attraction.

Ralph Weisheit conducted a number of interviews around the same time frame with arrested growers in the Mid West and of 32 convicted growers, only two were females leaving him to conclude:

As might be expected, most marijuana growers were male. In only two cases were females the primary growers, although there were several cases in which females played secondary roles. In both cases, with females as the primary growers, the operations were well below average in size and complexity, and in both cases the growers were relative neophytes (1992: 71).

The common thread linking this literature is that women were not found to be in positions of authority. In other words, women growers were rare and their operations were not on the same scale or level of expertise of the male growers. The women in Adler’s work who were dealers were often the old ladies (wives or girlfriends) and occasionally took active dealing roles but for the most part remained in the background of their dealer mates. Adler found this was due largely to the social constraints created by male dealers. The men were reluctant to deal with women, feeling they did not have the personality for the business. Women did occasionally work as smugglers as well but for the most part, the women in Adler’s study were seen as “eye candy” for the men. In contrast, Raphael did note one woman in his work, a single mother who grew marijuana as supplemental income to support her family. In other instances, the women in Raphael’s work were involved romantically with male growers.

There is, however, a new body of emerging literature that focuses on the forms of power women do hold and generate when they participate in underground economies, especially those associated within frameworks of Prohibition (Anderson 2005; Denton & O'Malley 1999; Murphy 1994). Historically, moonshining has a special relationship with women as seen in a 1940 article appearing in Life magazine, featuring photographs of 18 arrested moonshiners, seven of whom were women, though none gained the notoriety or wealth attributed to the male gangsters of the Prohibition Era such as Al Capone (Life Magazine 1940). One notable exception is Bonnie Parker, although even she was not a solo operator but the partner of Clyde Barrow. Mary Murphy investigated such women moonshiners in the context of rural Montana and offers this interpretation of its female participants, "The independence of female bootleggers also challenged male notions of women's place" (1994: 186). It seems that moonshining became a means to greater financial stability and independence and at the same time reflected changes in social norms around public alcohol consumption and who was approved to participate in this American ritual. Empowerment appears to follow increased levels of economic independence along with increased self-esteem with the notion of providing steady provisions for one's family members. Murphy writes:

Women who made whiskey and those who patronized speakeasies were breaking both custom and the law. Their actions were deliberate and self-conscious. For working-class women, bootlegging was a logical extension of the many kinds of home work they had traditionally undertaken to supplement family income; admittedly, it carried some risks but presumably offered greater rewards (1994: 187).



Tammy Anderson brings yet another dimension to women's roles in a similar context of Prohibition and the ongoing War on Drugs (2005). Based on urban drug markets, women are seen as power holders in that they often provide the element of stable housing in personal and business relationships and with it, access to urban markets and networks of consumers. Anderson clearly conceptualizes the notions of empowerment and agency among women participants in drug markets and defines power concepts based on structural and relational approaches. Her assertion is that women hold relational forms of power that enable males to enact the structural power in urban drug markets, providing them with distinctly different types of power that work together to reproduce the market. Power is accorded women through the housing stability they bring to the context, access to networked urban markets, monthly purchasing power as drug consumers in conjunction with maintaining households, willingness to hold a legitimate form of employment as well as participate in drug markets and finally, they often subsidize dependent men. Two final notes regarding Anderson's work are first, where women do assume dealer roles, they are frequently the middle woman and are likely to employ more strategies to avoid detection and exercise a higher level of caution than their male counterparts (2005: 389).

### **Women Dealers**

Successful women dealers studied by Denton and O'Malley in Melbourne, Australia found the familial structure was replicated by these women in their business operations (1999). Family and close friends comprised circles of trust and were

depended upon in times of difficulty. Trust was critical in the buyers' perception of their dealers as well and the women under study all agreed that their reputations for fairness and quality enabled them to maintain regular customers and reliable supplies of heroin (Denton & O'Malley 1999: 521). It appears that women are more successfully able to transfer skills between their illegal and legal activities around income generation (Anderson 2005: 391).

Transferring relationship skills from family and friends to business practices allow the women to create a high level of trust and a corresponding low level of violence. Denton and O'Malley note, "... most of the dealings carried out by the Melbourne women never needed to resort to violence" (1999: 523). On rare occasions when women did feel the need for physical intervention, they often looked to criminal members of their families or trusted 'enforcers' who were paid to act on the dealer's behalf. The study found women dealers were surprisingly less concerned with the lower level and peripheral workers due to potentials of risk than male dealers. Males do play a role in women dealers' lives as Lisa Maher's (1997) three year study of women participants in a Brooklyn drug market revealed. She writes, that "to the extent that women do participate, such participation will be mediated by involvement with husbands and boyfriends," a description that is consistent with earlier narratives around the theme of powerlessness (1997: 88).

It is important to note that much drug research has an urban focus. The works of Anderson (1997) and Denton and O'Malley (1999) are based on studying urban drug markets. Given that marijuana growing is no more legal than other drug markets, it is

worthwhile to scrutinize the characteristics from urban markets for similarities that may exist in the more rural and suburban settings of marijuana growers. There is a deficit of information around all marijuana growers and in particular female growers. Women growers, as the literature demonstrates, have been deemed as too few or too inconsequential to demand study; thus, even basic conclusions about this group within the subculture warrant further investigation.

### **Growers and the Marijuana Plant**

Interestingly, the cannabis plant itself displays its sex and in a strange twist, it is the female of the species that is revered as goddess of the culture (Thomas 2002). This is ironic since only the female plant is cultivated for its psychoactive and medicinal properties yet the actual growing process and much of the marijuana market is dominated by males. It is somewhat similar to the male pimp's relationship to the prostitute in that a controlling, dominant man sells and collects the fees for services rendered by women. Only cannabis breeders keep male plants for the specific purpose of pollen collection; otherwise male plants are despised and put simply, are "killed" for if they are allowed to mature they would surely pollinate (seed) any nearby sensimilla (seedless) crops and substantially reduce the value (Sexing Plants 2010; The Seedbank Grow Guides Male Marijuana Plants 2010). Feminized marijuana seeds can be purchased and guarantee only female plants will be sprouted<sup>5</sup>. Preferred strains are coaxed to maximum size so growers can harvest clones from mother plants thereby creating a new crop with

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<sup>5</sup> Feminized seeds have been treated with a type of hormone causing the resulting plants to be 100% female. < <http://www.marijuanaseedbanks.com/> >

consistent yields and potency. Newly cut clones are often referred to as “the babies” and once they are planted in dirt or hydroponic pots they are frequently called “the girls” (August 2010). If a grower has mother plants with high quality, strong genetics, male plants would not be needed for many years. Some growers never learn to differentiate between the sexes, simply because there is never an opportunity. Clearly, the marijuana plant is celebrated in its female form.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance and Stigma**

Here, I will give an overview of the theories that provide the explanatory framework for my research. I used theories of deviance, stigma and feminist social theory to inform my analysis. Since marijuana growing can be considered a deviant act, I draw upon theoretical perspectives within the sociology of deviance. Two areas I address in my analysis are theories of motivation and learning since it is important to understand how marijuana growers begin growing and how their desire to grow is manifested in terms of achieving the goal of growing. Stigma is another suitable theoretical perspective since it can be the social response to deviance and illegal drugs have been stigmatized in American society for many years. Lastly, feminist social theory allows for evaluation of the female roles of women participants in my study and their access to power in a subculture dominated by men.

## Deviance

The sociology of deviance is frequently associated with research in criminology and focused on those who step outside of the legal norms. Research around deviancy has broadened the definition to include “any socially prescribed departure from ‘normality’, meaning culturally defined norms. The sociology of deviance has considered a great diversity of behavior from drug abuse (Hathaway A. D. 1997) to football hooliganism (Tsoukala 2008) to witchcraft (Inverarity 1987) as behavior which is labeled as deviant (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner 2006: 106). Since marijuana growing is not generally accepted behavior I found deviance to be an appropriate theoretical lens for my research. There are many established theories around deviance; the three I will highlight are social-strain, labeling, and learning.

Social-strain theory, introduced by Robert Merton (1938), offers a typology of deviant behavior that is based on two factors, the individual’s motivation and belief around obtaining goals (Clinard & Meier 2008). Merton describes five types:

- Conformity is defined as the acceptance of cultural goals and the culturally accepted means to obtain those goals
- Innovation is defined as the acceptance of the culturally defined goals but rejection of the acceptable means of obtaining such goals
- Ritualism is defined as the rejection of cultural goals but the acceptance of the culturally approved means for obtaining the goals
- Retreatism is defined as the rejection of both the culturally accepted goals and the means of achievement
- Rebellion is defined as rejection of culturally accepted goals and means but there is an effort to replace both with different goals and means

Strain theory is important as it characterizes deviance to be the result of social structures that encourage individuals to become deviant in their pursuit of commonly accepted societal goals (Clinard & Meier 2008: 71). An example of strain theory innovation can be seen in drug dealers whose illegal incomes provide the means to attain the socially approved goals such as vehicles, clothing, and other status symbols indicating success in the given society.

Labeling theory looks to the deviant individual and the social response to the deviant. One of the best known definitions of labeling comes from Becker's (1973: 9) definition of deviance, "consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (Clinard & Meier 2008: 87). For labeling to emerge as described in theory, an individual must be labeled as a deviant and accordingly adopt the label for themselves by acting out the expectations of that label (Clinard & Meier 2008: 88). Labeling may be the first step for individuals who become career deviants. Labeling is important to the concept of deviance in that there are dimensions of labeling related to power – who has the power to label individuals? Persons in positions of authority, society at large and the deviant individual's immediate social groups may all be labeling agents. Both those in positions of authority and society at large have generally been influenced by upper-middle class socialization and thus are more apt to label individuals from lower classes as deviant, since these classes tended to be targeted as owning most of the socially deviant behaviors (Clinard & Meier 2008: 88). Furthermore, it is those with the most social power who tend to define deviance based on

their own norms and values (Clinard & Meier 2008: 88). Labeling theory is significant as it can ascribe stereotypical assumptions to individuals who have been labeled as deviant. This can be seen in the assumption that motorcycle clubs are gangs and operate like the violent Hells Angels.

Another well known deviance theory is Sutherland's differential association theory (1924). Sutherland asserts that deviant behavior is learned, not innate, and is learned through associations with others (Clinard & Meier 2008: 100). These group associations are often with primary groups of socialization such as family or peer groups, and deviant behaviors most often emerge when conditions are more favorable for violating norms than conforming (Clinard & Meier 2008: 103). Sutherland's theory also claims that when the learning process occurs deviants learn how to commit the crime as well as the motivations and rationalizations that are part of successfully completing the deviant act (Clinard & Meier 2008: 100). Differential association theory further states that deviant acts are not limited to general needs and values as both can be satisfied through conventional or non-deviant means (Clinard & Meier 2008: 101). Learning theories of deviance are important as they can help explain the process of one becoming deviant. Differential association theory could be used as the lens to view second or third generation moonshiners who learned their trade from parents, grandparents, uncles or cousins.

## **Stigma**

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma has been defined as "a social attribute which is discrediting for an individual or group" and can be stigmas of the body (deformities), the character (delinquency), or of social collectives (race). Stigma theory attempts to explain the exclusion of stigmatized individuals from normal social life (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner 2006: 381). Goffman focused on the stigmatized individual and those with the power to define the stigma. There are two different types of stigmatized individuals, those who are discredited and those who are discreditable. Discredited individuals assume their differentness is known or immediately evident to others (Goffman 1963: 41). They must manage situations of interaction with normal people. Discreditable individuals assume their difference from others is unknown or not immediately evident (Goffman 1963: 42). This group must manage the information that would reveal their difference to others. Various strategies to cope with stigma have been identified and include removal in the case of physical blemishes or deformities, mastery of the stigma source, using the stigma for secondary gain, viewing it as a blessing, using it to reassess normals, avoiding contact with normals and seeking out sympathetic others (Pontell 1993: 79). Those who define the stigmas are referred to as "moral entrepreneurs" (Adler & Adler 2006: 135). An example of stigma can be seen with sex offenders who are not easily identifiable and can remain discreditable in comparison to sex offenders identified using Megan's Law when they become discredited.



## **Feminist Social Theory**

Feminist social theory attempts “to understand and explain the subordinate position of women in society by reference to gender differentiated and specifically in terms of a theory of patriarchy” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner 2006: 145). A feminist perspective asserts “that the relations between men and women in the spheres of work, politics, family and sex exhibit patterns of gender inequality” (Seidman 2008: 201). Feminists believe the gender differences between men and women are produced to sustain male dominance (Seidman 2008: 202). The United States has traditionally been a patriarchal society, meaning men occupy the positions of power and hence control social institutions and workplace environments. The social world is dominated by men; they are presidents, C.E.O.’s, politicians and legislators. They have a vested interest in maintaining their positions of power the results of which are women earn about 75% of what men do in the same job with the same education level (Allan 2006: 148). This has become a social system of oppression and control for women. For example, career paths are designed so that women wishing to have families suffer when it comes to promotion and compensation and consequently are not promoted and therefore the positions of power are rarely filled by women (Allan 2006: 155). These will be important points as I explore women participants in the marijuana industry in their various roles, the power or absence of power in those roles and how the structure of the grow culture impacts the women’s abilities to become marijuana growers as well as their level of achieved success.

## **METHODS**

This ethnography of a marijuana growing subculture in Northern California is based on data collected between 2010 and 2012. During this time period I participated in 12 months of field observation, conducted 12 primary and follow up interviews and collected existing documents such as job announcements that provided additional insights into the structure and culture of the industry. I interviewed nine members of the marijuana growing community: six men and three women. In the following sections I discuss my own biography and relationship to this community, details of my movement into systematic study of the subculture, particular approaches to my investigation, as well as challenges that I faced. I also discuss ethics and strategies that I used to protect my participants and myself.

### **Locating the Researcher in the Field**

When I first arrived in California from the East Coast of the United States, I was intrigued with the tolerant attitude so many Californians exhibited towards marijuana. My intrigue was further stimulated when I moved to the Northern part of the state where marijuana, once the unstated backbone of the economy, was estimated in December 2012 to represent a billion dollars annually in just one of the three Emerald Triangle counties (Budwig 2011). Twenty years of residency has not dulled my impression of the centrality of marijuana on the North Coast. Instead I became suspicious of why media representations of marijuana growers did not seem to correspond with the characteristics

of growers I had met over the years. My own role as a single mother, fully employed, with tendencies towards the hippie side of life, allowed me to circulate among a few folks that were longtime residents. Camping, attending music festivals and hanging out with Deadhead<sup>6</sup> friends was how I spent my leisure time. This gives a picture of the social circles where I mingled over my twenty-two years in the region. It was through these circles I met a few growers and over time many of their friends as well. Most were employed at least part-time in legitimate positions, had young children, strived for clean lifestyles and were mild environmentalists. The majority was secretive about their growing operations and took every precaution to maintain low profiles in their neighborhoods and community. None were wealthy. These folks did not match the portraits painted in the media that often center on large scale for profit grow operations involving individuals portrayed as having questionable ethics and little respect for the communities they inhabit. The following excerpts are closely representative of articles that stirred my interest:

“One parent said the pungent reek of growing marijuana emanating from the house could be smelled across Janes Road, in the school playground. Another parent said that on one occasion, the residents had been openly smoking marijuana on the front lawn during afternoon student pickup time, with pot smoke pelting students waiting for school buses across the street.” (Hoover 2009: 5).

“An anonymous tip led to the discovery of diesel spill on Hacker Creek, a tributary of southern Humboldt County’s Salmon Creek, and at least 17 landowners are being advised to stop taking water from the stream, officials said Friday” (Falkner 2008: A1).

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<sup>6</sup> The large contingent of travelling Grateful Dead fans are known as Deadheads.  
<<http://yas.sagepub.com/content/18/4/418.extract>

“In the residence, officers also reported finding 146 one-pound sealed bags of marijuana bud, worth an estimated \$292,000, and several pounds of hash. Three pistols, four rifles, a shotgun and \$8,000 in cash were also found at the scene, according to the release” (Greenon 2012: A6).

In contrast, most growers I knew maintained small scale operations and hoped to do nothing more than close the financial gap that stood between them and a slightly better standard of living. Growers I knew avoided living near schools and used technology to abate the smell of their crops. Perhaps because children were often present, the only weapons these folks usually owned were hunting rifles. Those who lived in the hills grew outdoors and had no need for generators unless they were supplementing their solar home sources.

When the opportunity arose as a graduate student to document the differing constructions of growers, I saw a chance to portray the growers I had come to know as community members. As luck would have it, I needed a room and a friend, who happened to be a medical marijuana grower, was in need of a roommate. Thus, I became fully immersed in the marijuana growing culture. An added dimension that makes this study unique is the contradictory legal status of the participants’ given professions as marijuana growers and the ever-changing attitude and level of enforcement by federal authorities.

This study was conceived during a time of federal tolerance immediately following the election of President Barack Obama. The Obama Administration directed federal law enforcement agencies in the Ogden Memo not to pursue medical marijuana dispensaries or patients as long as they were in compliance with state laws in those states

which had adopted medical marijuana laws (Ogden 2009). In February 2011, federal authorities reversed the policy adopted from the Ogden Memo and began raiding medical dispensaries and growers, emboldened by U.S. Attorney Melinda Haag's memo to the City of Oakland, California, clarifying the Department of Justice would "enforce the CSA [Controlled Substances Act] vigorously against individuals and organizations that participate in unlawful manufacturing and distribution activity involving marijuana, even if such activities are permitted under state law" (Haag 2011: 1).

### **The Research Setting**

The Emerald Triangle of marijuana production is estimated to be worth more than all of California's legal agricultural crops combined. The Emerald Triangle is known world-wide for high quality marijuana produced by local residents who grow annual outdoor crops and indoor crops year round. The area is geographically rugged, dotted with small towns whose importance faded with the logging and fishing industries decades ago. The population is sparsely distributed - all three counties combined have a population of just 236,000, with the largest town having barely 27,000 residents according to the 2010 census<sup>7</sup>. The rural town populations range from several hundred to a few thousand. The Pacific Coast line and two major highways, U.S. Route 101 and California State Route 299, divide the area from the rest of the state and create a secluded area said to lay 'Behind the Redwood Curtain.' Indeed, winding roads bring visitors through heavily forested mountains to the areas known for marijuana growing. While

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<sup>7</sup> United States 2010 Census. <<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/>>

much of the area's pot is grown outdoors, a considerable amount is grown indoors by smaller scale growers who convert garages, bedrooms, basements, sheds, or outbuildings into grow rooms. Grow supplies are readily accessible with nearly every small town having at least one hydroponic supplier; in some cases the number of grow stores exceeds that of supermarkets. In fact, there are 20 grow stores per 100,000 people in Humboldt County compared to 1.5 per 100,000 people in the San Francisco Bay Area (Meisel 2012). The local population is an eclectic combination of artists, ranchers, educators and hippies known to hold liberal views about marijuana use and cultivation. These conditions combined with consistently high rates of unemployment have created an underlying tacit approval and support for marijuana growers throughout the community. It is here in the three counties of the Emerald Triangle that I interviewed marijuana growers.

### **Researching Marijuana Growers**

Initially, I reacquainted myself with people I had met over the years who I knew to have strong ties to the growing community. I reestablished some friendships and was somewhat able to gauge the potential response from the growing community in regards to my research. One of my friends expressed an interest in helping me contact growers who might be willing to share their experiences with me. This proved to be the primary link for me to other growers. In addition, I also spoke with a few trusted colleagues at school about my work and I received two referrals in that way. My interviews were conducted with six men and three women ranging in age from early 20's to late 40's. Collectively,

they were well educated with four having college degrees and three more having at least some college. Only two of the nine were employed in legitimate positions and six of them relied on growing marijuana for at least 90% of their total incomes. The majority of growers were single; however, four of them supported children with marijuana money. One final characteristic worth mentioning are the medical recommendations that six of the growers hold to justify their activities.

For this study, I selected marijuana growers using the following criteria:

1. Informants had to be active growers at the time of interview or retired growers with at least five years in the industry.
2. Informants were included if they were part of a grower's labor pool and were able to provide some information about the growing operation they participated in through labor.

The objective of my research was to examine the daily lives of marijuana growers in a rural community context. My goal was to explore the complexities of how the growing subculture integrates into the larger mainstream community while also working in a federally enforced illegitimate economy and industry. I looked at individual characteristics and compiled them to create my own descriptions of growers. I relied on several sources of data for my research. First, I conducted open-ended in-depth interviews with marijuana growers in northern California's Emerald Triangle. My interview questions were designed to focus on multiple dimensions of the grower experience. I explored the following topical areas: business practices and strategies, personal history, social integration within the larger community, personal interactions and relations, gender distinctions of women who grow or who are part of the marijuana

industry, hierarchy among growers, integration and interactions with other members within the growing community. I also compiled field notes over a period of 18 months of observation at an active medical marijuana grow site. A third source of data included newspaper coverage that expands the understandings I derived from my interview analyses and supports themes around the growing community. Finally, I gathered job listing posts from Craig's List in order to explore the gendered nature of marijuana growing. I collected the postings for manicurists during the 2010 and 2011 marijuana harvest seasons to facilitate an examination of gender preferences in the division of labor seen with the trimming of harvested marijuana.

Using a mixed method approach for this study I felt would lend the greatest reliability and depth to the data I collected. While it was not always convenient or appropriate to ask questions during field work, conducting interviews allowed me to pursue avenues that had been opened but could not be travelled during field observations. An example can be seen in various strategies growers employ to avoid detection and often discuss when socializing; it would be a social blunder to seek explanation and logistics during the course of conversation since I was not a grower myself. However, I was able to ask about such strategies when conducting individual interviews, where all aspects of growing were on the table and it was up to the grower to elaborate about his/her particular practices or to decline discussing the topic. The postings from Craig's List permitted me to examine unobtrusively some of the gender dimensions I had observed when the topic of trimming was came up in my field research. Combining all



three types of data enabled me to paint a rich portrayal of the growers who were the focus of this study.

### **The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Growers**

My study was reviewed by university faculty in a Full Board Review process. The purpose of such reviews is to ensure that all parties involved in any study are fully protected from any possible harm as a result of the research project. In my particular case, the windows of liability were multiple and created a number of hurdles to overcome in order to satisfy the governing body that all parties to the interviews would be fully aware of risks and every possible measure taken to ensure confidentiality. Not only was there concern for the growers' confidentiality, but the university wished to reduce any potential criminal liability that could potentially arise from investigating a career that is federally illegal. For this reason I had to follow a special appeals process to obtain permission to record the interviews I planned and I developed a stringent protocol for encryption of the interviews, storage, transcription and finally destruction of all interview materials. These steps were in addition to discussions around my own safety since there is some degree of danger, appropriate or not, associated with marijuana growers.

The solution here was to create a departure and check in system that I utilized when interviewing growers with whom I was unfamiliar. I purposely avoided growers I knew to have reputations that made me uncomfortable such as those who carry guns or owned visibly aggressive dogs. Additionally, I was forced to face the delicate political position of my university. Given that my university is geographically centered near

ground zero of the medical marijuana movement in California, I suspected that there were concerns about how my research might influence the public image of the institution. I was well aware that the institution had historically tried to disavow (Goffman 1963) any stigmatizing associations with the local marijuana subculture. Such associations might also negatively impact student enrollment during a period of severe budget cuts. Finally, once the interviews began, I faced the dilemma of becoming knowledgeable of events and behaviors about which I was not comfortable knowing. I had no desire to gain knowledge of criminal activities and when I felt the conversation was taking that trajectory, I adopted the strategy of asking the grower to skip that story to protect both of us.

### **Interviewing Growers**

Many researchers conducting interviews rely on key informants or gatekeepers. These individuals are established in the population of study and friendly to the idea of assisting in that role. They hold the knowledge and the network connections to the data. I was not different in this respect. My roommate was my key informant, helping me select interview participants and advising me when someone I wished to interview may not be open or perhaps even hostile to the idea. He took me with him when he visited other growers and connected me with trimming jobs so I could gain entry to other grower circles. As I composed my interviewed guide I relied on his wisdom to eliminate any topics or questions that might create difficulty or arouse suspicion in my purpose. He helped me adopt the language of growers, explained any questions I asked in detail and

made sure I was informed of new information around growing. In other words, he made sure I appeared knowledgeable in the field.

For me, gaining entry to the grow culture was not as challenging as it was to actually complete interviews. Even small scale growers devote a great deal of time to producing their crops and just as in other forms of agriculture, the plants determine the work schedule. I found the grower population to be difficult to reach during the busy periods of planting and harvesting. While they were still friendly and approachable, they were not willing to sit down for several hours and chat with me. I achieved the greatest success by approaching growers when their crops required the least attention, during the vegetative stage of growth. This strategy came to me as a hint from my grower roommate whose advice I sought from time to time when I faced field challenges.

I chose to conduct in depth interviews at locations picked by the growers to facilitate the greatest comfort zone for conversation. In one case the interview was conducted in a coffee shop and another was conducted at a participant's legitimate work site. The remaining interviews were carried out in the growers' homes. At the suggestion of the university Institutional Review Board, in cases where I barely knew the grower, I arranged for a third party to know I was working in the field and would telephone by a designated hour to confirm my safe return.

During the interviews I encouraged the growers to speak at length regarding their work profession and any topics they felt to be related. At times, I shadowed participants during the course of work activities when requested to do so. Sometimes this shadowing meant I helped complete the chores, whether that was watering the plants, removing dead

leaves or mixing feed; I gained a lot of knowledge in this fashion. On occasion it meant riding along to the grow store for supplies or at times chatting while we trimmed freshly harvested marijuana. Some growers I simply watched as they went about their daily routines, with little conversation. When I did interviews, the average interview length was one and a half hours and longer if I requested a follow up interview after reviewing the transcripts. Follow up interviews averaged 30 to 45 minutes and I generally completed these through telephone conversations. Interviews were conducted using a digital voice recorder with enabled encryption software, downloaded to a USB memory device and stored for transcription. All interviews were transcribed as soon as possible following the interview process and the digital recording subsequently erased from the recording device. Audio transcripts were deleted from the transcription software immediately following the completed transcription process. Informants were identified from this point by code names as used in the transcripts.

I initially recruited growers through my personal acquaintances and used snowball sampling to increase the diversity of interviewed growers. I interviewed a total of nine growers for this research. Six men and three women growers, ranging in age from early 20's to late 40's, participated in at least one interview, with three being interviewed a second time. Seven of the nine growers had at least some college, with four having degrees. The remaining two participants, both in their early 20's, had not completed high school. Two of the nine were employed in legitimate positions and six of them relied on growing marijuana for at least 90% of their total incomes. The majority of growers were single. Four of them supported children and two were involved in romantic relationships.

## **Field Observation and Membership Roles**

As I indicated earlier, I had the good fortune to know a commercial medical grower well enough to accept an invitation to become a boarder in his home. This facilitated 12 continuous months of field observations where the grow operation was part of the residence. This grower had a well developed system that included mother plants to provide clones grown in a room designated for vegetative growth and a much larger area where plants were flowered under 8,000 watts of light until harvested. This indoor grow site was a hub of activity for the grower and his associates. It offered me a comfort zone I could not achieve in most growing operations since I am personally acquainted with this individual. His home was comfortable and easy to live in having all the appointments associated with a middle class lifestyle. The setting provided me with a number of potential interviewees involved at various stages of growing from the ground up.

Most observations were made while I was in the living room doing other school work, in the kitchen cooking or cleaning, or just passing through to the laundry area as the grower went about his daily life. The atmosphere was sociable and relaxed with most people seated, talking and smoking marijuana. Often the grower and his friends were occupied playing video games as they talked and smoked. Three dogs were a constant presence, considered to be family members and although not overly protective, were regarded as a layer of security. Growers are often reputed to own aggressive Pit Bulls for the single purpose of guarding crops and I have surmised the very presence of Pit Bulls is

seen as a deterrent to persons who may harbor nefarious intentions. I believe this grower relied heavily on the appearance of his Pit Bulls to deter would be thieves.

Occasionally we would go into the grow rooms to discuss specifics about the crop. At other times observations were made while working in the indoor flower room, the indoor vegetative room<sup>8</sup> or the outdoor greenhouse. Field observations permitted me to observe several individuals in their daily routines and document their work at balancing being a community member against being a pot farmer, how they parented simultaneously, how they worked their legitimate jobs at the same time, the networking between growers and the support gained when individuals were struggling in their efforts. I was also able to see the varying ranges of success with different growers as well as their internal dilemmas.

I believe I was given full access for a number of reasons. First, I was honest with the grower about my goals and purpose. He knew I wanted to document growers in their daily lives and is a strong outspoken supporter of medical marijuana. It may be that he interpreted my work as potentially part of a legitimating process to medical marijuana. I also worked very hard to learn the procedures and make myself useful and needed during his frequent absences. This meant working in the grow<sup>9</sup> and learning this grower's methods of feeding, cutting, cloning, and harvesting marijuana. My situation was very different than the social membership or courtesy roles described by Adler in her research

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<sup>8</sup> Indoor marijuana growers often use multiple rooms to produce their crops allowing them to have plants receiving up to 18 hours of light in the vegetative stage while simultaneously flowering plants with no more than 12 hours of light in another room. Consistently well cloned, planted, and flowered crops from strong genetics permit the grower to harvest as often as every 8 weeks under ideal conditions.

<sup>9</sup> Grow is the commonly used term for indoor marijuana gardens.

on cocaine dealers (1993: 18). I was a complete participant (Adler & Adler 1987) in the setting as I became heavily involved in the day to day grow operations and included in most conversations. I also loaned him my car, money and pledged discretion of personal issues such as romantic involvements. I had not thought I would have such a large role in the working crew or the social circle of his house; however, slowly but surely over the months this notion proved wrong. These agreements between the grower and me built a silent foundation of trust that continues even now. We remain good friends and I sought his advice and wisdom as questions arose while I completed this project. Visitors and other growers to the home were advised there was a study in progress at the discretion of the grower. At times the grower asked me to retreat from the research process or leave the premises. Over the course of many months, most individuals saw me to be a genuine researcher and student and seemed not to notice that I was collecting data. Additionally, because this grower had been busted recently, there was little secrecy around his operation therefore most people entering the premises knew 'he was known' to authorities. I feel that contributed to him perceiving my research as less risky for him than some of his recent experiences with law enforcement. There are other instances where researchers have given tacit support to their informants and in return are given access to the community chosen to study (Chapkis & Webb 2008). One study identified various forms of tacit support given by the researcher: fundraising activities, providing transportation, hauling trash, moving equipment and fixing cars (Chapkis & Webb 2008: 7).

On the other hand, his recent bust signaled a more precarious position for me as a researcher at this particular grow site. I found the year as a boarder extremely stressful. I constantly feared the reappearance of law enforcement and was well aware that should legal entanglements become reality, I had no legal support from my university. Early in the interview process I deleted two interviews from growers who were busted shortly after we had spoken. The two growers knew each other and both had rather large indoor grows in excess of 1,000 plants. Their arrests spooked me and I waited nearly four months before completing another interview. Patricia Adler shared a similar experience in her study of cocaine dealers in the late 1970's "We knew it was possible to get caught in a bust involving others, yet buying and selling was so pervasive that to leave every time it occurred would have been unnatural and suspicious" (1993: 24). There was also the element of "dirty knowledge" that is knowing of criminal or illegal activities that weighs on the mind of any researcher (Ferrell 1998: 24). Part of the fear I experienced stemmed from the ritual of smoking pot everytime a guest would arrive. Had I not participated in this ritual, I would have been excluded socially, just as excluding any visitor from the ritual would have been considered poor manners. At times this resulted in feelings of paranoia if I had welcomed too many people over too short a time period. In contrast to Adler's perception that marijuana use hindered the interview process (1993: 22), I found it to be a perfect way to ensure a relaxed atmosphere in which people tended to over respond to inquiry. Smoking marijuana is a social process for many and smoking with other people tends to strengthen social bonds. Lengthy conversations



debating every topic imaginable are not uncommon and a simple question may be answered in turn by everyone in the room.

While I was eager to be part of the grow scene where I lived, I felt it had to be well justified to offset the potential jeopardy that might arise from any number of sources. Not only was law enforcement a threat but there are always situations in underground markets where people become unhappy and feel the need to express their displeasure over wrongs, perceived or real. During one disagreement over a disputed debt, both parties involved threatened the use of guns as they attempted to negotiate a way to split the loss. I had no assurance they would not appear with guns as I knew they both owned weapons. Adler described similar uncertainty about the behavior of those she was studying, “They were also likely to behave erratically owing to the great risks they faced from the police and other dealers” (Adler 1993: 23). At this grow, unhappy individuals were rare but the occasional incident was always unpleasant and tense. On one occasion an individual had gotten clones from this grower and was not pleased with them. While he wasn’t aggressive, the atmosphere in the room was nerve wracking as they moved from recounting what each had done for the other in the past to the conversation that had taken place during the clone sale. It was finally settled with the grower replacing half of the clones free and the remainder at a lesser price than the originally agreed upon bargain.

I collected my field observations using a note taking process that fit my circumstances – frequently I was doing homework in the living room where people were hanging out. This ensured that I was always present with pen and paper in hand and able

to take notes innocuously. When that was not the case, any piece of paper was acceptable since I was able to take notes immediately as needed and deposit them in pockets, folders, books, purses or any other convenient location. I stored all notes in a locked box for later transcription to a field journal. On at least two occasions I was able to ask the grower to pause so I could note something important he had said during conversation. My notes included references to dates, parties involved/observed along with code names, notable actions or conversations organized chronologically. The notes were later tagged for topic using the same coding scheme assigned to interviews and subsequently organized by both date and topic. By using the same codes, interview data could be supported with field observations. My field journal helped me document the practices of grow operations situated in home environments. It allowed me to substantiate the commonality of practices among growers who collaborate with each other as well as those who grow without collaboration.

### **Growers and Trimmers Connect: Collection & Analysis of Work Announcements**

I manually reviewed all postings to the “Services Offered Farm & Garden” section of Craig’s List from September 27, 2010 through November 9, 2010 and September 27, 2011 through November 9, 2011. This section of the online site is a daily forum where growers and workers can connect for work purposes. My review resulted in a collected total of 125 announcements for the two years. The number of ads for persons seeking work (113) far outnumbered the number of ads placed by employers (12).

Harvest time is a grower's busiest period of the growing cycle. Outdoor crops must be harvested prior to the arrival of inclement weather. Growers strive to have the crop cut, dried and trimmed for sale as quickly as possible to reduce losses incurred from rain, mold, theft or seizure. Indoor growers are pressured to prepare their crops for market as well since accumulations of marijuana product invite theft and potential legal troubles. On occasions when their known labor pools are exhausted, growers may choose to consult Craig's List to hire trimmers. Conversely, trimmers post ads to find reliable work manicuring during the season. I created separate lists for the two different years by collecting all ads related to marijuana production and trim work. Initially I divided the postings into the following four simple categories: growers seeking trimmers, laborers seeking employment as trimmers, automated trimming services and relevant products. I further analyzed the language of the announcements using a gender lens: I was interested in the construction of gender in the industry and the evidence of gendered divisions of labor that I had observed in the field.

The Farm & Garden Services Offered section of Craig's List offered additional information about people who trim harvested marijuana. Once I collected the postings as described above, they were categorized into those seeking to employ trimmers or those seeking employment as trimmers. Two other categories of marijuana ads emerged and were categorized as automated trimming services and relevant products. I examined the ads focused on both dimensions of trimming employment and further categorized them as male, female or gender neutral. I then analyzed each group for gender characteristics, both obvious and latent. Examples I considered to be obvious gender characteristics are

seen in posts that request to hire female trimmers, trimmers who describe themselves as easy on the eyes, while more latent characteristics are assigned to descriptors such as good with the hands, fast and dexterous worker or able to move dirt and equipment. Assumptions defining these gender preferences come from my time in the field where I made multiple observations linking the physically demanding manual tasks to male laborers and the more delicate scissor work trimming marijuana buds to female workers. The number of posts for automated trimming services was also noted for both years. I believe this brief analysis lends support to the gender dimensions of marijuana growing that were first observed in field work and subsequently during interviews. For confidentiality purposes, I removed contact names and numbers from the compiled postings.

### **Analyzing the Data**

Once I transcribed the interviews I then used Atlas.ti to facilitate my analysis using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). To help me develop a coding scheme, I wrote memos during my analysis process that defined my codes and reminded me of potential links between codes. As concepts, relationships or processes became apparent I wrote more memos clarifying the links and relationships I would need to expound on in the writing process. My goal was to garner as rich a data collection as possible from my transcripts while looking for what seemed to be important to participants and looking for processes relating to particular codes. I wanted to fully understand what the grower was feeling and considering as he or she spoke so that I would be able to create a narrative

that accurately portrayed the growers. I also referenced my field notes in memos to create broader understandings of coding definitions and interpretations. My overall analytical strategy is consistent with a constructivist approach which “sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz 2006: 130).

Line by line open coding was utilized to identify emergent themes and subthemes. As advised by Charmaz, reflecting what the data illustrated was key to identifying primary themes (2006). Once primary themes were identified, a focused coding was employed to examine more deeply the primary codes and seek processes in interactions and practices. I used *in vivo* coding when I captured the respondent’s words as a code in order to convey “condensed meanings around general terms” and “reflect assumptions, actions, and imperatives that frame action” (Charmaz 2006: 56). The following select phrases and words are examples of *in vivo* coding as applied in this study:

- The phrase *the game* as defined by observations in the field, describes the whole process of growing and selling a marijuana crop. The game is a descriptive euphemism that accurately denotes the instability of marijuana production, wherein any event can occur and change one’s position in a matter of minutes, just as in any game of chance. This *in vivo* code was further assigned to the primary code family of grow culture.
- The phrase *square bear up*, meaning one changes their appearance to a more conservative display for the purpose of managing potential interaction with law enforcement. This code was accordingly assigned to the code family encompassing growing and linked to the related code risk management strategies.

As I transcribed the interviews, I reviewed them for new areas of exploration leading to incorporation in to future interviews. One example of such a reflexive adjustment in the interview process was my decision to conclude every interview by

asking the participant to retrospectively assess their lifetime grow experience and if they could make the decision a second time, would they have become involved in marijuana growing. This change was the direct result of a participant volunteering his regret at having become a grower and the misgivings around his decision, for instance not having an employment history or retirement fund. I arranged follow up interviews to clarify or elaborate on previous points and explore newly discovered themes.

## **GROWING AS A WAY OF LIFE**

Many themes surfaced during my interviews and field observations; however, I have chosen to focus on those that appeared most frequently. I begin with the subculture growers have created for themselves, describing their social lives and parenting. Learning how to grow and why they grow were equally important to understanding how and why these growers continue in careers that potentially jeopardize everything from their families to their property. I look at the networking between growers – how it occurs and what it does for them. I address risk management from the growers’ perspectives. I continue by looking at the gender dimension of growing and how the experiences of women differ from those of men. Community interactions and support were also frequent areas that emerged. Finally, I focus on the hierarchy in growing and the division around marijuana legalization. I move through the analysis from the ground up beginning with the growing subculture itself so the individual practices and characteristics of growers are seen in the same context from which I made my observations.

### **Growers as a Subculture**

My research was conducted in the Emerald Triangle, where marijuana is deeply embedded in the culture. There are plays about growing, an abundance of grow stores and a myriad of peripheral businesses dedicated to marijuana use or growing<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The Emerald Triangle is host to many indoor horticulture suppliers, paraphernalia shops, marijuana themed clothing boutiques and marijuana is the focus of numerous local entertainers.

The growers I observed and interviewed are part of this subculture and they are devoted to marijuana. They are heavy smokers, starting early in the day and lasting all day. Most of their conversations concern marijuana and reflect the huge role marijuana plays in their lives. Their social lives are intertwined with other growers and most do not typically associate with non-growers unless they have to as a result of being parents or working in legitimate employment. The larger scale growers don't have a lot of spare time for socializing. They spend their days travelling from one grow site to another performing the daily chores and the majority of their interactions are with other people deeply involved with marijuana. One grower described her social life to me:

“Everyone I associate with either grows or smokes heavily. So pot's just a big part of my life – not the main focus but a big part of it. I'm very aware I have that green smell that permeates everything. You know your clothes everything. I tried not to get involved in anything too straight but when you have kids it's a little bit different. Straight can't really be avoided.”

The growing subculture can be further defined by its unique language and while not every circle of growers uses the same terminology, some are common to all growers. Grow rooms are simply called *the grow* or *scene*, clones are referred to as *babies* or *girls* and harvesting a crop is known as *taking it down*. The entire growing process, from planting the crop through selling it, is referred to as *playing the game*. It was common to hear growers say “the game has changed” since Proposition 215 passed and so many newcomers have started growing. For example, some of the long time growers attribute the drop in prices to the influx of people who have come to the area to grow under the auspices of medical marijuana and have subsequently created a market glut. They are



pressed into growing more to make the same amount of money when marijuana prices drop.

Growers who are parents are ever vigilant that their children do not expose their activities to children of non-growing families. For the most part, grower parents associate with other grower parents and the children are wise to the situation from a very young age. The parents I interviewed and observed did not hide their activities from their children. On the contrary most parents were forthright with what they were doing, even teaching them techniques, yet all the while discouraging their children from using marijuana at early ages.

### **Becoming a Grower**

Learning to grow happens in several ways, but most often seems to be learned from family members who are growers or from established growers who decide to mentor new growers. One 21 year old grower who described himself as a seventh generation hemp farmer told me this:

“When I was like probably 12 I had just learned about germinating seeds and stuff through my mom. Just talking to my mom about my grandmom back in Indiana they grew corn and farmed hemp.”

“I learned from my mom and her friends. They were always talking about growing and what to do to get better pot. I learned mostly from listening to them talk. Then when I started growing I just asked my mom what she did when I needed to know something.”

The second quote came from a 22 year old grower, who thinks of himself as an upcoming grower. Both of these men learned to grow by observing their mothers and listening closely to conversations about growing as they grew up. For these two young men,

growing marijuana is nothing new – it’s in the family and they feel they are simply continuing what they best know how to do. Neither young man expressed interest in legitimate employment, citing low wages and working conditions as the primary reasons why they chose to grow. They did have a broad range of grow knowledge and both were hungry to learn how to produce better pot using more rigorous organic methods<sup>11</sup>.

Mentoring was the most frequent method of learning to grow. Three of the growers I interviewed credited mentors as their teachers. Mentors are generally successful and have been growing for several years, establishing themselves as competent growers. In this case, success is gauged more on the quality of the marijuana, not the quantity. Several growers spoke to me of how they were mentored by someone with experience growing marijuana. The first grower, a large scale grower in his 40’s, had been in the industry for over 10 years and spoke of his mentor this way:

“I mean I’d been screwing around trying to grow weed since I was like 13 years old – starting seeds and whatever but this was the first time someone sat me down and showed me how to apply commercial procedures to an indoor growing operation.”

“I had kind of a mentor. A guy out of Davis. He had his doctorate in botany out of UCD. But he taught me how to do hydroponics and we just did it in rock wool ebb flow trays and then to the buckets and bucket system. But it’s a hard learn.”

“I was dating a guy at the time who was a full time grower. He kind of helped me get going as far as teaching me the basics of growing pot and how to put a grow room together. He was known for big, tight, dense nuggets and really tight [efficient] grow rooms.”

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<sup>11</sup> Currently most growers are forced to use at least one product that is not truly organic from their perspective, i.e., clone dipping solutions, rock wool, oasis cubes and some commercially sold brands of dirt.

The second grower, who was in his 30's and also a large scale producer, gave a similar description of his mentor. The final quote from one of the women growers shows how established relationships can also shift and expand to accommodate mentoring roles. As they entered their growing careers, they desired to grow enough high quality marijuana to supply themselves and sell for income. They sought out individuals to advise them and developed long term relationships with their mentors. The mentors did not seek compensation, saying their satisfaction came in seeing the new growers be successful.

Another important source of information about growing discussed by growers was the internet. Not everyone wishing to grow is acquainted with reputable growers willing to share their knowledge and the internet provides a viable alternative. In other words, if one wants to grow marijuana, it is not necessary to know any other growers. This is how digital learning was described:

“So like I'm the sole person of everybody I know [who grows]. I taught myself. I did some online research – online research pretty much. Online seeing blogs people talking about their systems, what they did.”

For this female grower, absolute discretion was imperative. She was fully employed in her community in a traditional work setting. Sharing her experiences with coworkers was not an option and indeed, could in fact create conditions that would lead to her being fired. The internet provided her with first hand experiences yet she did not have to socialize with other growers and run the risk of tainting her reputation in the community. The internet provided her instruction with guaranteed anonymity.

## Why They Grow

The growers I interviewed overwhelmingly began growing to reduce the expense of supplying themselves with marijuana. Said one grower, “Money. There was no reason to buy pot when we own a house.” This motivation surfaced in all nine interviews as did the notion of having access to high quality weed grown organically. It was important too that they knew what products were used in the growing process and the only way to know for sure was to grow for themselves. Those who grew on a commercial scale providing their sole source of income expressed strong independence, wanting to be their own boss and carving out their own bit of market share. The commercial scale growers felt they could make equivalent or better money by growing than in legitimate industries. One referred to growing as the last true form of capitalism, although he admitted the illegality of it all inflated prices. Collectively, they spoke to the internal satisfaction of bringing a crop to harvest by their own hands. High quality was important and they sought the best strains available in the area, with one grower calling his collection of mother plants his stable.

“It’s great. It’s so great. And it’s like interesting cause I feel like ... women have such a ... it’s like Mother Earth and we have such a deep connection. It’s so interesting to see like I’ll wake up every morning and when I was out in my tent I’ll walk around each plant and like look it over and like grab ‘em just be like yeah!”

“Cutting clones is my like my favorite thing. Just making life you know. Creating something.”

“I love to be in nature. I love growing outdoors. The plants do so good outside in the natural environment. Kind of where they should be. They get so beautiful.

So green. And so stony. It's beautiful there too and you can appreciate the trees and the dirt and the birds. I like that feeling.”

Judging from the remarks above, success as a grower isn't necessarily determined by the amount of money one amasses or the quantity of marijuana grown. For some growers, success is intricately linked to the internal satisfaction of producing a high quality crop. I found this to be supported in my field observations as well. Growers devote much conversation to producing quality marijuana and sharing their buds with grower friends. They often critique the pot as they smoke it, commenting on the taste, potency and appearance. It is a big part of the growing subculture.

### **Grower to Grower Networking**

Networking among growers is strong. This informal structure provides the foundation for the underground economy of marijuana growing and is centered in the social lives of networked growers. The growers observed and interviewed collaborated on everything from techniques to transportation to pricing. Much knowledge is circulated about strains, the market, participants in the grow scene, supplies, demand and labor. Growers tend to share their success strategies as often as their failures, which most experience at some level from time to time.

Market strategies are probably one of the foremost topics among growers. It is important to their success to know what strains are selling at which prices, which have been over or under produced, if there are any large orders to be filled in the future and most importantly, who is buying during periods of market gluts. Prices are discussed and informal unspoken agreements evolve for the strains grown by the group. These

dialogues effectively set the local market for given strains between growers and to outside buyers as well. Growers who are unable to sell large portions of their crops over a reasonable period of time face financial challenges when rent or house payments are delinquent. This is how many brokering arrangements are conceived as well. If a grower is traveling out of the area to sell his crop, he may be asked or volunteer to take another grower's marijuana and sell it along with his own. Of interest here is that most of the growers in this study placed a high degree of importance on keeping the proceeds from any business in the county. If transactions occurred outside the area, it was equally or more important to return those funds to the home county.

“I feel a huge responsibility to get the money back. Sometimes it's for a kid's birthday or it's Christmas time and they [the other grower] have kids so they need the money. Like the one guy has I think eight kids. He always needs the cash. Or their rent could be in my hand.”

Not only was this justified on economic grounds, but around family structures as well, since children went to local schools, pets saw local veterinarians and elders saw local physicians.

While there is no overarching hierarchal structure, there is an informal hierarchy within the smaller groupings of the growing subculture. The conversations within the small networks are where reputations are frequently established. These informal conversations are points where creditworthiness is established on the most basic of levels and experience. It is an exchange point for trustworthiness as well as behavioral evaluations. Acceptance into the group may be determined by the outcome of such assessments. Basic questions are answered in these information exchanges. Does this

person exercise the required level of caution? Has anyone here dealt with him/her in the past? How long ago? Is the individual good for weight<sup>12</sup> or money? Will anyone vouch for an individual? These conversations determine the status of other growers in the subculture. They are also the entry point for new growers. Established growers can connect with individuals in these social circles who want to grow but possibly cannot afford the start up costs, have never grown before or have no place to grow. I observed growers offer to help newcomers in all of these areas. One grower I interviewed gave this response when I asked how he got started, “Hey I should like set you up in a house we should like grow some weed ...” This meant his mentor was offering to put up the initial investment money to rent a house, purchase equipment, clones and pay the expenses of running the grow until the first crop was brought to harvest and sold. Another said of newcomers, “Oh yea I totally want to teach people I like. We share ideas and do the whole clone thing” [exchange].

An informal hierarchy was identified in my field work, giving the highest status to those able to sell large amounts of marijuana. This respect fell off dramatically in cases where growers sold marijuana for other growers and could not pay the grower immediately after the sale. This was always interpreted as the seller had used the money for other purposes. High status was also accorded growers who consistently had access to desirable strains. Of those I observed, one of the most highly regarded individuals was someone who was clearly respected for the strains he brought to the group as well as his overall knowledge of growing. On multiple occasions growers contacted him when they

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to loaning someone a quantity of marijuana, usually at least one pound.

would experience a problem with their grows, usually asking him to come by and diagnose the problem. They consulted him because growers who sold product with mold or mite damage lost status in the group and the local market; accordingly their reputations as growers suffered. When he arrived he was usually carrying a joint of some exotic strain for everyone to try and his visits were highly anticipated. As this indicates, these networking circles are also learning circles. Growers trouble shoot with each other and assess the effectiveness of different growing techniques. They share information about technology and the performance of equipment<sup>13</sup> used in the growing process. The structure of the marijuana growers' subculture may be looser in its processes and procedures than mainstream garden societies, but it has structure none the less.

### **Risk Management**

Growers perceive multiple risks to their occupations. They know they could be raided by law enforcement and, depending upon the size of their operation, lose their crop, their strains, their cash, their property, their families, their lives and ultimately face incarceration. There are home invasions of growers, some reported to law enforcement some not. They are at risk during the sale process when new and occasionally known buyers are the customers. Not only could the buyer potentially rip the grower off under threat of harm but the buyer could be a police informant. Growers are particularly at risk if they are transporting marijuana out of the Emerald Triangle to areas where law

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<sup>13</sup> Equipment encompasses grow lights, ballasts, ventilation fans, carbon filtration systems, light bulbs, dehumidifiers, automatic timers and any other items the grower uses in the process of growing a crop.



enforcement is less tolerant. Knowing these risks, growers have adapted multiple ways of reducing the various threats to their livelihoods.

My field observations documented the informal group networks function much as mainstream credit reports do when one applies for credit. It was also an information highway. Both the creditworthiness and legal status of buyers was rated in these networks. Creditworthiness was established by prior experiences of members within the network – if an individual had been extended credit either in cash or weed, that fact and how quickly they cleared the debt was shared among members. Likewise, if they had failed to pay, that too became known. If they have been busted, this information would contribute to a sense of distrust among the group members. It is always suspected that law enforcement has attempted to extract information in exchange for lesser charges. Most of the growers I interviewed and observed completely refused to deal with strangers, preferring instead to wait for known buyers. Growers also unanimously agreed to not provide marijuana to minors but rather restrict sales to dispensaries, patients with 215 recommendations and adults.

Home invasions are often targeting marijuana growers for both their pot and their cash. The growers I observed attributed this phenomenon to sloppy grow practices. In other words, the grower had not taken adequate steps to prevent pedestrians passing by on the street from identifying their locations as grows. Responsible growers take measures to ensure this does not happen by placing their ventilation fans as far from street traffic and sidewalks as possible. They use carbon filtration, ionizers and ozone generators to eliminate the powerful odor of budding marijuana. Some have surveillance

cameras in strategic places to observe their property remotely and to screen visitors at the front door. Eight of the nine growers I interviewed owned dogs and three of the eight were Pit Bull owners. None of these dogs displayed any aggression and it is my belief these particular owners relied heavily on the reputation and appearance of their dogs, especially since two of the growers are parents to young children. The growers are also conscious of their own activities as observed by outsiders. Two of the indoor growers spoke to this clearly:

“I did most of my work at night especially like moving bags of dirt around. I always did that at night and even that I tried to stagger a little bit like bring in two in a night instead of like 20 in one night. I didn’t want the wrong person seeing me do that.”

“We can move our whole thing. We’ve had to do it. We were like out there in the dark. It was classic. Well I mean I’ve got retired neighbors. Those people right there are retired [pointing to a window nearby]. You know that they are watching your every move. Those people are retired [pointing to a different window]. Those people just moved out so they’re new people but both those two houses and them were retired so I mean you can imagine – always home. You do stuff after dark.”

I found this information in contrast to popular assumptions that growers do much of their activities in plain sight of neighbors, who then feel compelled to complain to authorities.

One of the most vulnerable times for growers is when they transport their marijuana to other areas to sell it. Law enforcement officers are alert for any signs of marijuana from the distinctive smell to wads of cash to a roach in the car’s ashtray.

Therefore, driving with quantities of marijuana requires special preparation. The

marijuana is kept in special bags, known as turkies<sup>14</sup>, to reduce the smell. It is packed so that fragile buds are not smashed in unassuming luggage, like gym bags or backpacks. The grower who decides to drive with his crop on board prepares himself as if he were running a gauntlet. One of the commercial growers I spoke with gave this response when I asked how he travelled with large amounts:

“Oh yeah I totally *square bear up*<sup>15</sup> and dress like fresh [clean] and take the earrings out and all the tattoos are covered and just a regular car and have a few, a couple of extra scripts<sup>16</sup> on me for what I need. Just always drive the speed limit.”

The growers from the Emerald Triangle see travelling on the highway as extremely risky, especially during the outdoor growers’ harvest season. Some will not travel out of the area during this period. Others have individual strategies such as not smoking any pot in the vehicle once they leave the area or travelling as tourists with their families, stopping at every roadside attraction and taking pictures. Growers who choose to leave California to sell their product greatly increase their potential risk. Only one of the growers I interviewed had taken the gamble but indicated no amount of profit was worth that level of risk.

### **The Gender Dimensions of Growing**

“My boss felt that I was more in tune with the plants and that I was doing a better job than him [a male coworker] and so he made me like the micromanager and this guy straight up said I will not be bossed around by a woman. He quit. Dude

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<sup>14</sup> Marijuana is often packaged for storage and sale in turkey oven roasting bags that are reputed to reduce the smell of freshly harvest buds.

<sup>15</sup> Square bear up refers to making one’s appearance more normative.

<sup>16</sup> Scripts are the slang name for 215 recommendations for medical marijuana used by patients and are written by physicians.

had made a few sexual harassment comments towards me too at some point so it's like I'm glad that guy's gone. It was like an awkward part of working and another anxiety I didn't want to have.”

This quote exemplifies the gender divide experienced by women growers. It came from a female who worked two consecutive seasons for two different male growers. Her experience supported discussions I had heard in the field among male growers around the appropriate work, primarily trimming, for females. This was further confirmed in my field observations that revealed characteristics in line with the classic narratives of a gender divide represented primarily by powerless women, with a few notable exceptions. Powerless in this context refers to women uninvolved personally in the business but present during business operations as partners to the male operators. Interestingly, everyone in the field of study regarded growing marijuana as work, whether it was their primary source of income or not, accomplished for personal use or not. For that reason I define the concept of work used in this study as “activities that produce goods and services for one's own use or in exchange for pay or support” (Reskin & Padavic 1994: 1). A further distinction is made between paid, coerced and unpaid work, which is frequently seen in domestic employment. This is useful when assessing the roles of women who participate in the marijuana industry at some level, either as small growers, laborers or trimmers as well as analyzing the context of the work in relation to other individuals involved in that particular grow. The women I observed who did participate in the business were most often ‘behind the scenes’ performing labor in the

garden, preparing marijuana butter and other ganja foods<sup>17</sup> in the kitchen or trimming. Though several women were in fact growers, they marketed their product through male relationships dealing only with close friends or having males actually sell their product. Only one female was observed as an independent dealer and in time it was revealed her product was in fact produced by her romantic partner rather than her own operation.

Generally speaking, labor was gendered as men performed heavy weight jobs, moving dirt, electrical and ventilation work, hash making and upfront sales. Men, for the most part, did not seek female assistance when performing the heavy labor, but did enjoy female involvement in the form of providing refreshments and meals as well as running errands. I observed nearly all transactions were made by men and in a few instances where women did conduct business, there were invariably situational issues that surfaced. For example, some women had just recently ended a personal relationship or a personal relationship was in turmoil, children were misbehaving whereas the males conducting business tended to keep the conversations more business focused. Any mention of personal issues from men took the form of vague general statements as opposed to personal pleas. I was unable to determine if the personal situations women shared were truly an issue in their lives or were disguised attempts to ensure they got the best possible deal in their transactions. Men rarely spoke of personal issues on the other hand, were more likely to speak in general terms of the woman or family “being well” and elaborate no further. In my observations, women appear to primarily be involved in cloning work,

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<sup>17</sup> Ganja foods are made with marijuana as one of the ingredients and are known to be very potent, providing a more intense drug effect.

making edibles and trimming. More the exception than the rule, there are successful women growers, but more numerous are the smaller cottage industries operated by women, often in conjunction or simultaneously with legitimate employment. Marijuana cottage industries are prevalent throughout the Emerald Triangle. There are stores devoted to paraphernalia, clothing lines, posters and other knick-knacks with marijuana themes. It is often women who create edibles, craft a variety of marijuana inspired goods, run peripheral businesses, transport product between locations, clean indoor equipment and grow rooms, tend crops and drive water and food supplies to remote outdoor growers during their grow seasons. This group of independent women entrepreneurs tends to fit previous descriptions of small family farmers (Raphael 1985), in which profits were often invested in necessities like wood stoves or roof repairs.

For the most part, the women observed in my fieldwork were the romantic partners of male growers and were present as companions during work periods. They had little to do with the business aspect of the grow operation and were generally unconcerned with the details of growing. The various conversations I observed suggest this group tends towards a materialistic lifestyle that is similar to descriptions given of women associates of the dealers studied by Adler (1993). For instance, the women I observed wore designer blue jeans, shoes, and carried expensive designer handbags. Several owned purse dogs like those of Paris Hilton, said to have been purchased for \$5,000.00. It was not uncommon for these women to have had plastic surgery for everything from breast augmentation to derriere lifts. Most were not old enough to consider face lifts or surgeries to reverse the signs of aging. In addition, these women

often were users of other drugs besides marijuana, including cocaine and prescription pills. As the intimate partners of male growers, they also maintained the appearance of house performing what is typically seen as domestic work such as cleaning and meal preparation. In some cases, this meant arranging for a trusted individual known to the grower to perform housekeeping duties. I thought of these women as the significant others [of male growers], quite different in their characteristics from the women growers I describe below.

I found other distinctive differences between male and female growers in my interviews. Of the nine growers interviewed, three were women of which two were involved in commercial operations. Of these two, only one relied on growing for 100% of her income, and the other used growing to supplement her legitimate income from full time employment. This is comparatively different from the six men interviewed, all of whom were commercial growers, with five of the six relying on growing as their sole source of income. Additionally, three of the men were supporting families with young children in comparison to none of the women. Only one of the women was growing on a large scale and she was a seasonal worker, employed by a male grower. Another of the women was a small scale grower and the remaining woman grew strictly for personal consumption. In comparison, none of the men interviewed grew strictly for personal consumption. Neither of the women who were growing commercially marketed their product, but relied on male acquaintances to sell the finished marijuana. Another difference can be seen in education and employment status. All three women held college degrees and two were employed full-time in legitimate work. On the other hand,

two of the six men held college degrees with only one man employed legitimately albeit part-time. Finally, all three women were dressed very casually when they were interviewed. They all wore blue jeans, work shirts, boots and were obviously dressed to perform manual labor during the day. They differed very little in appearance from the men who wore the same basic attire. Their boots were a bit dirtier and their shirts torn, but otherwise there was little difference.

The two women with commercial grows both relied on men to sell their crops. This is understandable in the case of the seasonal worker and she was clearly uninformed about the sale of the crop she produced. She described the crop sale as being her employer's responsibility:

“That’s all on him. Like I really don’t want anything to do with that aspect of it. Like I don’t want to know where it goes – if it’s legal or if it’s illegal. Like I don’t need – I’m just growing it. Like I don’t care about the other part of it so...”

But for the small-scale grower, selling her crop was achieved through a boyfriend or other well-known male acquaintances, greatly reducing the potential for loss. She felt she was more susceptible to being paid less than market prices or being ripped off by an unknown buyer than her male counterparts. She related her sales this way, “One person used to buy most of my crop for his head stash<sup>18</sup> so that pretty much took care of what I was selling.”

Setting up grow rooms is another area that is different for women. The woman who grew strictly for personal consumption ran her grow in a mobile container, designed

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<sup>18</sup> Head stash is the slang term for the quantity of marijuana (or any other drug) a grower or dealer keeps for his/her own personal consumption.



and constructed by her husband. The small-scale grower had paid a male to install her ventilation systems and upgrade the electrical wiring to her grow area. She used small pots and grew more plants in comparison to the males who usually grew in beds or large pots. This woman scaled her grow operation down till she could manage all aspects on her own, including moving the plants and disposing of used dirt<sup>19</sup>. Neither woman constructed her grow room. In comparison, all of the men constructed their own rooms themselves or with the help of male friends.

Finally, my interview with the seasonal worker, who was a Women's Studies major in college, exposed extreme gender discrimination associated with outdoor growing. She had worked the previous season for a man she described in the following excerpt:

“Last year I worked for someone who was so greedy and just kind of a dick and like you know made me feel shitty about my gender. You know like in terms of doing this kind of work like it's really gendered. It was like ‘oh go help the girls trim’ and I'm just like ‘dude!’ Like if he had wimps to like help carry this *gennie*<sup>20</sup> or something. It just pissed me so much cause I'd been working for him longer than this other dude and this dude was acting more feminine than I am and asked him to help like move the *gennie* cause he was the only dude around. I was standing there too and I'm just watching this dude try and lift this *gennie* with him and I'm ‘are you fucking serious?’ I went over and was like ‘watch and I picked up the *gennie* by myself. I was like ‘You're such a jerk. Why did you make that assumption that I'm a weak girl?’”

At the time of the interview she had left her first employer and was working for a different grower. She had this to say about working for her new employer:

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<sup>19</sup> Growers who grow in pots rather than beds dispose of their dirt after each harvest or up to six times a year.

<sup>20</sup> Slang term used for generators.

“You know the gender issues I think are huge in that men do the labor and the girls do the trimming. It’s like no. I hate that. It was a struggle to get my boss to recognize that I’m capable of like doing work. And I wanna do the work. Like I like getting dirty and I don’t like sitting in a chair all day. Like I don’t want to do that. I wanna get like down and do the work cause it’s like rewarding to see all of that you know.”

The interview excerpts clearly demonstrate the division of labor for male and female workers as well as the attitudes of some male growers towards female employees. While working in grows exposes a gendered labor divide, there is another dimension that provides even more evidence of gender differences in marijuana production.

The gender divide is most evident in the labor of trimming or manicuring the plants to prepare the buds for sale. By investigating trimming as part of the marijuana production process, several illustrations can be made to demonstrate that trimming is one area of marijuana growing that is visibly gendered. Trimming is the term used to describe the process of removing leaves and stems to create a visible flowering bud which is then smoked. The plant is trimmed after it has reached maturity and has been harvested or cut down. Trimmers use small scissors and the work is tedious and requires careful focus. There is the element of criminality associated with the job. Trimmers can be caught up in law enforcement raids on growers, arrested and be charged along with the growers. Trimmers who work for indoor growers frequently work at the grow site and usually work for long periods but do leave at the end of the day, returning to their own homes. Many times this occurs with several people gathering to work at a home, sharing meals and conversation until the workday is declared finished. Trimmers are normally

paid by the pound, meaning for each pound of trimmed marijuana they produce they are paid an amount that has been previously agreed upon with the grower.

The work sites of outdoor growers are not always comfortable places and many involve travelling to remote locations in the nearby hills where the living accommodations are often tents, bottled water and require four-wheel drive vehicles to traverse dirt or gravel roads. Workers may stay as long as two or three months, until there is no more marijuana to be trimmed. Often the growers are tense, tired and anxious to get their crops trimmed, bagged and sold. The end of the outdoor season is the culmination of an extended period of stress and tension for growers – not only is seizure a threat but theft is also a worry. There are *patch raiders* who wait for the end of the season to rip off crops. Trimmers have been known to steal from their employers and it is likely the grower has a stack of bills waiting to be paid after harvest season. This is not to say that trimmers are not treated well. To the contrary, many growers provide meals, comfortable housing, plenty of weed to smoke and are good-natured, knowing their pay day is just around the corner. Trimmers who are fast, honest and easy to get along with in group situations can make enough money to support themselves until the next year's outdoor harvest season arrives.

However lucrative it may seem, trimming work is situated within a broader culture which confers legal sanctions upon those guilty of sexual harassment, yet places women in vulnerable positions as sexual objects. The broader culture openly disapproves yet discreetly ignores or even promotes situations vulnerable to sexual harassment. Women trimmers are sometimes sexualized and objectified by their male employers. My

Craig's List analysis of growers seeking to hire trimmers leads to the conclusion that female trimmers are preferred for manual dexterity, speed, quality and a few characteristics outside of what might be normally associated with manicuring harvested marijuana. The objectification of women in these ads is evident. An example of these sexualized characteristics can be seen in the following two posts from growers seeking to hire trimmers:

- **Girl Trimmer needed**
- Date: 2011-11-02, 1:19PM PDT  
Reply to: removed
- Need a good looking trimmer that is Dtf<sup>21</sup>. And oPen minded, pay is great, lots of work, again need a good looking girls that's Dtf, mid 20's guy here, good looking and athletic build, blue eyes, come work this week, worker needed asap  
Send pic and info or no response, also let me know availability next few days, thankx

The first posting explicitly requires the female respondents to be attractive and willing to have sex with the grower. The definition of attractive is an ambiguous one which only that grower can determine and a photo must be provided for the grower to assess if the respondent is adequately good looking.

- **lady trimmers sought**
- Date: 2010-10-20, 4:02PM PDT  
Reply to: removed
- hello there- seeking new trim ladies. previous help got greedy and lazy... maybe over-indulged. looking for new help, topless extra. haha great pay otherwise.....2-3 per depending on exp.. but may train the right girls. call now will only be in

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<sup>21</sup> Acronym for a term used to describe a girl who is "Down To Fuck."  
<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=DTF&defid=2884963>>

town for a few. or leave message will be back on town in a few . looking for self starters looking to earn or earn and learn call soon wont last (541)removed

This second post offers additional compensation for those ladies willing to be topless as they trim. While the ad implies this is a joke, it illustrates the experience of women during harvest season. Women are indeed offered more money than the agreed upon per pound amount if they will labor partially nude.

Not only can this be observed in the ads placed by growers, but it is reinforced by the women participants as well. The following two ads were posted by women seeking employment as trimmers:

- **HOT Experienced Trimmer;) (Hum Co)**
- Date: 2011-11-02, 3:47PM PDT  
Reply to: removed
- I am 32, experienced, clean, easy to get along with, fast, harworking and easy on the eyes. I have my own truck live in the area and can stay the night if needed. You can reach me @ (707)removed

This first post clearly illustrates how some women may perceive advantages in hiring by describing themselves as hot or easy on the eyes. Not only does this post announce the respondent's appearance as hot, but the emoticon of a winking smiley face suggests other intentions as well. This emoticon can be interpreted as flirtatious and designed to attract the attention of those male growers who require their trimmers to be physically attractive and potentially willing to engage in sexual activities.

- **Hard Working and Cute Female Trimmer**
- Date: 2011-10-03, 6:54PM PDT  
Reply to: removed

- Hey there Humboldt!  
I've got plenty of experience with what I do, and know how to make your product look beautiful and take off only what needs to be taken off. I've also got my own campervan, so putting me up won't be an issue. Looking to work for a while, so if you've got enough to keep me busy for a month, that's perfect! I've also got experience with cooking, cleaning and making products, so I'm a pretty handy gal to have around... I'm willing and able to travel, and ready to start work today, so let me know! Cheers!

In this sample post, not only does the respondent advertise her appearance, but is also willing to perform other tasks far different from trimming, such as cooking and cleaning. It seems being an experienced trimmer with her own accommodations may not be adequate to secure a position. The respondent perceives a combination of good looks, the willingness to perform additional tasks, and experience will be the most effective selling points for her to secure a position.

It became obvious in my analysis that female trimmers are aware the very nature of their work creates a scenario that could easily facilitate sexual harassment. In response, experienced female trimmers may join with other female workers to form crews and thus alter the environment and conditions of their employment. The posting below illustrates this point:

- **Trimmchicks**
- Date: 2010-10-07, 8:55PM PDT  
Reply to: removed
- What we offer are Experienced, Reliable, Discrete, and Honest ALL Female Trim crews. Crews are 2 to 6 workers depending on job and space. Maximum hours per day per person is 12. We provide our own equipment and food. What we expect from you is a safe, well lit, comfortable room to work in with restroom facilities. Payment is to be made at the end of the shift. You pay me, I pay the crew. The standard price is ballpark and will apply to most jobs. Little and loose will cost

more.

Sexual Harassment will not be tolerated. All jobs have to be approved by management. You of course are the boss. If there is a conflict of personalities with any crew member, that crew member will be sent somewhere else. The job will always be done per your instructions. Each person that works for me is known personally by me for at least 15 years, most considerably longer. The more people you want the earlier you need to schedule.

Contact removed

Notice too this post referred to the work team as a *crew*, fitting the description of mob [organized crime] crews identified in research focused on the social organization of deviants (Best & Luckenbill 1980). Mob crews form in the unified pursuit of economic gain from their activities just as trim crews come together to earn money. There is also an element of safety for women trimmers who only work in crews, as the above announcement illustrates.

Finally, my analysis of Craig's List provides more perspective just by looking at the number and purpose of the postings. As I described earlier, the postings were divided into those seeking to hire trimmers and trimmers seeking work. Over the course of two seasons I collected a total of 125 postings specific to trim work, 12 seeking to hire trimmers and 113 trimmers seeking work. Of the 12 ads hiring trimmers, 10 specified only women respondents would be considered, two were gender neutral and none were seeking male trimmers. Of 125 ads seeking work, 32 were males, 35 females and 46 were gender neutral. The ads seeking to hire trimmers are the most revealing.

**Table 1 Craigslist Trimmer Posts by Gender and Advertisement Type**

<b>Gender of Trimmer</b>				
<b>Advertisement Type</b>	Male	Female	Gender Neutral	Total
<b>Ads seeking trim work</b>	32	35	46	113
<b>Ads seeking trimmers</b>	0	10	2	12
<b>Total</b>	32	45	48	125

The numbers themselves may not be all that impressive, but when one considers that three of 12 (25%) ads for female trimmers had details that raise questions of sexual harassment, a clear pattern of male dominance emerges. In addition, this should also be balanced against the fact there were no posts for specifically male workers. While this small sample size does not allow for any generalizations to be made, it clearly makes visible the role of gender in the dimension of trimming.

### **Community Integration and Support**

Overall, the growers I interviewed and observed were community oriented. They were concerned with the future of their towns and expressed concerns around national and global communities as well. Growers organized efforts to support a local animal shelter through fundraising and provided consistent donations to their thrift stores. Growers were volunteers for various nonprofit organizations.

“Our biggest upcoming challenge is how we’re treating Mother Earth. It’s like wars and money and control and power. And it’s like everything seems to step around one commodity.”



“I worked at an activist camp an anti-Shell oil activist camp for the summer. I spent like two and a half months in a tent fighting Shell.”

“I had a good friend and she used to get me out volunteering from time to time... and I did some stuff on my own at like the animal shelter and the food bank.”

The statements above show the direct relationships between these growers and their larger community. Clearly these growers harbor a desire to help improve a variety of social conditions from environmental damage to hunger, nor do they limit their efforts to local issues.

Growers often have a full circle of support around them, especially those in more populated areas where neighbors are bound to eventually take notice of their growing activities. This support can be the result of intentional efforts on the part of the grower who seeks to keep the neighborhood both at peace and friendly towards himself and his property or just a reflection of the tacit community acceptance of the marijuana industry. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the relationship between the grower and immediate neighbors:

The grower was unable to pay his power bill that was thousands of dollars and his electrical service was discontinued. His indoor crop was just two weeks from harvest and lack of light would greatly reduce the quality and quantity of his harvest. Within hours of his power being shut off, two generators had been delivered to his operation and were running the grow scene and key items of comfort in the house. The generators ran continuously for nearly five days yet neighbors came by with meals and inquired as to how they could help. Those neighbors immediately next door claimed not to hear the raucous noise and said “we know the operation can’t stop now.”

This grower had employed the son of this neighbor for nearly two years on a regular part time basis and had supported the young man as he changed his former lifestyle of hard drug use to one of education, sports and growing. He had also provided the young man’s

father with high quality trim for his personal use and made himself available when labor was needed on home improvement projects next door.

### **The Environment and Ethics**

In contrast to media depictions of indoor growers as indifferent to their environmental impact, the growers I interviewed expressed concern for the carbon footprint their grow operations generated. They also monitored the toxicity of the products they used to feed their plants, ward off pests and fight powder mold. They were constantly searching for organic products to fill these needs and even went so far as to eliminate products that had been shipped into the area. Only one of the two outdoor growers used generators and swore they were regularly maintained and carefully filled to avoid diesel leaks or spills. Two of the large scale growers spoke about growing and the environment in this way:

“But you’re flying all that stuff across the ocean or boating or however you get it over here you’re wasting petrol oil. It comes down to oil. Why not get things locally and make things locally. We got everything we need right here.”

“This is what I really love about my boss is that he’s really innovative. Like he’s created his own organic nutrient. And it’s really organic. Like he’s using his money now to build this building and he wants to set the standard for environmentally friendly organic indoor grows and he’s purchasing these skylights that [are] gps operated and these are all like no generators no gas.”

The environment was one of the most frequently mentioned concerns of growers. As the following grower relates though, concern over his carbon footprint did not override his desire to grow:

“Well one obvious worry to me is the energy consumption is just like so crazy. Well I mean you know obviously not enough that I stopped [growing]. I seem to

think I kid myself that if I try to live in other ways it kind of offsets like my not eco-groovy vocation.”

This particular grower attempted to negate the environmental impact of his indoor grow by living a very green lifestyle in all other areas of his life. He was religious about recycling, buying green products and limiting his driving. He did not shop for new items but frequented thrift stores to reduce his contribution to landfills.

While the environment was a frequent topic, so were general ethics around indoor growing in residential neighborhoods. The growers I observed and interviewed collectively felt neighborhood preservation was not only a responsibility, but a strategy of risk management as well. They took care to maintain the outer appearance of their dwellings and to maintain amicable relations with their neighbors. They felt obligated to take precautions to discourage home invasions and theft and did so by carefully screening their traffic and employing some of the security measures discussed previously. Neighborhood safety was perceived as individual safety for themselves.

### **The Legalization Debate**

The 2010 elections in California provided voters with the opportunity to legalize recreational use of marijuana. It appeared on the ballot as Proposition 19 and failed by a close margin of 53% to 47%. It did, however, create an intense debate among growers, law enforcement agencies, legislators, marijuana activists and economists. Growers in the period leading up to the election planted larger crops to maximize yields in case the referendum would be voted into law. Long time community members were often in disagreement over the proposition, fearful of economic losses and the potential for

government intervention at the Federal level. Many of the younger growers, however, favored the referendum and worked tirelessly to ensure they would be well positioned should the ballot measure become law. They proposed marketing their product just as Sonoma County has marketed their wines, with trademark names and tourist attractions. At times this positioning meant alienating other growers, long time family friends and even family members. A variety of advocacy groups formed and numerous public forums were held to address everything from securing the market to potential economic impacts to how to address the threat of intervention from the Federal government.

One dimension that divides the growers is the idea of scale. Most of these growers do not favor the industrial size grows like those approved in Oakland, California in 2010 (McLean 2010). The growers I studied were concerned that the scale of industrial grow operations would take over the industry from production to marketing. This is somewhat indicative of their tenuous lifestyle, as market factors have depressed prices in the past decade to lows not seen since the 1980's. Predictions forecast during this time suggested a sharp drop in price post legalization (Kilmer, Caulkins, Pacula, MacCoun, & Reuter 2010). The smaller operations and family farmers saw legalization as a threat to their way of life economically and feared for those whose living depended wholly on the industry, especially trimmers who rely on harvest season for their year's income. The conflicting perspectives were related to me like this:

“Oh well of course I 100% believe in it. I mean the fact that you can get liquor anywhere. I mean when liquor is um I'd say 100% worse for you than pot.”

“They are ready for legalization. It's going to be like corporate tobacco growing marijuana making like spliffs and packaged shit that's not good quality marijuana.

It's not gonna be good at all. They are still gonna want to fuck people over because corporations are gonna get involved and they are going to be like only these corporations can have it. You know like Monsanto and their certain strains. People can't grow certain strains."

"No. No way. Just the way it was set up it was a bust. And it's how people around here make their living even if they're not growing. I think I saw it as the big guys will get their money and everyone else would just get put out of business."

"I can't support legalization. Prohibition is what makes my living."

The potential economic impact was by far the greatest concern followed by the perceived likelihood of corporate ownership of marijuana. Growers compared the potential for strains to be owned by corporations, similar to Monsanto and their patented genetically engineered food crops. Because the measure failed, the debate subsided but clearly there was no consensus emerging among the growers.

My analysis is limited in that the sample is extremely small. It does, however, contribute to the body of known information about marijuana growers. My analysis is specific to growers in the Emerald Triangle and speaks to their unique subculture as well as their individual characteristics. I found they are substantially motivated to produce marijuana of the highest quality. All of the growers expressed a strong desire to produce organic product free of chemicals. They care about their immediate neighborhoods and larger communities, both economically and environmentally. They are involved in their communities philanthropically. These growers acknowledge their risks and take steps to mitigate perceived threats. The growers are divided over legalization and are struggling to address the future should legalization be realized. Women in the marijuana industry have markedly difference experiences from men. They are growers, laborers and

trimmers. They operated in what is a male dominated subculture and as a result often find themselves working with a male partner, for sales if nothing else. The underground nature of the industry provides the context in which the sexual objectification and harassment of female laborers at worksites can occur. These findings collectively lay the foundation for the discussion that follows in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

The growers in my study represent just a narrow glimpse into the broader marijuana growing subculture. It is characterized by its language, practices, relationships, and lifestyle, all of which have been developed by the growers themselves. The subculture is fluid and shifts in response to the level of approval shown by the broader society and the current degree of local and federal law enforcement. Overall, they strongly resemble the back-to-the-landers Raphael describes; they work their marijuana crops to survive economically (1985).

These growers are innovators and rebels. They desire some of mainstream society's materialism blended with their own rural definition of comfort and they defy conventional methods to achieve their goals. This does not align perfectly with theoretical descriptions of deviance and social strain (Merton, 1938). Their goals paralleled mainstream society in that they desire homes, furnishings and family holidays. For some, having new four-wheel drive vehicles is seen as a requirement to access their outdoor operations. Additionally, they wanted the latest technology in their grow scenes and considered this type of investment part of normal operating expenditures. They have created the normative expectations that define what it means to operate as a grower. They have intentionally created a sub-cultural lifestyle that is closed to outsiders. Above all, in contrast to the degree their subculture has been normalized locally, they have chosen to remain in defiance of federal law and thus continue to attract the outlaw label.

The identities and social lives of the growers I interviewed are intricately linked to their careers in marijuana production, which defines their social boundaries. Membership in a group of growers can influence the success of and provide valuable support to growers in times of hardship. Growers with families are especially vulnerable and take special precautions with their children to ensure discretion. This group was socially involved at the community level as well, volunteering, donating funds and goods, and attending fundraisers.

The small groups within the subculture provide a strong informal network that is critical to a grower's success in the marijuana market as it exists today. This network is a chain of acquainted growers and their collective actions set market prices, establish reputations, arrange sales and provide vast amounts of information for exchange. The networks are an entry point for new growers. The social lives of most growers are grounded in these networks. Growers in this study valued their reputations as growers as much as their community reputations. These findings differed a bit from those of Weisheit (1992), in that the growers in my sample were much less concerned with their community reputations compared to the arrested growers in his study. They did, however, share the sense of accomplishment that goes with being known as a successful grower. The small groups formed by these growers are closed to outsiders – they are hospitable to newcomers but withhold sensitive information about group members. Full admittance to or exclusion from these groups is determined by established members.

Since most of the growers in this study learned to grow from family or mentors, differential association theory helps explain my findings (Sutherland, Cressey, &



Luckenbill 1992). Nearly all of the growers I interviewed had enjoyed the experienced tutelage of mentors or family. Mentors and family represent intimate relationships and it follows that the motivations and justifications for growing are learned as well. Another part of differential association theory makes the assumption that deviant activities are pursued when the benefits outweigh those benefits that might be realized from the pursuit of non-deviant activities. Clearly, my growers perceived the benefits of growing to exceed any benefits of not growing, including the threat of legal prosecution. I found the growers to be equally motivated by both the money and the growing process itself. Growers who were initially motivated to reduce the cost of having marijuana available for their own use found they preferred the independence of running their own business and chose to make it their career. I liken the growers in my study to both the pragmatist and communal growers identified by Weisheit (1992). My growers engage in a criminal act primarily to meet financial needs and for the satisfaction derived from the growing process itself. They enjoy growing and the social life that accompanies being a grower. Likewise my growers expressed similar motivations to those Weisheit (1992) named.

Growing is generational and the growers in this study indicated they would not be disturbed should their own children decide to become pot farmers. For these growers, the social stigma associated with growing is of no consequence, if anything they are pleased to be labeled as growers. I found this to be primarily true of growers who had been brought into the business by family members – growing is what they know how to do and they were not raised to view growing marijuana as a crime. Furthermore, each successive generation carries forth some of the previous values and practices around growing.

I found these growers to be a responsible group, sensitive to their neighbors and expressing a desire to keep their neighborhoods safe. To this end they employed several strategies to ensure their grow operations remained covert. My growers were primarily family people, even those who were not raising families of their own spoke of familial relations and that was a driver for keeping their neighborhoods safe for everyone. Children played a big role in this and all of the growers expressed the sentiment that the neighborhood children should be free to play in front yards and in dead end courtyards without any potential of danger presented by neighbors who grow. None of the growers I documented approved of supplying minors with marijuana and they made concerted efforts to limit the number of people coming and going. Keeping their grows covert had a dual purpose – maintaining harmony with immediate neighbors and reducing the chance of discovery by law enforcement or thieves. In exchange, my growers enjoyed a high level of neighborhood support, as well as unspoken approval at the larger community level. They received discounts at the local grow stores, they were welcomed in restaurants and they had learned which merchants did not hesitate to accept their \$100 bills. The larger community in my study responded much like those in studies of rural Kentucky growers (Hafley & Tewksbury 1998; Katz & Whitaker 2001). Their responsibility extended to the environment, both locally and globally. They believed in the local economy and spent their money in the community. These descriptions fit those of the 1980's early growers given by Raphael (1985). This is not to say there are no risks for these growers. To the contrary, they worried most about selling their crops without

incident of robbery or seizure by law enforcement. They viewed transporting marijuana out of the area as an extremely high risk activity and most elected to not take such risks.

The gender divide between male and female participants in the marijuana industry proved to be one of the most interesting features of the subculture. For the most part, the selling of a crop seems to be a point of vulnerability for women growers forcing them to partner up with a male to reduce the risk of being ripped off by potential buyers. The two women who grew on a commercial basis were strongly independent and proud that they ran their own operations. This finding is consistent with the moonshining women in Murphy's work (1994). Women are generally pushed into the tedious jobs of growing, tending crops, trimming and clone work. Since none of these particular tasks bring high wages, prestige or positional power, it is a perfect example of feminist social theory at work. The major players in the marijuana industry are males and the resultant market structure is not conducive to female success. Rarely, are women encouraged to set up and maintain their own operations and in contrast to the findings of Adler (1993) and Anderson (2005), they were rarely acting as brokers or middle-women. The small number of women I observed reinforced Weisheit's findings that the marijuana industry is primarily a male environment (1992). Women risk sexual harassment as workers and advertise themselves as much as their skills when seeking employment in the industry. The objectification of women is not hidden in the illegal economy but blatant and unsanctioned. This qualitatively creates a potentially dangerous work environment for the women. Furthermore, women who are involved in the industry as a result of their relationships with male growers can be equally sexualized and find themselves

insignificant eye candy, strongly paralleling Adler's assessment of the women in her study (1993). It is here in the gender dimensions of growing that further examination is warranted to assess agency and power in the context of the subculture as it exists today.

## CONCLUSION

While growers are often depicted as having lavish and hedonistic lifestyles, the growers observed in this study generally fell into two groups – those struggling to make ends meet and those able to maintain a standard of living equivalent to those in the middle class. I contend they do not fit the deviant image portrayed in media representations. Rather, I see them as simply another group of folks who have decided to make their living in an alternative manner. Studies have shown marijuana use is becoming increasingly normalized in the United States and it seems only logical the growers who supply these users should no longer be labeled as deviant criminals (Hathaway A. 2004; Hathaway A. D. 2004a; Hammersley, Jenkins, & Reid 2001). As more states move to allow medicinal use and decriminalize marijuana possession, it is likely the number of growers will increase to meet the demand, as was the case in California following the legalization of medical marijuana. These growers could be the clerk in the video store, the teller at the bank or the parent next to you at P.T.A.<sup>22</sup> meetings. They cannot be identified by their appearance, their possessions or their community activities. They may be the neighbors. It is clear we need to gather more information around the growers who are at the very crux of marijuana production.

### Study Limitations

The size of my study prohibits any generalizations being taken from the data. It would be quite impossible to describe the full spectrum of growers. My study does

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<sup>22</sup> P.T.A. is the acronym for Parent Teacher Associations in schools.

enlarge what we know about their perceptions of their work and their larger communities. It contributes to our general knowledge of marijuana growers and at the same time confirms how very little we do know about their day to day life experiences. The limits of my study also provide an outline for further research around growers. Specifically, I believe research is called for in the areas of gender, child rearing in grower families and efforts to legitimize growing. Presenting a full understanding of growers and their lives will take years of research which is now underway.

### **My Research in Retrospect**

When I look back on this project, access to growers did not present a significant challenge for me. I have 20 plus years of residency that allowed me to speak with a number of growers over the years. I met them through the daily life activities of being a single mother supporting a child. When I decided to undertake this research, I reacquainted myself with people I knew had strong ties to the growing community and worked hard to insert myself into a group known to be serious about their business but with no reputation for violence.

My key informant was invaluable as a conduit to information and other people. Without his assistance my work would have been shallow and uninteresting. Honesty was the capstone of my relationship with this individual. Leaving the field therefore did not represent a large hurdle. It was not difficult to admit I had reached the point in my work where I could no longer perform in the role of participant observer. I did not feel I could collect any more data than I had at the one year mark without significantly

increasing my time as a student; if I wanted to do further research it would have to come through other avenues. Once I was again established in my own residence, I realized how my lifestyle had evolved over the prior year. I eventually became comfortable having a few, if any, regular visitors and keeping regular hours – meaning I wasn't working in the grow until all hours of the night. Nor was every conversation centered on marijuana in some form. It took a few months, but I settled back into the structure of mainstream life appreciating the less risky nature of a more conventional lifestyle.

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