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## Mechanisms of Drug Abstinence, Desistance, and Persistence: A Study of Drug Use Patterns in College, Post-College, and Salient Life-Course Transitions

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Mechanisms of Drug Abstinence, Desistance, and Persistence:  
*A Study of Drug Use Patterns in College, Post-College, and Salient Life-Course Transitions*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

Attending college is indeed a special event. It is a time marked by large transitions, new experiences, and increased freedoms. It is a time for exploration, whether social, academic, or both that I will argue has an important affect on an individual's life. It is no secret that drug use on college campuses exists. In fact, many national surveys have already reported on rates and use patterns among college students (SAMSHA 2013). Although it is evident that these behaviors in college do exist, I am interested in explaining what may influence certain individuals to choose to participate or adopt these behaviors and what influences others to not. Furthermore, I am eager to conceptualize how the experiences individuals have in college may be used to predict the potential behaviors and attitudes towards drugs they will maintain in the future.

Not all forms of deviance are the same. What one interprets as deviance stems from both social and cultural discourses that aid in shaping how we not only categorize types of deviant acts, but also how much weight is given to each. Committing a crime is considered deviant. The laws in place make clear that doing so goes against the norm. While general theories on deviance exist to provide a rationale for the phenomenon as a whole, more exclusive theoretical frameworks must be utilized in order to discern what influences different types of deviance to occur, persist, or desist over time. What drives individuals to begin using drugs cannot solely be explained by a theory that accounts for why people may commit robbery.

How does "deviance" translate over the life-course? Is drug use just a phase reserved for the rebellious adolescent? Or does drug use continue to exist within people's lives well after they have aged into adulthood? From numerous studies, national surveys, and media representations,

we know the latter to be true. But why is this the case? And furthermore, what forces may be involved to influence drug use to subside (desist), persist, or never exist for some over time?

This project examines drug use from multiple lenses. The first lens: the pre-college experience, is where socialization factors and attitude formation sources are explored to determine how the perceptions of drugs one has at a younger age may transform over time and influence behavior. The second lens: the college experience, looks at college as both a key site and life-course event that can assist both in transforming views and behaviors. Lastly, the third lens examines drug use patterns post-college, finding that the events and transitions made out of college are indeed useful indicators of potential drug-related behaviors. The events that take place in college and post-college become important to producing, maintaining, or combating drug use, but are also, what I argue, key indicators useful to explaining the relatively fluid processes of abstinence, desistance, and persistence.

These three processes make up the basis of this project. How do the changes in social contexts associated with transiting out of college shape drug use or non-use patterns? How do people abstain from using drugs throughout their life? How do people who have used drugs in the past embark on a process of desistance that is only “completed” when their drug-related behaviors have ceased? And finally, how do people persist? What allows or influences individuals to keep using drugs over time? This study provides a detailed examination of these processes—how each process of abstinence, desistance, and persistence operate, how they differ, and how they even at times may experience overlap with one another. While this project is grounded in empirical data made possible by voluntary survey submissions, it is also a project very much in concert with dominant theories of deviance, particularly those examining deviance

from a life-course perspective. Drawing upon these widely accepted and utilized theories of deviance, my project functions to showcase consistencies with these theories in some regards, and critiques of them in others. The theories that will be used to inform and conceptualize my empirical work include: life-course perspectives on drug use, and more broadly, deviance, social control, social learning, social interaction, and differential association theories. The subsequent sections provide detailed considerations of the theoretical literature.

### **Drug Use from a Life-Course Perspective**

Life events marked by salient transitions make up what is known as the life-course. The life-course is defined by “pathways through the age differentiated life span, where differentiation is manifested in expectations and options that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points” (Sampson and Laub 1992:65). Sampson and Laub explore a life-course perspective on crime and deviance. Building upon previous literature, they argue that in order to be able to fully grasp the life-course perspective on crime and deviance, social sciences must focus on the age-related transitions individuals have throughout their life as well as the salient life-course events such as, marriage and employment/job position, that mark these transitions. While the life-course events *are* important, Sampson and Laub propose that it is not the event itself that may influence the individual to resist or adopt deviant behaviors, but is instead the transition to the event that influences such behavior during adulthood.

When an individual experiences transitions into the workplace and or marital status, it is predicted that they will experience greater social bonds and attachment to social institutions that could reduce chances of deviant behaviors to persist. Sampson and Laub find that actual transitions and stronger attachment to social institutions that occur through life-course events,

however, do not always deter deviance in adulthood. Instead they posit that, “adaptation to life events is crucial because the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different trajectories” (1992:66). Transitions into college as well as out of college can also be placed in the category of salient life events.

The transition in and out of college require Sampson and Laub’s notion of adaptation. It is not solely the event of attending or graduating college that may influence certain drug use or non-use behaviors, but instead how such behaviors can arise as a result of how one adapts to each transition. If an individual enters college having previously used drugs, it is likely that their transition into college may also facilitate persistent drug use. The reverse could also be said for individuals who enter college never having used drugs before. Here, the transition into college could produce two outcomes. One, the individual could adapt to the transition of being away from their families, presumably attaining more freedom and independence, and decide to experiment with drugs. Or secondly, the individual not having used drugs prior to college, could adapt to their transition into college holding on to the same values that deterred them from using drugs in the first place.

Transitions out of college often coincide with the transitions and normative standards of becoming an adult. While it is typical for those in college to remain within a certain age range, the age definitions related to adulthood are less clear. Normative age categorizations have established young adults to be those who fall between the ages of 18-25, while those who are 26 and over are understood to be adults (Arnett 2007:68). The large range of ages that fall into both the category of young adulthood and adulthood, however, presents somewhat of an issue. Arnett argues that the age period typically understood as young adulthood (18-25) marks an important part of the life-course “with distinctive developmental characteristics” (2007:68). This period, as



Arnett claims, would be best referred to as *emerging adulthood*, as it represents a time in one's life that is often accompanied with some sense of instability. It is the time in life where people have the ability to explore different possibilities before finally reaching adulthood status. While the post-college experience is formed through numerous transitions and life-course events, Arnett calls to attention the importance of the transitions that come first and foremost during the emerging adult period. It is this time, characterized by exploration and instability, that shapes an individual's potential future pathways into full adulthood.

Further understandings of the transitions required to reach adult status have been explored from a life-course perspective. There is an overwhelming consensus that adulthood and deviance do not mix well. Many scholars have found that there is a general trend of "aging out" of deviant behaviors (Sampson and Laub 2001). In a study to test this theory, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) provide an analysis of how normative adulthood roles and transitions are correlated to the idea of aging out of deviance. The terms desist and persist are used throughout the study to describe respondents who were either able to desist from deviant activities and behaviors *or* have them persist throughout adulthood. The results from this study illustrate that while there is a general trend of aging out of deviance, some adults continue to persist. Their persistence, however, was tied to the fact that they, unlike the respondents that experienced desistance, were unable or have yet to experience the many transitions that accompany arriving at adult status.

Adult status has been marked by a number of characteristics each identifiable by a significant life-course event such as: obtaining and sustaining employment, getting married, and having children. Each of these events correspond with lower levels of deviance (Massoglia and Uggen 2010; Merline et. al. 2004; Duncan et. al. 2006). Explanations for why salient life events

as well as the transitions that accompany them, comprise the theoretical framework known as social control.

### **Strong and Weak Bonds: Notions of Social Control**

Social control theorists align deviance as a result of weakened social bonds to established social conventions. Travis Hirschi most prominently maintains that the strength of an individual's social bond is attributed to their upholding of social norms. He claims that a social bond is composed of four elements: *attachment*, *commitment*, *involvement*, and *belief*. However, it is when one or more of these four elements is absent, becomes weakened, or is broken that the individual is more likely to exhibit deviant behaviors (Hirschi 1969:16). Hirschi's model can be applied as a rationale to explain why an individual may be likely to get involved with drugs.

*Attachment*, the first element of Hirschi's social bond model, finds that when people have strong social attachments and relationships with people who do not use illicit drugs, they will be less likely to use compared to individuals who instead lack such attachments (DeKeseredy 2005:217 *see also Hirschi 1969*). *Commitment* refers to the commitment one has to the social order—that is, the commitment an individual might have to their job, school, family, etc. that would deter them from getting involved with drugs, as such behavior could jeopardize these relationships (DeKeseredy 2005:217 *see also Hirschi 1969*). *Involvement* refers to the idea that when people spend more time engaging in “legitimate pursuits”, they will be less likely to get involved with drugs. On the other hand, individuals who do not have, nor are able to gain access to such pursuits will be more likely to engage in illegal drug behaviors (DeKeseredy 2005:217 *see also Hirschi 1969*). Lastly, *belief* has to do with the extent to which individuals believe and accept the norms and laws of society. If people do not believe in such rules, there is a greater chance that they will break them. In the case of drugs, if people do not accept laws stating that

the consumption or distribution of drugs are illegal, then there is a greater likelihood that these same individuals will choose to use drugs compared to others who accept and believe in drug laws (DeKeseredy 2005:217 *see also Hirschi 1969*).

Hirschi's model is applicable to both drug use found within the college setting and outside of it. The conditions that shape the four elements of social bond, however, may differ in each setting. In examining how colleges could assist in producing strong or weak social bonds, it becomes important to look at both the type and structure of the school as well as the different subcultures that may exist within it. Since Hirschi is primarily concerned with deviance produced as a result of weak social bonds, it is likely that the colleges that lack strongly enforced norms or well-defined academic or vocational trajectories, will also have students who are less attached, involved, or committed to the institution, and therefore will be the students who experience weakened bonds to normative and traditional values. With that said; however, a student's bonding to his or her own higher education institution is purely situational and dependent on the context and setting of the institution itself.

### **Drug Use and Social Learning Processes**

Socialization processes are often informed by both social and cultural practices. Such practices can be used to understand the ways in which people develop certain views towards drug use. As studies have shown, family, peers, and schools act as the most prominent socialization processes responsible for both protecting against or allowing drug use to occur (Beauvais and Oetting 2002:11).

Oetting and Donnermeyer (1998) present the *primary socialization theory*, utilized in order to understand how deviant behaviors such as drug use are either prevented or accepted. The primary socialization theory, as a social process, typically occurs and continues to develop from

infancy to young adulthood. The theory asserts that, “deviant behaviors, including drug use, are learned behaviors resulting from the interaction of social, psychological, and cultural forces” (Cubbins and Klepinger 2007:811 *see also Oetting and Donnermeyer 1998*). The same phenomenon is promoted in Becker’s *Becoming a Marijuana User* (1953), which explains the process by which an individual not only learns how to use marijuana, but also how to interpret the actual experience of getting high. For Becker and other interactionist theorists alike, using drugs is not just an individual experience, but is instead entangled within a broader social learning procedure. While Becker’s piece focuses explicitly on marijuana, his findings can be applied to the use of any illicit drug. When getting involved with any type of drug, the user must not only engage in an experience of learning how to use the drug itself, but also in learning how to interpret their experience. Becker would argue that the latter is inherently socially produced. Becoming a user only occurs by learning through others.

Many studies and national surveys have concluded that drug use is most rampant during adolescent to young adulthood years (SAMHSA 2009, 2013). These age categories commonly represent high school and college-aged individuals. Using the aforementioned socialization processes, it can be inferred that socialization processes may occur both before and during college and furthermore could be relevant in explaining why drug use at such ages is most prevalent. It is not presumptuous to state that many individuals enter college already having experienced some sort of involvement with drugs. For these individuals, drug use in college may already be viewed as a normalized activity. Using Becker’s rhetoric, these individuals have already learned how to use and experience drugs, and are therefore more likely to fit into groups that accept and normalize this behavior. With that said, there are individuals who do not use drugs in college even if they have had previous experiences with them before college. For these

individuals, previous experiences with drugs could in fact aid in their decision not to use in college. As Becker claims, part of the learning process that accompanies becoming a user has to do with interpreting the experience of being high. If individuals interpret their experience negatively, it is less likely that they will continue to use drugs in the future.

Individuals who go into college never having experimented with drugs often go through another socialization process. As White and Rabiner state in their book *College Drinking and Drug Use*,

Many students enter college with perceptions that heavy drinking and drug use are normative behaviors among college students, that substance use has a facilitative effect on making new friends, and that substance use is a symbol of maturity (2012:1).

Here, drug use is linked to other social processes of making friends and reaching a level of maturity. It is perceived as something beneficial that could aid in making the college experience more fun and enjoyable. Students who enter college with no prior experience with drugs may find themselves taking one of two routes. First, they may adopt the heavily dominant perception which normalizes college drinking and drug use and decide to integrate themselves into a community where they will become socialized as a college student who uses. Or second, they may disagree with these “positive” perceptions of drugs and drinking and stray away from getting involved all together.

### *College as a Social Process*

The experience one has during college can be understood as a social process. It requires some sort of social awareness in order to aid in shaping how one behaves, interacts, and understands their own surroundings. Drug use in college, whether an individual decides to get involved or not, requires this same social learning process. As Becker argues, it is both the social context in which people interact and the meanings people come to share that distinguish their

own perceptions about and experiences with using drugs (DeKeseredy 2005:219 *see also Becker 1967, 1973*). Labeling is yet another aspect of Becker's theoretical framework that asserts that drug use only becomes understood as deviant once it is labeled as such. Labels are a product of interactions and social context. While drug use is generally understood as a deviant behavior, applying the interactionist theory to college student drug use may yield a dissimilar effect. If college students interact with one another to determine and label drug use to be 'normal' or 'acceptable' than it will not be viewed as necessarily *bad* or *deviant*. The post-college experience may also yield similar results. If college graduates find themselves working jobs or maintaining social networks that normalize drug use, it will not be as stigmatizing as it might be for college graduates who are instead involved and attached to certain networks and roles that do not condone drug use.

Following Becker's labeling theory, differential association theories on deviance claim that people are exposed to different definitions of both deviance and conformity and therefore behave accordingly to such views (Sutherland 1947). While many conform to uphold standards that oppose deviance, others normalize it. The very idea of differential association makes clear that there are different types of people in the world with different social networks, attachments, and backgrounds that aid in shaping their outlook on certain behaviors. Drug use fits in perfectly with this perspective on deviance. More so, drug use in college and post-college can be used as prime examples of how differential association can exist and change from one setting to another over time.

Drug use in college can be widely attributed to the types of subcultures that may exist within the institution. Since some subcultures may experience more regulation and be held to normative standards of conduct, it is reasonable to infer that drug use, while it probably still

occurs, is not seen as an acceptable activity for those subcultures. Therefore those involved with such subcultures will have negative associations with drug use. On the other hand, there are many subcultures that exist within the college setting that may indeed facilitate, accept, and normalize substance use. To further analyze the effects and characteristics of subcultures, a theoretical perspective on such groups is necessary. Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory is relevant. Although their theory of neutralization is geared to explain the behaviors and rationalizations of delinquent subcultures, it is feasible from Sykes and Matza's perspective to explore the non-explicitly deviant subcultures that may exist in college. In *Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency* (1957), Matza and Sykes define delinquent subcultures to include a complete set of systems and values that go against the laws and norms widely held by the larger society. While many subcultures that can exist in the college setting may or may not outwardly try and subvert or go against the general laws and norms upheld by society, or more narrowly their institution, they may rationalize their potential deviant behavior in accordance with Sykes and Matza's views. What is unique about Sykes and Matza's ideas is that they assert that even though delinquent subcultures try and defy all normative, acceptable modes of conduct, they also demonstrate an internalization of larger societal laws and norms. With college subcultures, although many may promote deviance through the acceptance of using drugs or alcohol, many students are often aware of the repercussions that may follow if they are caught partaking in such deviant activities.

### **College and Post-College Factors**

Drug use in college cannot fully be explained by the college experience itself, but instead relies on the inclusion of many other factors that have regularly been cited to influence drug use behaviors. A 1981 study conducted by the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services

surveyed 7,700 randomly selected full-time college students on self-reported drug use. The study documented how drug use trends in college vary when examining the relevant factors of gender, race, college location, and college year. The results found that men in college were more likely than women to use illicit drugs on campus, while both men and women were equally likely to use prescription drugs for non-medical use. In regards to race, white students were found to be the largest population of users. Location factors were also explored and found that students attending colleges in rural and suburban areas were more likely to use drugs than those attending colleges in cities. Lastly, one's college year (level) was also an indicator of drug use trends. Freshman and sophomores were found to have slightly higher rates of use compared to juniors and seniors (New York Report 1981). Similar results were found in regards to race and gender variables in Bates et. al. (2010) study.

While demographic characteristics as well as factors pertinent to the college environment itself have been explored, what is more important to the processes of persistence and desistance are what comes after the college experience. What factors post-college, in conjunction with those that exist or arise in college, facilitate a process of drug use desistance or persistence? Do college experiences influence experiences later in life? Or do situations arise independently post-college that aid in determining the likelihood of desistance or persistence? Social control theorist would argue for the latter—that events and transitions pertaining to the post-college, “adult” environment including employment, marriage, and having a child would indeed be the most important factors to explore in determining the likelihood of drug desistance or persistence. What I will argue, however, is a combined approach—an approach that employs the rhetoric of social control and social learning to demonstrates how events and experiences, like attending college,



have the potential to shape and/or influence the likelihood of drug persistence or desistance later in life.

### **The Minimally Explored Territory of College and Why it Matters**

It is clear that drug use among college student is widespread (Bates et. al. 2010; Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; White and Rabiner 2012; Gledhill-Hoyt et. al. 2000). Previous studies have shown that while drug use rates have diminished over time, young or *emerging* adults between the ages of 18-25 still represent the largest population of drug users in the United States. The lowest rates of drug use occur amongst kids (12-15) and adults 30 and older (SAMHSA 2009, Mieczkowski 1996:352 *from National Institute on Drug Abuse 1993*). Due to the fact that this distinction between ages and rates of use has remained relatively consistent over time, I am interested in testing the age-graded theory of deviance among individuals who may have experienced higher use rates in college and have since desisted from use after graduating. At the same time, this process is not all encompassing. There are individuals who do not experience desistance from deviant behaviors and continue to use drugs throughout their life span. This is what is referred to as drug persistence. There are also individuals who do not experience desistance from drug use at all because of the simple fact that have never used drugs. This is referred to as drug abstinence.

While there have been many longitudinal surveys conducted and scholarly texts written providing insight into the life-course analysis of drug use, little research has been done on drug use among college students; and even less research done on comparing how experiences with drugs in college may influence behaviors and perceptions post-college. Drug use from a life-course perspective has been well-documented throughout many studies including the Youth Development Study (YDS), the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Monitoring

the Future, and National Survey on Drug Use and Health. These studies provide important information regarding the prevalence of drug use among adolescents and young adults as well as information about drug use later in life. Not only have these studies been able to illuminate an extremely important and relevant issue, but they have also been widely utilized and analyzed by scholars concerned with explaining and exploring the relevant factors that facilitate a life-course perspective on drug use.

Using data collected from the Monitoring the Future survey, Merline et. al. (2004) were able to explore how prevalent substance use is at age 35 and which factors are most responsible for contributing to this prevalence. There is a general belief that when midlife begins, individuals are assumed to take on greater social responsibilities and roles that influence substance use to subside—an idea largely consistent with social control theories of deviance. This study, however, shows that even when controlling for factors of gender, marital status, employment, and education there is a strong association between substance use of the past and current substance use. The effect of substance use history plays a huge role in this analysis, specifically when controlling for certain types of substances (2004:101). For example, the study found the connection between marijuana use and heavy drinking in high school and marijuana use and heavy drinking at age 35. The study concludes with findings supporting the notion that substance use is still rather prevalent at age 35 and is due to factors relating to adulthood roles (employment stability, marital, and parental status), experiences, and previous use. While Merline et. al. highlight how age and life-course experiences such as marriage, parenthood, and employment stability can impact substance use behaviors, they do not dive into the experience of college. They instead focus primarily on how adolescent experiences with drugs may impact

adulthood experiences. Although data regarding adolescent substance use is important to explore, there is something distinct about the college experience that requires further analysis.

Although both the Monitoring the Future Survey and National Survey on Drug Use and Health *do* provide longitudinal research on college student drug use, they do not address the actual experience of college—why drug use is so widespread during those years, and how it may influence drug use activity later in life. My study hopes to begin to answer some of these questions by asking college graduates to both reflect on their college experiences and current experiences with substance use. My study hinges on a life-course analysis of drug use by looking first at the college setting as a key site for drug use to emerge and persist, and second at how drug use behaviors and attitudes post college may or may not change. While there are of course many factors that might influence an individual to get involved with drugs (gender, age, socio-economic background, religiosity, etc.) my research will demonstrate that while these other factors may be relevant, there is something distinct about life-course events, especially the event of attending college, that needs to be studied further.

### **Methodology**

My study relies on the survey responses of 54 college graduates. 65 survey responses were initially gathered for this study, however, after reviewing each survey in its entirety, 11 have been discarded either for their lack of information provided, due to multiple skipped questions, or the fact that some participants were identified through their responses as not having graduated college. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods. Links to my survey were promoted on social media platforms including Facebook and LinkedIn as well as through word of mouth.

The survey itself was conducted online and was 100% voluntary and anonymous. Participants were instructed to answer questions about their past and current attitudes towards drugs, past and current experience with drug use, as well as more general questions that could help determine the other relevant factors that could intervene with the factor of college to explain behavioral choices and attitudinal formations. The survey consisted of 28-52 open-ended and closed-ended questions.<sup>1</sup> The number of questions a participant was asked was dependent on specific answers to previous questions. There were no set categories of drugs listed (i.e. marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens, non-medical use of prescriptions, etc.), so participants were allowed to write out specific drugs that they may currently use or have used in the past. For operationalization purposes I have categorized all the drugs mentioned in survey responses. These groups include: marijuana, cocaine, “study drugs”, benzodiazepines, MDMA, prescription opiates, hallucinogens, non-prescription opiates, and “other” drugs. Participants were able to skip any question they did not wish to answer.

Participants were informed about the potential risks and benefits to completing the survey and were required to affirm their consent before taking the survey. Participants were not asked to release their names nor any other personal information about specific institutions they may be affiliated with i.e. the name of the college/university they attended or the name of the company they may currently work for. If participants did refer to specific institutions or provide specific names in any of the open-ended survey questions, I made sure not to utilize any of this information in my data analysis. Any names referenced throughout this study are pseudonyms. The time it took to complete the survey was dependent on the participants answers, however, on average it took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I for the list of survey questions.

While the data collected from this survey is used to explain each process of drug abstinence, desistance, and persistence, there are some limitations to this research. Due to the time constraints of an eight-month long project, data had to be collected and analyzed in a timely fashion. This meant that the survey was only active online for about two to three months, which most likely limited the potential number of participants I was able to acquire in that time. The sample size itself remains relatively small. Because of this, it is difficult to generalize drug use trends to a greater population. Instead, my sample exists not to explain *why* drug use patterns arise or change over time, but rather to theorize *how* they may or may not change over time by testing the largely accepted theories that accompany processes of desistance, abstinence, and persistence.

The survey asked respondents to reflect on past and current illegal behaviors. While the survey was completely anonymous, asking individuals to address illicit activities they participated in during college and currently participate in could have made them uncomfortable and potentially effected the information they provided in their responses. Although these responses are valid, the reliability of them, especially when dealing with recounting memories of past experiences, can always spark debate. Another limitation presents itself when considering the demographic of survey participants. There is an inherent lack of diversity between respondents. The majority are white, middle class respondents between the ages of 22-26. Because of this, it becomes difficult to make any class or race-based arguments, as well as significant age-graded connections that may pertain to the each process under examination. Although these claims are absent in my own research, they are nonetheless important to note as they likely have an impact on each process of desistance, abstinence, and persistence.

## About the Participants & Project Layout

### *General Sample Characteristics*

*The majority of survey participants were females (61%), followed by males (37%), and anyone who identified as another gender (2%). The majority of respondents were also white (72%), followed by Asian (11%), multiracial or “other” (11%), non-white Hispanic (4%), and black (2%). In regards to class, the 63% of survey participants reported belonging to the middle class, while 26% belonged to the upper class, and 11% the lower-working class. Although many respondents reported what religious denomination they identified with, the majority of respondents reported that were non-religious (85%). Lastly, in regards to political views, 74% of survey participants identified as liberal, followed 21% moderate, 4% conservative, and 2% “other”. See Appendix II for further details.*

The 54 survey participants have been placed into three different theoretical groups based on specific drug use pattern characteristics. Using the terminology of Schroeder et. al. (2007) and Blumstein et. al. (1985) two categories are referred to as *desisters* and *persisters*. In addition, I have labeled another category: *abstainers*. *Desisters* and *persisters* in the Schroeder et. al. study are used to describe individuals whose self-reported drug offending histories have since subsided (*desisters*) or continue to occur (*persisters*). Blumstein et. al. also use the terms in the context of criminal career research, depicting the likelihood of criminal offenses for members of each group. Both the Schroeder et. al. and Blumstein et. al. studies, unlike my own, deal with mapping out drug-offending trajectories over time, largely in conjunction with broader notions of criminality and incarceration rates. While our studies may differ, the terms *desister* and *persisters* will be used throughout my work to refer to the different types of pathways each survey respondent has been identified as traveling in regards to drug use—that is, the abstinence path, desistance path, or persistence path.

The first chapter deals exclusively with the abstainers. The abstainer refers to the college graduate who has abstained from using drugs in college and post college. Out of the 54 survey participants, 12 have been identified as abstainers. The 12 abstainers range in age from 22 to 61,

with the majority between the ages of 22 and 25, with an average age of 30. There are eight abstaining females and four abstaining males. In regards to race there are eight white abstainers, two Asian, one non-white Hispanic, and one multiracial abstainer. While the number of abstaining respondents is relatively small, they act as an important demographic and will be utilized to compare and contrast among other groups. The abstinence process will help explain how and why certain alike individuals or groups may tend to get involved with drugs while others do not. The chapter on the abstainers works to determine the contexts and reasons behind the decision to abstain from drug use throughout college and post-college. It examines, in detail, the unique responses provided by each survey participant as the main source of evidence in explaining the socio-cultural characteristics, life-course transitions and pathways, and personal ideological influences that may have impacted each participant to remain abstinent from drug use over time.

The second chapter is dedicated to the desisters. The term desister refers to the college graduate who used drugs during their time in college, but has since ceased using. Out of the 54 survey participants, 15 have been identified as desisters. The 15 desisters range in age from 22 to 62, with an average age of 34. There majority of the desisters come from the middle class (60%) while the other 40% come from the upper class and lower-working class at 20% each. There are fourteen female desisters and one male desister. In regards to race, there are thirteen white desisters, one black desister, and one mixed race desister. Similar to the preceding chapter, this chapter focuses on the life-course patterns of the desisting respondents. It begins by exploring the attitudes and behaviors desisters have expressed both before and during college to see how such views and behavioral choices have changed through the transitions that begin to make up the post-college experience. This chapter will reveal how drug use patterns in the past may

influence drug use to subside in the future, as well as shed light on the other possible factors that may influence this change in behavior including: institutional attachments to employment, as well as distancing relations to deviant peers.

Lastly, the third chapter revolves around the unique group of persisters. The term persister is used in reference to the college graduate who used drugs in college and continues to use drugs presently. Of the 54 survey participants, 27 have been identified as persisters. These persisters range in ages between 21-58, with an average age of 26. Unlike the abstainer or desister groups, male respondents occupy the slight majority of this persister group at 57%. The persister group also possess the largest percentage of respondents belonging to the upper class at 37%. In regards to race, the majority of persisters are white (67%) followed by Asian (15%), multiracial (15%), and non-white Hispanic (3%). This chapter on persisters explores drug use patterns over time by examining the distinctive events, transitions, and social arrangements that facilitate persistent drug use. It explores questions pertaining to how individuals come to use drugs less frequently or more frequently over time. How have these individuals been either unable or unwilling to desist, and furthermore what are the implications of drug use persistence? Persisters and desisters will function as comparative agents, highlighting how each process of desistance and persistence is inherently different, but at the same time share some overlapping similarities when further explored.



## Chapter One

### *The Abstainers*

Meet Rebecca. Rebecca is a white 24 year old woman residing in the suburbs of New York. Rebecca is Catholic and considers herself to be religious. She is currently employed as a working graduate student. Rebecca is single and still possesses friends who use drugs currently. Rebecca grew up belonging to the middle class. Both of her parents graduated from college. From a young age Rebecca remembers her parents very conservative views against drug use. Although inherently against drug use, Rebecca recalls her parents' stance on marijuana as relatively liberal. Rebecca entered college with the perception that some drugs were "ok" while others were bad.

Rebecca attended a small liberal arts college where she had many friends who used drugs. It wasn't until college that Rebecca became exposed to many more "hard" drugs; she herself had never experimented with them before. Rebecca was initially nervous about the increased exposure to drugs in college but later grew accustomed to their ubiquitous presence on campus. She was no longer frightened by the very site of them. Furthermore through the very exposure, drugs became normalized to Rebecca, allowing her to adopt more lenient views of them: "If you can handle it, go for it."

Rebecca did not use any drugs during her time in college, although she did frequently drink alcohol. While the opportunities to use were there, Rebecca maintained that getting involved with drugs was never something she particularly had any interest in. Instead, not using was a way for her to be different from the masses. Rebecca continues to abstain from drug use today.

The following chapter highlights the life course patterns of those who chose to abstain from using drugs in college, and who continue to abstain from drug use currently. The focus of this chapter will be to determine the underlying social forces and factors that have influenced individuals like Rebecca to abstain from drug use over time. Drug abstinence is a process, one that requires conscious, repetitive decision-making to continue on the same path. Since the respondents who make up this group of abstainers are all traveling the same non-drug using course, each contribute an important insight into how this process of abstinence is possible for some and not others. In order to illustrate the process of drug abstinence, the abstainers are

examined through numerous lenses in the following sections. The beginning sections work to establish what general attitudes towards drugs each abstainer held before attending college in order to show if and how the experiences they had in college might shape and transform their initial views. College is then observed from both a social interactionist stance and a social control stance, examining how experiences with friends in college and attachments to the college institution itself may have played a role in facilitating drug abstinence at the time. Finally, the present, post-college arena is explored, illustrating how post-college factors of employment, romantic relationships, and current social networks are all useful to explaining the process of drug abstinence.

#### *Attitudes: Pre-college and in College*

Participants were prompted to reflect on the attitudes they held before attending college, how and why those attitudes may or may not have changed during college, and finally what their attitudes are now after graduating college.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to reflect on whether, and if so how, their parents influenced their attitudes towards drug use before attending college. While all the abstaining respondents reported having parents who held negative beliefs about drug use and promoted abstinence from them in their household, all but four abstainers reported that their parents anti-drug views had not influenced their own. The eight abstainers whose views were directly influenced by their parents provided detailed reflections of why that was so. Alyssa, age 24, states that her parents taught her “to abstain from hard drugs”... and that “bad things come to those who do drugs.” Similarly Peter, age 61, writes, “They told me about people they knew who died. I was afraid of drugs when I was younger.” For Alyssa and Peter, a fear of drugs instilled by their parents led them to perceive drug use as dangerous at a young age. While the fear of

drugs itself was a result of parental influence for Alyssa and Peter, other abstainers reported that their view of drugs were influenced by a different kind of fear—a fear of disappointing their parents. Becky, age 24, states, “[I] still would be afraid to have my parents find out if I were using a substance.” Lastly, Rebecca, age 24, provides another example of the ways in which parental influence affected respondents’ previous views towards drugs. She writes, “[My parents] encouraged us not to do drugs and led by example.” For Rebecca, and other abstainers alike, having parents who preached an anti-drug rhetoric and also “led by example” by not using themselves, positively influenced their children’s views towards using drugs as a behavior to avoid.

The four abstainers to report that their parents views on drugs did not influence their own also shared important insight into why that was the case. As Penelope, age 23, states,

While [my parents] didn’t condone [drug use] they didn’t actively speak against it. They trusted our judgment and helped guide us to our choices in other ways [...] I formed my own opinion on drugs and the effects that they have on people and their lives.

Similarly Madison, age 22, writes, “Only my brother’s interest has made me more curious, but no influence from my parents. If anything, they make me feel like it’s my decision and are neutral so long as I’m safe.” Although both Penelope and Madison had parents who did not condone drug use, their views on drugs were not as rigid as other abstainer’s parents. Instead, Penelope and Madison’s parents promoted safety and trust, which led Madison and Penelope to develop their own perceptions and make their own decisions about drug use.

The majority of the abstainers reported having primarily negative or indifferent views towards drugs before attending college, while a select number of them reported having some positive views. Those who reported negative views provided rationales that essentially went along the line of, “for the most part drugs make you a worse person” (Tom, age 23) or, “drugs

[are] bad and drinking [is] a sin” (Jessica, age 24). Tom and Jessica both shared a negative view towards drug use before attending college. For Tom, the issue was with the user who he claimed would become a “worse person” from using, while Jessica found the drugs themselves to be the main cause of concern. Following this theme of concern over the drugs themselves instead of the person who uses them, there was one abstainer who reported having negative, indifferent, and positive views. Mary, age 34, states that she held negative views towards drugs “if addictive and destructive”, indifferent views if drug use was “experimental”, and lastly positive views towards drugs if they were “used for legitimate medical purposes.” Mary’s comment demonstrates that the type of drug along with its intended use facilitated her perceptions of them. If drugs were used for medical purposes, as marijuana and other prescription drugs regularly are, then she would view drug use in this context as positive. It is when someone begins to abuse and/or become dependent on these drugs that Mary views them as problematic. Contexts and reasons for use become the main force behind creating Mary’s perceptions. Not all drugs are *bad* and not all drugs are *good*, but there are certain circumstances and situations in which drugs can be used to “help”, medically speaking, and times where drugs may be detrimental, socially and individually.

The abstainers who reported having an indifferent view towards drugs before attending college painted a different picture of their perceptions of drug use. For them, drug use was not a “sin” as Jessica depicted it, but instead, a personal choice that they did not believe it was their place to make any judgments of. As Penelope states, “People make their own choices, and if they aren't hurting anyone, it isn't my place to interfere.” Madison reiterates these sentiments in her response: “[I] didn’t care if other people used, but I wasn't particularly interested.” While the abstaining participants regarded drug use in a primarily negative or indifferent light before

attending college, interesting shifts occurred when participants were asked about how their views changed in college. Of the eleven abstainers (one abstainer's attitude data is missing), six reported that the attitudes they had before attending college remained the same throughout college, while the other five abstainers reported having experienced a shift in views while attending college. What is clear for many abstainers who held on to the views they shared before college is that parental socializing influences were largely associated to the upholding up these views. On the other hand, the abstainers who experience shifts in drug perceptions in college demonstrate how attitudinal transformations can be mediated by multiple social actors: parents and peers. These ideas are consistent with broader socialization theories that find parents, peers, and schools to be the three dominant influences used to construct views (Beauvais and Oetting 2002:11; Oetting and Donnermeyer 1998).

#### *The Friendship Factor: Social Networks in College*

The most apparent cause of the shifts in views experienced by these five abstainers had to do with the friends they had in college. Take for example Jessica, who had previously reflected viewing drugs and alcohol as “bad” and sinful. Jessica's views changed in college, and she herself attributes this change to the friends she saw using drugs in college. She states in one of her responses that, “I had friends who participated in illicit drug use. Although I wasn't the biggest fan of their behavior, I didn't stop being friends just because they liked doing so.” Jessica's response reflects an indifferent tone similarly expressed by Penelope and Madison earlier on. Jessica, while secure in her position to abstain from using, did not let her friends' decisions to use in college keep her from wanting to be friends with them. Instead, it was because Jessica was around the presence of drug use that she was able to adopt a more indifferent outlook on them. She was not going to use herself, but she also was not going to judge the

people who did. Friends played an important role on Madison's views as well. Although Madison, unlike Jessica, entered college with an already indifferent view towards drug use, she expresses that seeing a lot more of her friends use different drugs throughout college actually made her more curious about experimentation.

Rebecca, who we know from the vignette, also referenced the role her friends played in shaping her perceptions of drugs during her time in college. In a detailed reflection Rebecca writes,

Before college I was skeptical about the use of "hard" drugs (i.e. cocaine, acid, prescription pills, etc). Since I was never really exposed to the use of "hard" drugs before college, their very presence made me nervous I guess. But then I grew accustomed to their almost ubiquitous presence amongst many of my friends and at most parties. I guess this habituation process made them less frightening. Now, I don't think there's anything remarkable about heavy drug use. Its chill almost passé at this point actually. "If you can handle it go for it" is basically my position.

Not only do the friends an individual has in college prove to affect perceptions, but it also became clear among other abstainers like Rebecca that the environment of the college itself plays an important role in shifting views of drug use. Rebecca, like Madison and Jessica, noted that many of her friends used drugs in college. For Rebecca, seeing her friends use made drugs seem "less frightening." She also comments on the fact, as many other survey participants did, that drugs are simply more ubiquitous in college. Rebecca became more exposed to them throughout college; the very exposure allowed the idea of drug use to become less concerning. What is interesting to note about abstainers like Rebecca is how they reflect many of the same sentiments regarding college exposure to drugs as other respondents who ended up using in college. In Rebecca's case, it becomes harder to try and explain abstaining behaviors when the respondents themselves report having less negative and more indifferent views towards drug use in college.

What differentiates the abstainers from the desisters and persisters, however, is the fact that even though many of them might have perceived drug use indifferently in college, they still maintained that it was not an activity they wished to partake in. What is more comprehensible instead, is the abstainers whose views towards drugs did not change in college. At least with these individuals the link and logic between viewing drugs in a negative manner and therefore choosing to abstain from them is easily traceable.

While perceptions and views towards drug use became less harsh among nearly half of the abstaining respondents when they got to college, the other half held on to the beliefs they had before attending college. In attempts to find explanations for why certain members of this abstaining group held on to their previous negative perceptions of drugs in college, while others experienced a shift to more accepting or indifferent views, it became necessary to look into the types of schools each respondent attended as well as the type of friends they surrounded themselves with.

The abstainers who reported adopting more lenient views on drug use also reported being around “a few” to “many” friends who used drugs in college. Abstainers who did not experience a change in views, on the other hand, reported either having “a few friends,” “almost no friends,” or “no friends” at all who used in college. This relationship is relatively logical. It implies that being around more friends who used allowed abstainers to come to regard drug use less harshly since it became a normalized activity among friends. On the other hand, those who still viewed drugs negatively were the ones to have fewer drug-using friends in college. It may then be the case that because the abstainer entered college with negative conceptions of drug use that they decided to friend individuals with similar stances. Whether influenced by seeing peers participate in drug use or not, what remains abundantly clear is that the personal beliefs each abstaining

participant had during the time they attended college played a role in their decision to abstain from using in college.

*The Abstainers' Rationale: Why the Abstainer, Abstains*

For many, using drugs in college is a decision; a choice, a yes or no situation. You either agree or choose to participate or you don't. For those who chose to abstain from using in college, one thing is clear, they each had a variety of reasons why they decided not to partake. The first rationale expressed by the majority of the abstaining respondents was an underlying perceived fear—a fear of the dangers associated with drug use. As Jessica, age 24, writes in her survey, “The dangers associated with drugs like ecstasy or cocaine did not seem appealing. The temptation of a brief high wasn't enough to persuade me to try them.” For Jessica, the idea of experiencing a “brief high” was not worth the risks associated with using. Her perceived fears of using along with the notion that whatever psychophysiological sensation she might experience would not be worth it, detracted from her overall interest in experimenting with drugs. Another abstainer, Tom, age 23, states, “I wasn't sure about the health risks of ecstasy, and pot makes you stupider. All the other drugs are dangerous so I stayed away.” Here, Tom, like many of the abstaining respondents, reported that his lack of knowledge regarding specific types of drugs aided his fear, or rather, perceived dangers associated with them and ultimately facilitated his desire to abstain. Health concerns were also addressed in a response by Becky, age 24, who claimed that, “Health concerns, academic concerns, [and] moral concerns” were the three dominant reasons for why she chose not to use. While fear was a widespread response to the question of why choose to abstain, other reasons were often expressed in conjunction with this notion of fear. Like Becky, moral concerns and academic concerns also played a role in why she chose to abstain.



Following Becky's mention of the moral concerns she held about drug use, it became clear among other abstainers that personal values along with personal experience were two more dominant explanations for why many of these respondents chose to abstain from using drugs in college. While all abstainers are categorized as such for their decision not to use drugs in college and post college, four of the twelve abstaining respondents *did* report experimenting with drugs before attending college. Unlike the rest of their abstaining counterparts, these four individuals have tried drugs in the past and therefore represent an important example of how past experiences have the potential to influence future behaviors. Many researchers have argued that previous drug experiences can increase the likelihood of future occurrences (Merline et. al. 2004; Blumstein et. al. 1986), but what is unique about these abstainers is the very opposite. Their previous drug encounters do not predict future ones to occur, but instead influenced them to cease. Although not entirely the same, the experiences of these four abstainers also mirror a type of desistance process. They desisted from drug use before attending college and then proceeded on the path of drug abstinence.

Three of the four respondents who reported using drugs before college attributed how their past, negative experiences with drugs influenced their decision not to use in college or post college. As Madison, age 22, writes, "[I] just haven't had good experiences in the past so I'm refraining from having those again." Joey, age 22, shared a similar view, "eh, I did it in high school and I was honestly scared to overdose again." For Madison and Joey, the past negative, and even traumatic experiences, in Joey's case, with drugs became the primary reasons for abstaining from drug use throughout college and post college. For another abstainer who used before college, it came down more so to how the drug(s) they experimented with made them feel. These feelings ultimately played a role in influencing them not to use again. Tom, who is

mentioned before, attributes the effects of marijuana to the sensation of stupidity. Having experienced that sensation himself when he first tried marijuana before attending college, it is evident from Tom's response that the sensation he got from marijuana was not one he wished to experience again.

What we gather from these individuals is what Howard Becker (1953) so eloquently argues in his piece, *Becoming a Marijuana User*. For Becker, and in the case of these abstainers, unpleasant, negative first experiences with drugs influence these beginner users to not pursue further use. It is only if their experiences are corrected, or rather learned to be interpreted as pleasurable that use will continue. For these abstainers, use experiences were never learned to be interpreted as a source of pleasure. As Becker claims, learning to redefine drug experiences only occurs through interaction with more experienced users. Yet, because these abstainers did not find pleasure in using drugs to begin with, it is likely that they never embarked on learning to redefine drug use behaviors through interactions with others.

The last abstainer who reported using drugs before attending college did not share any reasons for abstaining reported by the other three abstainers who had also used before college. Unlike Madison, Joey, and Tom, Peter, age 61, states that “[I] had grown out of it [using drugs] by [college]. I was older when I did my studies.” Here, Peter references what I believe to be another important factor in determining who and why someone may abstain from using drugs in college and post college: age. While Peter did not report at what age he *did* attend college, he *does* acknowledge that his age had some influence on his decision to abstain from using in college. Peter's statement brings forth interesting inquiries regarding age as a potential indicator of drug use behaviors. Is there something about those who attend college at an “abnormal” age—that is, older than the typical 18-21 year old college student that can predict abstinence from

drugs? Or is it more so about the social engagements and environment of the college itself that can influence potential drug use? Either way Peter's case is nonetheless important to note as it coincides extremely well with the aging out theory of drug use and other deviant behaviors. The theory supposes that as an individual gets older and experiences normative transitions throughout the life-course, they will be less likely to get involved with drugs or other deviant behaviors since they are not considered acceptable behaviors at the ages when an individual is perceived as an adult (Sampson and Laub 1992).

The last dominant reason for choosing not to engage in drug use reported by many members of this abstaining group was simple disinterest. As Penelope, age 23, states in a response, "I hated the idea of losing control and I had no desire to see what it was like." For Penelope and other abstainers who have never used drugs before, preconceived notions of the potential ability to "lose control" on drugs was enough to solidify their disinterest in trying them. It is evident from the abstainers who have experimented with drugs before college that past experiences with drugs played an important role in halting future use. For those who did not share any drug experiences before college, it primarily came down to their own preconceived notions of the dangers and risks associated with drug use that aided in their overall disinterest in trying them.

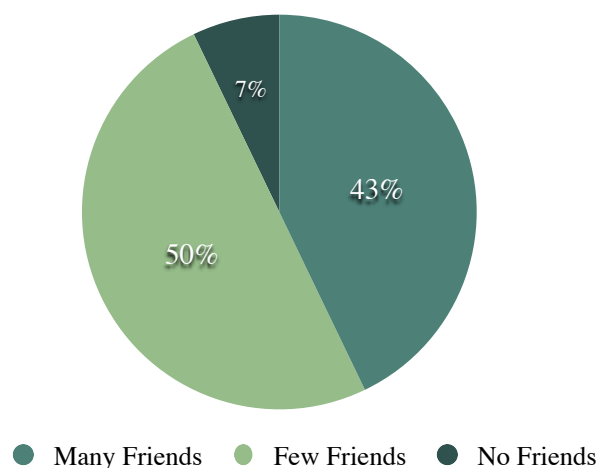
### *Type of School*

The type of school one attends and the number of friends who used drugs at the time, provide an important insight into the type of social contexts experienced by this group of abstainers. These concepts then can be used to help explain why and how these individuals chose to abstain from using drugs during college. Among the abstainers, eight reported attending a large university, three a small liberal arts college, and one another non-listed type of university.

While there is no current theoretical framework in recent scholarship to explain if and how certain types of schools may have an influence on increasing or decreasing the potential for drug use among students, I will argue that the type of school an individual attends, in conjunction with the type of social life they have during college, may secure an influential role in determining the likelihood that they will either choose to use or abstain from using drugs during the time spent in college.

Survey participants were asked to select the type of college they attended. The response choices included: small liberal arts, large university, religious, community college, or other. Another section of the survey asked participants to reflect on how many of their friends used drugs in college. The question itself was formatted as a multiple choice option that provided participants the ability to choose between 5 potential responses: 1- all friends, 2- most friends, 3- only a few friends, 4- almost no friends, and 5- no friends.

*Figure 1*



The responses have been collapsed for operational purposes (see figure 1). Respondents who reported that all or most friends used in college were categorized as having “many friends” who used in college. Respondents who reported having few or almost no friends who used in college

represent the “few friends” category. And finally, the respondents who reported having no friends who used in college remained in the category “no friends”. In order to see if there is in fact any correlation between the type of school one attends and the type of social life one leads while in college, the responses to both the question of school type and how many friends used at college were explored in conjunction with one another.

Figure 2

CFU \* CollegeType Crosstabulation

			CollegeType				Total
			Small Liberal Arts	Large University	Religious	Other	
CFU	Many Friends	Count	24	16	0	1	41
		% within CollegeType	96.0%	66.7%	0.0%	25.0%	75.9%
		% of Total	44.4%	29.6%	0.0%	1.9%	75.9%
	Few Friends	Count	1	7	1	3	12
		% within CollegeType	4.0%	29.2%	100.0%	75.0%	22.2%
		% of Total	1.9%	13.0%	1.9%	5.6%	22.2%
	No Friends	Count	0	1	0	0	1
		% within CollegeType	0.0%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%
		% of Total	0.0%	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%
Total	Count	25	24	1	4	54	
	% within CollegeType	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	46.3%	44.4%	1.9%	7.4%	100.0%	

Figure 2 is a crosstabulation table illustrating the association between college friend use by type of school attended of the entire sample. From the figure it is clear that the number of friends each respondent had in college who used drugs can be associated with the type of school they also attended. Those who attended small liberal arts school were also the participants to report having the most friends who used in college. The majority of abstainers (67%) reported attending large universities and were also the ones to report having comparatively fewer friends in college who used drugs. All three of the abstainers who attended small liberal arts schools reported having “many friends” who used drugs in college. The figure not only proves to be statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), but it also yields a strong association between school type and number of friends who use drugs in college (phi value=.561). To put it simply, those who attend

small liberal arts schools are more likely to possess a larger range of friends who use drugs than those who attend larger universities. The rationale behind this correlation is relatively logical. Small liberal arts schools are significantly smaller than universities that are typically categorized as having upwards of 10,000 undergraduates. It is likely that those who attend small liberal arts schools will then have a greater opportunity to get to know more people because of the smaller study body. These findings are not only relevant to the group of abstainers, but also prove significant among desisters and persisters. Both the majority of desisters and persisters attended small liberal arts schools, which depicts how drug-related experiences in college may be related to having more drug-using friends at the time.

Not only may college type provide an insight to the type of social life a student may have in college, but the number of drug-using friends an individual has in college is also associated with the drug use patterns of the individual. For the abstainers, many did not possess more than a few friends who used in college comparative to the groups of desisters and persisters who, in general, report having more friends who used in college (see Appendix III Table 1). With that said, there were still a number of abstainers to report having many friends who used in college. It then becomes less clear whether or not it is the lack of drug-using friend—a disassociation with “deviant” peers, as Sutherland (1947) has promoted, that helped facilitate these respondents’ decision to abstain from using during their time in college *or* if friends instead had little to do with the abstainers decision to refrain from drug use entirely.

### *College Drug Acceptance*

Along with the type of school one attends and the reported number of friends who used in college, respondents were also asked to address whether or not they perceived drug use as “accepted” or “normalized” at their school and if so, which specific drugs were perceived as

such. The abstainers who attended large universities only reported drugs including marijuana and Adderall to be the most accepted or normalized on campus. Not only did the abstainers who attended liberal arts schools report having many more friends who used drugs in college, but they were also the respondents to report viewing more drugs as “normal” or accepted on their college campuses. Along with marijuana and “study drugs” like Adderall, LSD, molly, and cocaine were the drugs the abstaining liberal art school attendees perceived as most normalized and widely accepted. Joey, age 22 provides a detailed response to the magnitude at which these substances became acceptable,

Cocaine was fine, but heroin wasn't. Also pills weren't, yet a majority used. So clearly a discrepancy between attitude and behavior. Also there was a limiting on coke, [it] was fine as long as you weren't "bugging out" on it, or it was interfering with your coursework. That was seen as messy "hot mess" as my friends and I would say.

At the small liberal arts college Joey attended, it was clear that while certain drugs were normalized, there was a range at which they became accepted. While “coke” (cocaine) was normalized, it was only considered acceptable to use if the user was not “bugging out.” Joey also references an important dynamic between attitude and behavior. He notes that while certain drugs were accepted, others like “pills” were not, yet the majority of students still used them. The tension between attitude and behavior is one that intrigues me most. If people hold certain views towards different types of drugs, wouldn't that be enough to influence them either to use the drug or abstain from it? At Joey’s school this was not the case. Even those who held negative views towards using “pills,” still succumbed to using them. This is a unique and important difference between those who abstained from using drugs in college and those who chose to use. For the abstainers, there is a clear and strong connection between attitude and behavior. For the individuals who used in college, this connection is less defined. Many desisters and persisters

could view drugs in a negative light and still continue to use them. This idea will be discussed in the chapters to follow.

### **The Post-College Experience**

While the event of attending college may play a dynamic role in shaping or reaffirming attitudes and behaviors at the time, after graduating college an individual experiences yet another important life-course transition. A typical post-college transition might go as such: look for a job, find a job, get married, have children, and so on. While every college graduate may not follow this trajectory, there is something notable about the effect of drug use from the life-course perspective that supposes that a process of some sort, where an individual ages and attains greater responsibilities in regards to work and or family. This process, from a social control perspective, is believed to influence drug use behaviors and other forms of deviance to cease. Since the group of abstaining respondents chose to not to use drugs during college as well as post-college, I am interested in trying to explain how this phenomenon was able to occur for some respondents and not others. An in depth overview of the potential relevant factors that could aid in explaining the abstainer's current stance and non-use behaviors will now be discussed.

### *The Graduate Social Life*

It is evident that the type of social lives the abstainers led during college had some affect on their perceptions of drug use during that time. Because of this, I will now argue further that the type of social atmosphere the abstaining respondents possess now has also played some role in maintaining their current abstinence from drug use.



Towards the end of the survey, participants were asked to reflect on what their current social realm looks like, if their friends currently use drugs, and if drug use is considered “normal” or acceptable. Of the twelve abstaining respondents, seven (58%) reported not having any friends who currently use drugs, while the other five abstainers (42%) reported current friend use. Of the five abstainers whose friends currently use drugs, some still reported, however, that drug use is not considered normal or acceptable in their social realms. As Jessica, age 24, writes,

Drug use is not accepted in my current social realm. I am in a professional health program and it is contradictory to be promoting health and well-being if you are using drugs on the side. The few people who use illicit drugs do so sparingly, and most of the use is marijuana which is legal in Washington.

Jessica’s reflection provides important insight into how one’s social sphere can influence behaviors. Jessica notes that she is involved in a professional health program. She claims it would be contradictory for her or anyone else in her program to use drugs. Yet, Jessica still reports that some of her friends currently use drugs. Jessica is a perfect example of how social understandings of drug use can increase or decrease the chances of engaging in certain behaviors. Among her colleagues in the professional health program, drug use is not considered an acceptable or normal behavior, however, among the few people she knows who do use drugs the behavior may in fact be normalized between them. Different groups may internalize drug use as an acceptable behavior, while others do not (Becker 1963). Jessica interacts with both groups, but if she has stronger ties with the group which is also largely associated with her professional life, it makes sense that she would abstain from use as it is not accepted among them. If she was instead more involved with the friend group that does continue to use drugs, this may not be the case. Lastly, it is important to emphasize Jessica’s final comment, which refers to the legality of marijuana in Washington. Marijuana is also the drug she reports is most commonly used by the people she knows.

The decriminalization of marijuana at the state level is unique in the sense that it is currently unfolding in more and more areas around the United States. With this said, the new, somewhat relaxed attitudes towards marijuana have proven to have an effect on respondents' social environments. Madison, age 22, who also reported having friends who currently use states, "Yes, weed is common around me and not really seen as a big deal." Similarly, Tom, age 23, writes, "Most of my friends from Los Angeles smoke pot and it's not a big deal." While Tom and Madison both report having friends who use drugs currently as well as how marijuana, in their immediate social realm, is perceived as normal and "not a big deal," another abstainer, Jeffery, age 25, does not report having friends who currently use, but *does* believe certain drug use, like marijuana is accepted in his environment.

It is clear from this unique group of abstainers that knowing people who currently use, or even the fact that some abstainers themselves perceive drug use as normalized around them does not guarantee potential drug use to arise. To put it simply, for these abstainers, the likelihood of getting involved with drugs does not have to be dependent on friends as much as it has to do with other structural forces that may influence an individual's own desire to partake in such an activity.

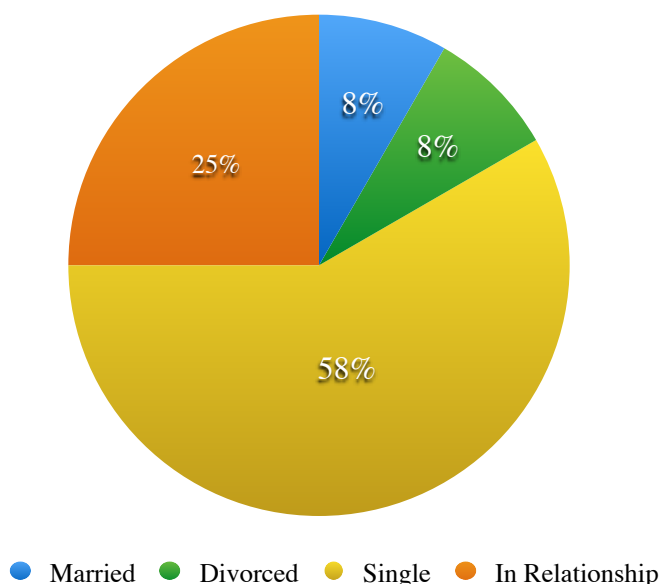
### *Employment*

Many studies have already made clear that deviance is less likely to occur when one has attained stable employment (Massoglia and Uggen 2010; Merline et. al. 2004; Sampson and Laub 2001). The importance of employment in halting unwanted behaviors like drug use is also sustained through larger theoretical frameworks. Take Hirschi's (1969) notions of social control for example. Those who are employed are more likely than those who are not to secure stronger attachments and commitments to the social order that working and maintaining a job demands.

All but one abstainer reported being currently employed, while the one respondent who is unemployed is also a full-time graduate student. Although when observing the abstaining group exclusively it seems likely that one's current employment status can play a role diminishing the probability of using drugs, the correlation between the employment status and current use is not as strong when looking at the sample of respondents as a whole, particularly among the group of persisters (see Appendix III Table 2).

### *Marriage*

*Figure 3*



While marriage has largely been explored as a factor to influence desistance from deviant behaviors (Laub and Sampson 1993; Nagin and Land 1993; Warr 1998; Giordano et. al. 2007), it may not be as useful, in the case of the abstainers, to suggest how and why individuals may continue to abstain. Out of the group of abstaining respondents, 58% reported being single, while 25% reported that they were in a relationship. Only 8% of abstainers are married (see figure 3). Relationship status and furthermore marital bonds then do not seem to have much effect on

determining whether or not abstinence from drug use will occur. Instead, what becomes key about these abstainers is the fact that their decision to abstain came long before the idea of marriage.

### **Conceptualizing Drug Abstinence**

Both social learning and social control theoretical frameworks have been utilized to suggest why and how this group of abstaining respondents have been able to remain abstinent from drug use in college until now. While these frameworks are useful, they are more so concentrated around conceptions of drug use desistance and persistence. Theorizing abstinence from drug use by employing these theories requires more thought and investigation. Can theories largely associated with ideas of desistance and persistence also be relevant to conceptualizing abstinence? While there *are* frameworks that deal exclusively with theorizing abstinence, they primarily deal with explaining it as an experience that comes after heavy use patterns or issues of “addiction” arise (Coleman 1978). What my group of abstainers provide instead, is a look into the types of people who never get involved with drugs in the first place, and a type of process that remains consistent over time. Once the abstainer uses, they are no longer apart of an abstaining process. While small in sample size, an outlier even, the abstainers still represent a specific type of group that is unique for never allowing drug use to secure a prominent place in their lives.

How does the abstainer abstain? What personal and social forces may be at play to deterring potential use? This chapter has worked to resolve some of these initial questions. While my research cannot assert causality, we have learned from this group of abstainers that social learning variables including attitude formation and socialization processes as well as simple social interactions may have informed these respondents, from an earlier age, that drug use was

never an activity they wished to participate in. In college, while some abstainers experienced a shift toward more indifferent, desensitized views of drugs, others still maintained their largely negative perceptions of them. This was mainly due to the presence of drugs on college campuses and the number of friends each abstainers had who used drugs in college. What remains unique about this group of abstaining respondents is that fact that even though they have had friends who used drugs in college and some even have friends who use drugs now, each member of this group of abstaining respondents continues to not use. Post-college, most abstainers still possess the views of drugs they held both before college and in college. They maintain that using drugs is simply an activity they wish to stay away from. In both the college and post-college setting, each abstainer's personal ideology has proven to act as one of the strongest deterrents of drug use. But attitudes may not paint the entire picture. While the abstainers perceptions of drugs are crucial to understanding their decision to abstain, it is also important to review the number social forces (i.e. the number of non-deviant peer associations and attachments to social institutions like the workplace or family) that have also presumably played a role in facilitating drug abstinence.

## Chapter Two

### *The Desisters*

Meet Jane. Jane is a 23 year old white female currently residing in California. Jane is employed, liberal, and Jewish, although she does not consider herself to be religious. Growing up, Jane's parents encouraged her to experience whatever she wanted within reason. Because of this, Jane developed a relatively accepting view of drugs at a young age. At 16, Jane had her first experience with marijuana.

Jane attended a large university where she had many friends who also used drugs. In college Jane continued to use drugs including marijuana, Adderall, and Xanax on a semester basis (i.e. once a semester). While her use was relatively infrequent she finds that she would use mostly in social situations like parties or big school events. Jane believed her drug use in college positively affected her social life, but had detrimental effects on her school work. Because of this, Jane's use decreased over the time she spent in college. By her senior year, Jane was using less than what she had been when she was a freshman.

After graduating Jane's drug use has completely subsided. She does not use drugs anymore. Although Jane believes that drug use is still relatively accepted in her social realm, she does not possess friends who currently use either. At the age of 23 Jane is simply over using drugs. She no longer sees the need in that kind of behavior. Although Jane now leads a drug-free lifestyle she still maintains a relatively positive outlook on drugs. She feels that her experiences in college have taught her to be more accepting of drug use, but has since realized that it is an activity she no longer wishes to continue.

This chapter focuses on the life-course patterns of the desisting respondents like Jane. Since desistance is a process, it is also a phenomenon that implies change. Changes in both attitudes and behaviors over time that begin in the past and ultimately lead to discontinued drug use. Because the process of desistance would not be possible without such attitudinal and behavioral transformations, this chapter begins by exploring the attitudes and behaviors these respondents have expressed both before and during college in order to see how such views and behavioral choices have changed over time. Each subsequent section deals with specific attitudinal and behavioral tendencies of the desisting respondents largely associated with, and influenced by, social forces. With questions pertaining to how and why drug use in the past may

influence drug use to subside in the future, as well as explorations of the other possible factors that may influence changes in perceptions and behaviors, this chapter not only examines and explains the process of desistance, but also questions the governing theoretical approaches to it.

*“They encourage me to try whatever I need to try within reason” : The Impact of Parental Views*

The attitudes one holds before college, in college, and post college have proven to be an important indicator affecting potential behavior, as seen within the group of abstaining respondents. The desisters prove no different. Their attitudes, however, unlike those of the abstainers, are pertinent to determining why and how these individuals have chosen to use drugs at certain points in their lifetime. It was clear among the abstaining respondents that most of their parents had some influence on the attitudes they held towards drugs and drug use before attending college. While the majority reported adopting the negative views held by their parents at that time, many of the desisting respondents instead, reported adopting the overwhelmingly indifferent views of their parents.

A number of desisters claimed to have parents who were open about their own past drug use experiences. Alice, age 22, states,

My father smokes weed and is experienced with psychedelics, which piqued my curiosity to experiment [...] being a product of two parents who grew up during the hippie era definitely caused me to view drug use as a casual activity.

The knowledge Alice had regarding her parents' past experiences with drugs led her to believe that the drug use was, and could be a, “casual activity.” Alice’s reference to using drugs as “casual” allows the idea of drug use itself to become normalized in her familial setting. Drug use was not seen as “bad” or “wrong”, as members of the abstaining group often reflected. Instead, drug use in Alice’s family is portrayed as a seemingly harmless, once again, “casual” activity. Similarly, Eve, age 50, writes,

Both parents acknowledged using or experimenting with drugs themselves. My parents' attitude towards drug use was casual enough that I didn't have strong feelings about either using or abstaining from drugs.

Like Alice, Eve's parents also acknowledge their own past drug use experiences. While Eve's parents were open about their past experiences with drugs, it does not seem to have the same effect on Eve as it did with Alice. Unlike Alice, Eve states in an earlier post that she was not significantly influenced by her parents' views. In fact, because her parents viewed drugs in such a "casual" manner, Eve did not feel influenced to use or abstain from drugs at the time.

Another desisting respondent provides an interesting and insightful response about the role her parents played in shaping her views on drugs,

[My parents] definitely influenced [me] to an extent. For one, their overall disapproval was vocalized, however there were instances of an almost "don't ask, don't tell" policy where they knew I was smoking pot, however they didn't tell me to stop/ say explicitly that they knew[...]They both have smoked cigarettes and pot in college, so i felt that it was almost a right [*sic*] of passage.

In her response, Dalia, age 22, explains how while her parents voiced their disapproval of drugs, in practice, they maintained a relatively neutral stance. Dalia refers to this as her parents own form of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Although they might have been aware of her drug use, Dalia's parents never actively prompted her about it. At the end of her remarks, Dalia claims, as Eve and Alice had before, that her parents used drugs like marijuana in the past. Although her parents past use may not have influenced her parents to allow drug use among their children, Dalia does note that because of her parents' past experiences with drugs, it felt like "it was almost a right [*sic*] of passage", and therefore "ok" for her to experience some of the same experiences her parents once had in the past.



Lastly, there is one response from a desister whose comments begin to shed light on the important transformation of how pre-college drug use perceptions can change once the individual enters the college setting. Sydney, age 29, writes:

My mom enforced her "rules" about not using drugs primarily through education and trust. I believe this helped in my lack of interest to experiment with too many substances. While my family's views about drugs probably had an influence on mine while I was very young, I believe I came to my own opinions about drugs mainly from my social interactions.

Sydney reflects on how her mother used “education” and “trust” to influence her children to abstain from using drugs at a younger age. Sydney believes these “rules” helped her become disinterested in experimenting with “too many substance”, which implies that her mother’s rhetoric regarding drugs did not influence her to abstain completely. While Sydney does find that her mother played an influential role in developing her views toward drug use at a younger age, Sydney ends her remarks by claiming that it was more so the “social interactions” she had with others that allowed her to develop her own perceptions of drug use.

The importance of one’s social interactions (outside the family) in determining perceptions and furthermore, influencing behavior, is exactly what the interactionist theories of deviance look into. Becker (1973), most notably, asserts that it is the social contexts and understandings which individuals share that will determine their own perceptions and experiences towards drug use. That is, through social interactions, one will not only learn through experience, but by the experience itself, what it means to use drugs. Through this theoretical framework, an individual’s decision to use drugs is solely dependent on the type of experiences that individual has with others. The individual learns how to use, and furthermore, what it means to use, through watching and interacting with others who promote that kind of behavior.

For many of these desisting respondents, their first conceptions of drug use came through an interactive, social learning process between child and parent. We can refer to this process as socialization. But as Sydney shows, parental influence can only last so long. At a certain point, people sustain interactions and experiences with others that begin to shape and transform their views and behaviors (*See also Maume et. al. 2005 and Sampson and Laub 1993*). This is exactly what we see happen with this group of desisters.

### *High School Friends, Experimentation, and the Transition to College*

Although many desisters reported adopting the views of their parents when it came to drug use, since many desisting respondents *also* had parents who did not explicitly condone drug use, or accept it, many desisters were left with a sense of freedom to use or abstain from using drugs before attending college. Out of the fifteen desisting respondents, only three reported never having tried drugs before attending college. The remaining 12 who did, all reported first experimenting with marijuana between the ages of 13 and 18, with one respondent who reported first experimenting with acid at age 17. Unlike the abstainers, the majority of both desisting and persisting respondents reported experimenting with drugs before college. For many of the desisters, experiences with drugs and other friends who used drugs before college, added to their largely indifferent views.

As Simone, age 29, states:

[Before college] I never did drugs beyond weed because I never had any interest. But I had friends who would get high on coke and other drugs frequently (more in high school than in college). My main reasons for not liking drugs were because I didn't like peer pressure and I didn't like the feeling of coming off a high. But overall I was indifferent to drugs as long as they didn't effect me directly.

Simone, like many other desisting respondents, entered college with relatively indifferent views of drugs. As she claims, drugs use was present among her friends in high school, but she still

maintained that using drugs was never something she herself was particularly interested in. While Simone admits to using marijuana before college, she was never influenced to use “harder” drugs like cocaine that her friends would use at the time. Simone reflects on some of the reasons for why she was uninterested in drugs at an earlier age. She writes that she did not enjoy the “peer pressure” associated with drug use as well as the “coming down” effects of a high. This response shares major similarities with some of the abstainers who also reported experimenting with drugs prior to college. It was these early experiences with drugs that influenced Simone, and others alike, to not necessarily regard drug use as negative, but instead something that they did not particularly want to engage in again. What differentiates Simone from the abstainers, however, is the fact that she goes on to use drugs throughout college. Simone is a perfect example of Becker’s (1953) notion of learning to experience the effects of drugs as pleasurable through others. Although her experiences with drugs were not so satisfying before college, in college it is likely that Simone learned through her interactions with other drug-using peers how to reinterpret the sensations she gets from using as positive instead of negative.

### *The Impact of College on Drug-related Views and Behaviors*

As seen with the abstainers, the event of attending college and the experiences one has during that time, plays a dynamic role in influencing attitudes and behaviors. In some cases respondents experienced a shift in views, while in others, desisters’ original perceptions of drug use were reaffirmed. While many entered college with somewhat indifferent views towards drug use, in college, many respondents experienced a slight shift in views that correlated directly to the exposure of drugs, the perceived sense of freedom students have in college, and the amount of people they knew who used drugs at the time.

Take for example, Dalia, who writes:

In college, I realized that the opportunities to abuse [drugs] were extremely apparent. For one, parents are not there to check-up on you and two, friendships were sometimes defined by the drug use. Friends would pressure, or ok severe drug use because it was entertaining/fun.

Dalia notes that the absence of parental supervision directly led her to believe there to be more opportunities to use, or as she claims, “abuse” drugs. There is an important and significant change that occurs when attending college. That is, a lack of perceived supervision or surveillance, which allows students to more freely experiment with drugs without concern of being caught. In some of the desisters’ responses regarding the impact of parents on their views towards drugs, many acknowledged that while their parents often shared indifferent views, respondents tended to abstain or feel guilty about using drugs at an earlier age as such behaviors would disappoint their parents. In college, this perceived sense of guilt or fear of using almost disappears completely because of the inherent lack of parents’ physical presence in college. Students do not have to worry about coming home drunk or high because their parents are not there to reprimand that behavior.

Another important aspect of Dalia’s response is her reference to the role friends played in shifting her views of drugs. She notes that some friendships were even defined by drug use and that furthermore severe drug use and peer pressure were elements of friendship that were “ok” or normalized if in the context having fun. It is evident from Dalia’s reflection that perceptions of drug use in college are not just dependent on the friends one has but the context in which drug use exists. Sure, drug use can exist among friend groups, but it is only when the contexts of these friend groups are explored—that is, the social situations like parties, small gatherings, or big events in which drugs are typically used that we begin to see how such perceptions and behaviors arise.

## **Contexts and Reasons for Using Drugs in College**

Survey participants were asked to reflect on the reasons behind their drug use and contexts in which drugs were typically used during their time in college. After compiling the responses from the desisting participants, it became clear that there were a number of reasons for why these individuals chose to use drugs in college. The social contexts in which drugs were typically used, however, were relatively static. In some cases, the contexts themselves were enough reason to influence drug use as well.

### *Under Pressure*

One of the reasons for choosing to get involved with drugs in college was peer pressure. By peer pressure, however, I am not referring to the quintessential “if you don’t smoke this joint, you won’t be cool” type of peer pressure commonly regarded for the territory of middle school and high school interactions. Instead, peer pressure here is used to reference a broader social pressure. A pressure not so much about needing to “be cool”, but rather a type of pressure to be on the same page as everyone else. As Georgia, age 22, writes, “Social situations caused pressure to engage in smoking weed in order to have a similar mood as everyone else.” Georgia’s response provides important insight into both the reasons and contexts that influenced her to begin using in college. While she makes no explicit reference to the ways in which she might have experienced pressure from her friends, she does claim that “social situations” themselves produced a type of pressure to use. Here, the instance of being around people who were using was enough pressure in itself to perpetuate Georgia to feel like she needed to use in order to “have a similar mood as everyone else.” For Georgia, drug use became just another way of being apart of something, to be apart of a group and to be apart of an event.

In another response, Alice, writes, “Peer pressure, extreme exposure, [and] eventually addiction” were the three dominant reasons that impacted her decision to use throughout college. Alice’s response begins to map out a certain trajectory of use patterns. While her initial use began as a result of feeling pressured by her peers, she also notes that the “extreme exposure” to drugs in college also led to eventual addiction. Addiction is an important term to consider in this response. While many desisting respondents either acknowledged using drugs heavily or less frequently in college as a result of social contexts and experiences, the notion of addiction implies an extreme sense of dependence on the drug itself. For Alice, once she had developed an addiction, drug use did not become just a social experience she shared with friends, but an individual problem that resulted in her using drugs primarily on her own. She later reflects in her response that, “When I stated using a lot, it would be alone or with another person using as much as I was.” While Alice *does* admit to using drugs a lot on her own, she also notes that she would only use with another person who was using as much as she was at the time. Conceptually, this idea fits in well with Becker’s notion of labeling. It is likely that once Alice’s drug use habits surpassed what was possibly considered “normal” drug use among her friends, she was left to use more so on her own or with someone who used as much as she did, as to not be considered a “deviant” drug user. Furthermore, Alice labeled her drug use as an “addiction”, a stigmatizing term for many, and therefore may only have felt comfortable using around others whose heavy drug use mirrored her own.

### *The College Environment*

Yet another reason for why this group of respondents chose to engage in drug use throughout their time spent in college had to do with their own perceptions of the school they attended as well as the greater exposure to drugs found in their new settings. When asked if the

respondents perceived drug use to be normalized or accepted at the college they attended, all but one of the fifteen desisters reported that certain types of drugs were both normalized and accepted on their campuses. The one desister to not report perceived acceptance of drugs at her school was also the only respondent to attend a religious college. This fact most likely had an impact on why drugs were not viewed as accepted when compared to the respondents who attended large universities or small liberal arts schools. Furthermore, Ariana, the respondent who attended a religious college, was the only survey participant in the entire sample to report that drug use of any kind was not accepted or normalized at her school. This then suggests that there is something about the type of college one attends that can determine how drug use may or may not be perceived. In this case, it is likely that small liberal arts school and large university will be more accepting of drug related behaviors than a religious college. While ties to religion as an indicator of diminishing deviance potential is not a new idea (Perkins 1985), it is an interesting fact that should be acknowledged nonetheless. What is more interesting when exploring religion and furthermore religiosity among surgery participants, however, is the weak association between the two factors and drug use (see Appendix III Tables 3-6). No religious denomination proved relevant to explaining increased or decreased drug use tendencies in college or post-college. Furthermore, religiosity—that is, how committed each individual actually is to their reported religion, proved to be an insignificant, weak association ( $\phi = -.146$ ) between deterring drug use of respondents. Only eight of the fifty-four survey participants reported that they considered themselves to be “religious”. Of those eight, five reported using drugs in college, showing that commitment to a religion does not guarantee drug abstinence. Although individual commitments to religion may not be largely associated with deterring or promoting drug use, Ariana’s religious university case exposes that even though “religious” students may continue to

use drugs in such a setting, drug use in general is not considered an acceptable or normalized activity in the religious school environment.

The role college environments play in influencing perception of drug use and actual drug use behaviors was made clear in a response by Dalia, who writes, “The environment at school seemed to be very accepting of using drugs. The school wasn’t strict and the students were very pro drug.” Dalia makes reference to two types of school actors; the student body and the school’s administration. She notes that the students “were very pro drug” and the college itself was not strict with managing its student’s potential drug-related behaviors. A lack of perceived regulation of such behaviors from the college’s position can be viewed from the perspective of social control theorist, Travis Hirschi. Hirschi is concerned with how deviance is produced as a result of weakened bonds to institutions that promote social order. Using his rhetoric it can then be hypothesized that because Dalia’s college did not enforce strongly defined norms or regulations, it is likely that students became detached from, and/or less involved with the college institution itself, allowing them to adopt non-normative and non-traditional values like using drugs.

While Dalia’s reflection highlights how she perceived the college environment and furthermore the college’s administration to foster more accepting views of drugs and drug-related behaviors, other respondents made reference to how the increased exposure to drugs on college campuses aided in producing a rationale for acceptable drug use. Alice and Jane, age 22 and 23 respectively, cite that the increased exposure to drugs produced a shift in their views of them and furthermore, a rationale for using them. Both Alice and Jane entered college with relatively indifferent, yet slightly negative ideas concerning drug use. As Jane states, “[Before college] [I] wanted to be open minded but was secretly scared”, while Alice writes, “[Before college] I believed I would never use anything other than weed.” In college these views changed. Alice and



Jane both claim that in college they became more exposed to certain types of drugs, and were among a few desisters to report that all of their friends used in college. Here, the increased exposure went hand and hand with the fact that all of Jane and Alice's friends were also using in college. While the influence of drug-using friends may not have played as influential role among the group of abstaining respondents, friends do certainly exert an influence on rationalizing college drug use among the majority of these desisting respondents.

### *Psychological Influences*

While reasons to initiate drug use in college were widely influenced by both friends and the college atmosphere itself, one desister shed light on another important rationale for drug use in college. Martha, age 50, writes,

I had a lot of depression, anxiety, loneliness, insomnia and stress and I knew drugs could relieve those things temporarily[...]Sometimes I just used something because I knew it would have a pleasant effect.

For Martha, reasons behind using drugs in college were not as social as other respondents had alluded to. Instead, Martha's drug use was rationalized by personal, mental health issues. As she claims, drugs could act as a reliever to the issues of depression, anxiety, and so on that she was feeling. They were also used because she was aware of the "pleasant effect" some drugs could produce. Here, drugs were not about the social context in which they were used, but instead about the possibility of the drug's pharmacological effects helping with individual issues. Surely Martha has had some experience with drug use in social situations, she even makes reference to it in another response, "Sometimes I used because I was with friends who were using." What is important to note here, however, is the distinction between rationales for using. In Martha's case, drug use was more so a way to self-medicate. It was a personal choice to impact personal issues

when using on her own. When around friends, however, her decision to use drugs was solely based on the fact of being around friends who were also using.

*“Parties. Pregames. Big events.” The Contexts of Drug Use in College*

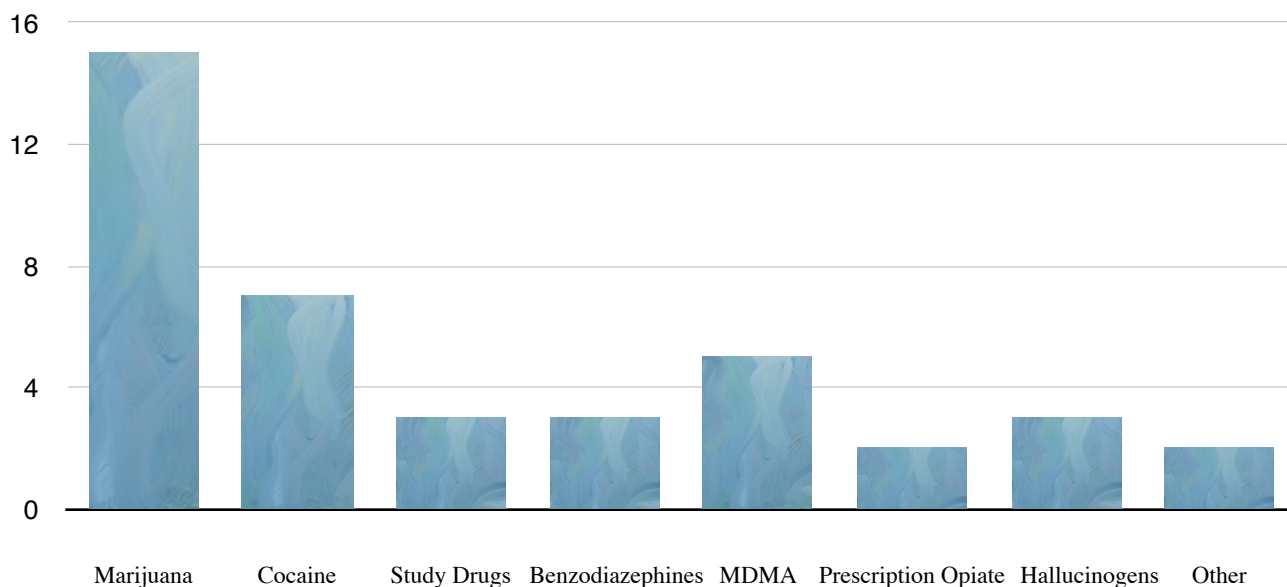
It is evident from the statements provided that many of the desisting respondents had a variety of reasons for getting involved with drugs in college. While their rationale for use may differ, the contexts in which drugs were typically used remained relatively similar. Of the 15 desisters, all made some reference to friends, parties, and social gatherings, whether large or intimate, as being the common contexts in which drug use arose. Only two respondents also made note of using alone, one of whom was Martha. The other was Olivia, age 52, who writes that drug use was “usually social (dancing, partying) but it was just as enjoyable to go to the beach alone, smoke some weed and watch the waves.” Although Olivia comments of the social aspect of drug use in college, she also notes that using alone and having experiences with nature, in her case, the beach, was “just as enjoyable” as using for parties or other social situations. While Olivia and Martha both highlight the fact that they used drugs alone, Olivia does not reflect having the same reasoning as Martha for using drugs alone. Again, Martha’s decisions to use on her own stemmed purely from mental health concerns, while Olivia’s decision to use on her own reflects more so of a personal desire to experience nature, taking on somewhat of a spiritual tone. While solitary drug use was not typical amongst the desisting respondents, Martha and Olivia’s comments do illustrate that other contexts for drug use, besides the widely accepted social ones, do exist within the college setting.

With that said, parties were without a doubt the most common response to the question of context for drug use among this group of desisters. For many respondents, the idea of going out to a party with friends corresponded directly to drug activity. In this manner, the context of the

party dictated the rationale for use. But this is not always the case. It would be short-sighted to say that without a party there is no reason for use. While all inherently social, respondents acknowledged that along with partying, simple social gatherings or hangouts provided another type of context for drug use. As Kira, age 24, states, “[Drugs were] just a nothing casual way to hang out with friends.” Similarly Dalia claims that drug use became a thing to do when “hanging out in dorms with friends.” In this context, drug use, as Kira and Dalia describe it, becomes just another way to spend time with friends. It is not only purposed for the high energy party scene, but exists as just be another social, “casual” activity. While different in nature, parties and casual hangouts between friends are nonetheless social situations, both imply that the primary reasons and contexts behind drug use in college are inherently social.

#### *Drug Type and Frequency of Use: Desisters*

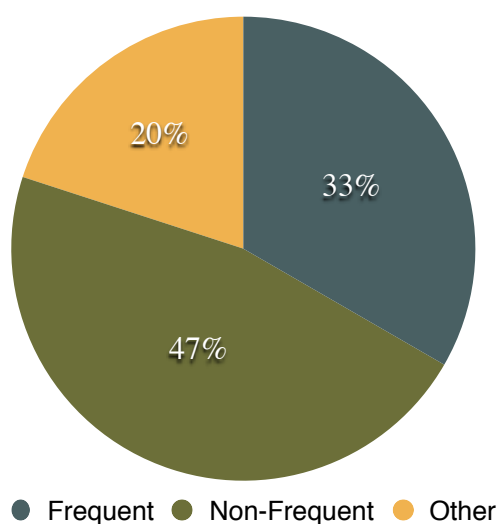
*Figure 4*



One of the largest distinctions between the group of desisting respondents and the groups of the abstainers and persisters is evident in relation to the frequency of drug use in college and

the types of drugs commonly used. Figure 4 depicts the types of drugs used in college by members of this desisting group, while Figure 5 shows the percentage of which respondents have been categorized as frequent, non-frequent, or other type of user. Respondents were categorized as “frequent” users if they reported using drugs multiple times a week or once a week. Non-frequent users were then those who reported using drugs either once a month or once a semester. Lastly, the other category exists for the few respondents who provided written descriptions of their fluctuating use patterns.

*Figure 5*



Nearly half of the desisters can be thought of as non-frequent users. Because of this, I argue then that the type of user one is in college as well as the type of drugs that are used at the time, could act as a potential indicator of the likelihood that the user will experience drug persistence or desistance post college. In the case of the desister, if the participant was a non-frequent user in college and only reported using one to a few different drugs at the time, it could be inferred that drugs did not have a huge impact on these types of respondents in college, and therefore do not secure a primary or influential role in their current lives. Figure 6 makes this theory becomes clear.

CurrentUse \* CUR Crosstabulation

Figure 6

			CUR				Total
			Non-Frequent	Frequent	Other	Non-User	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	1	21	4	1	27
		% within CUR	12.5%	80.8%	57.1%	7.7%	50.0%
		% of Total	1.9%	38.9%	7.4%	1.9%	50.0%
	No	Count	7	5	3	12	27
		% within CUR	87.5%	19.2%	42.9%	92.3%	50.0%
		% of Total	13.0%	9.3%	5.6%	22.2%	50.0%
Total	Count	8	26	7	13	54	
	% within CUR	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	14.8%	48.1%	13.0%	24.1%	100.0%	

Figure 6 depicts the number as well as the percentage of respondents who have been categorized as either non-frequent, frequent, other, or non-user *and* reported currently using or not currently using drugs. From the table it is clear that those who were non-frequent users as well as the abstaining “non-users” occupy the largest percentage of those who do not currently use drugs at 87.5% and 92.3% respectively. Conversely, those who were considered frequent users in college represent the largest percentage of those who report current drug use at 80.8%. Those who were categorized as “other” users in college share a relatively similar percentage of current drug use and non-use; with a slight increase in percentage for those who still currently use drugs at 57.1%. “Other” users become difficult to assess. In some cases, the “other” type of user experiences moments of heavy drug use and then instances of no use at all. Because of these dramatic fluctuations, it makes sense that some of these types of users have gone on to experience desistance, while their “other” counterparts may continue to use. Three “other” users are desisters, while four “other” users are persisters. This then shows that the fluctuating use patterns of “other” users in college are not as useful in predicting post-college drug-related behaviors. Instead, the more stable categories of frequent and non-frequent users provide us with

the rationale that the type of user an individual is in college can assist in predicting the likelihood of future use post-college.

While the link between being a non-frequent drug user in college and experiencing discontinued use post college seems relatively logical, what become harder to explain is the 33% of desisters who were categorized as frequent users in college and yet, do not currently use drugs. This is where I believe the importance of the number and type of drug(s) used comes in. Of the five desisters who were understood as frequent users, only one of them reported using more than three drugs in college. The remainder of the frequent users only reported using one to three drugs during college. The most common drug used by the frequent users was marijuana, while one to two other frequent users also reported using cocaine and/or speed regularly. What is important to note about the type of drugs typically used by the more frequent users, is that the majority of them reported only using marijuana on a regular basis. Marijuana can be viewed as the black sheep of illicit drugs. While inherently illegal to use and possess the substance without a prescription, over time marijuana use has become considered a relatively acceptable behavior (Maume et. al 2005; Cauchon 2001). So, even though five of the fifteen desisters have been categorized as frequent users in college, the drugs they frequently used are not considered as “harmful” or dangerous when compared to other drugs reportedly used by the group of persisting respondents (see *Persister Chapter*).

### **The Desistance Process**

The rationale behind the age-graded theory of deviance is made clear from its title; there is something about an increase in age that influences a decrease in or complete cessation of deviance (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983; Sampson and Laub 1992, 2001). While presenting evidence in support of the aging out theory, the desisting group *does* possess the largest

percentage of respondents over 40 years old (33%). What is more unique about this group of respondents, however, is the fact that the majority of them (53%) range between the ages of 22 to 24 years old. Age then, in the case of my sample, does not prove to be a dominant predictor of desistance from drug use. Instead, what my sample shows is that growing up or “aging out” of drug use is not so much dependent on actual age, but more so about what factors and experiences must be occurring to facilitate this process at any age. This idea is inconsistent with Hirschi’s and Gottfredson’s social control theory of deviance which supposes that as the age of an individual increases, there is a likelihood that they will experience greater attachments to different social institutions, securing stronger social bonds, and therefore reducing the chances for them to participate in deviant activities like using drugs. While the latter remains true in the case of the desisters, age does not seem to occupy such a defining role as Hirschi and other control theorist alike have proposed. Instead, my sample coincides more so with Loeber and LeBlanc (1990) who also find that desistance is possible at any age or at any point in the life span.

There is a common conception that past experiences with drugs have the ability to predict future use patterns (Merline et. al. 2004; Blumstein et. al. 1986). While this might be the case with some, Farrington and Hawkins (1991) find that the connection between the factors that influence deviance to arise earlier in life are not strongly associated with deviance later in life. Following Farrington and Hawkins, observing the patterns of the desisting respondents reveal that their past experiences with drugs in college do not dictate their current positions. Instead, what we see happen with the desisters is what Sampson and Laub (2001) and Hirschi (1983) find to be the one of the most important facilitators of desistance: securing strong bonds to both social institutions and conforming social networks.

Employment is one of the greatest factors associated with decreasing the chances of drug use to persist, or in the case of the abstainers, diminishing the chances that drug use will even arise. In the case of the desisters, the former reigns true. Of the fifteen desisters, only two reported being unemployed. The high percentage of those employed (87%) demonstrates consistency with the numerous studies (Sampson and Laub 2001; Farrington et. al. 1986), which have also concluded that employment has a strong potential to deter deviance.

Marriage also secures a prominent role in determining the probability of drug use persistence or desistance later in life (Maume et. al. 2005; Sampson and Laub 1993, 2001:19; Laub et. al. 1998; Rand 1987). Among the desisters, five reported that they are currently married, seven reported being in a serious relationship, and three reported being single. Although a good percentage of desisting respondents *are* married, the majority of them are instead involved in serious relationships. None of whom, however, are currently cohabiting. Although within the group of desisters, marriage might not have as strong of an association with deterring deviance as non-marital relationships do, when looking at the sample as a whole, marriage *is* found to be more so associated with discontinued drug use than persistent drug use (see figure 7). 86% of married survey respondents do not currently use drugs. Furthermore, we know that of those six married non-users, five are desisters. These findings are then consistent with social control stances that find marital bonds to increase the likelihood of drug desistance (Hirschi 1983; Sampson and Laub 2001). What these scholars do not do, however, is look into the nature of these types of relationships; if married individuals are actually influenced by their partners. By looking into the influences these relationships may create, we begin to see how simple interactionist ideas may also be acting to deter deviance. A further observation into the nature of these reported relationships is required.



CurrentUse \* Status Crosstabulation

Figure 7

			Status			Total
			Single	Married	Divorced	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	25	1	1	27
		% within Status	55.6%	14.3%	50.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	46.3%	1.9%	1.9%	50.0%
	No	Count	20	6	1	27
		% within Status	44.4%	85.7%	50.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	37.0%	11.1%	1.9%	50.0%
Total	Count	45	7	2	54	
	% within Status	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	83.3%	13.0%	3.7%	100.0%	

Participants were asked to disclose their current relationship status. After indicating whether they are married, divorced, single, or in a serious relationship and/or cohabiting, respondents were instructed to explain if and how their perceptions of drugs and their current non-use behaviors are influenced by their partners. The results varied tremendously. Among the married desisters, two reported being influenced by their partner's drug perceptions and non-use behaviors, while two other married desisters were not influenced by their partners at all. The remaining married desister did not disclose whether or not she was influenced by her partner. Due to the split in responses between the married desisters, it is hard to discern whether marriage itself, from a social control perspective, works independently to deter drug use, *or* if it is more so about the interactions with one's partner that can facilitate desistance from drug use. Or, is it something else entirely? Warr's (1998) work goes against such understandings of marriage and the desistance process. Instead of focusing on social control theories, Warr's work hinges more so on the ideas of Sutherland's (1947) notion of *differential association*. He finds that with the transitions to marriage, comes a difference in peer associations—a difference in the number of people individuals may surround themselves with during the transitions toward matrimony (1996, 1998). To put it simply, Warr finds the marriage effect, widely believed to diminish deviance, instead has an indirect effect on the desistance process. It is not marriage that

influences individuals to conform to normative standards of acceptable behaviors, but is rather the decrease in exposure to the number of delinquent peers that stems from getting married (Warr 1998 *see also* Maume *et. al.* 2005:31).

A multiplicity of results was also found among the group of desisters who reported currently being involved in serious relationships. Out of the seven desisters in serious relationships, five reported not being influenced by their partner's views or drug use behaviors, and furthermore three of these respondents even noted that their partners continue to use drugs currently. It is evident that having a partner who currently uses drugs does not guarantee that the same behaviors will arise or continue with the other partner. Instead, the desisters whose partners use, represent another important aspect of the desistance process: opportunity. While the opportunity to use drugs with their partners is surely there, it might be the case that since none of the desisters in serious relationships are also cohabiting, their partner's use habits may not infiltrate or cause any disruptions to their relationship. Furthermore, opportunity structures do not dictate potential actions, but instead create constraints for individuals to choose their actions based on the contexts of a given situation (Ulmer 2000:320 *see also* Blumer 1969; Maines 1977). This means that while the opportunity to use may still exist for a number of the desisting respondents, sheer opportunity will not influence their decision to use or abstain, but is instead reliant on the situations in which the opportunity to use arises.

#### *A Change in Views: More Risk, Less Opportunity*

Survey participants were asked to respond to the question of why they have decided to stop using drugs. For many desisters, the responses were clear, concise, and to the point. "No need. Over it" (Jane, age 23). Jane's sentiments were reiterated by many desisting respondents, making one thing abundantly clear; claiming to be "over it" implied moving past, or rather,

growing out of an old fad or trend. Just as child may love playing with certain toys when they are younger, at a certain point, the child simply grows to find the activity no longer enjoyable or necessary. The same process appears to occur with drugs among desisters. At a certain point, drugs are no longer enjoyable or worth doing. To use Alice's words, "Honestly, I'm over it. I no longer find them as fun or exciting as I used to." But what facilitates this sensation? What influences people to become so disinterested in drugs? And furthermore, how do some individuals experience this growing up effect while others do not? Although I cannot provide concrete solutions to all of these questions, I can try, with the assistance of participant's responses, to begin to explain how desistance from drug use is possible for some but not all.

While the factors that exist both before one enters college and within the college setting have been explored to suggest why and how members of this desisting group chose to get involved with drugs at earlier points in their lives, trying to discern how or why these individuals have desisted from drug use currently presents a whole list of other factors the require further review. Although there are clearly variables that surface during the post-college life, including employment and marriage, that can influence certain perceptions of drugs and other drug-related behaviors, I again wish to find the possible connection between, and potential impact of, college experiences on current behaviors with and attitudes towards drugs.

Like that of the abstainers, attitudes held towards drugs continue to be one of the dominant reasonings behind choosing to abstain or get involved with drugs at any point in one's life. For the desisters, while many maintained relatively indifferent views towards drugs before entering college and throughout college, their current views on drugs have largely shifted since being in college. These shifts, I argue, have likely played a role in influencing these respondents to desist from drug use. As Alice writes,

I'm glad I did [drugs], I now have a new perspective on why they shouldn't be done. They are infinitely more dangerous than I thought they were in college - addiction is terrifying and real, not something to be ignored and/or glorified.

Alice references her experiences with drugs as type of learning process. By using them in the past, she now understands “why [drugs] shouldn't be done.” She also makes an important distinction about college that should not go unnoticed. She writes, “[drugs] are infinitely more dangerous” than what she believed they were in college. This statement implies what many other respondents have referenced throughout their survey responses; when drugs are so widely normalized in college, people become desensitized to their actual potential dangers. Dangers like addiction were also mentioned in a comment by Dalia, who writes,

Drugs are habit forming. When I was in college, it was hard to view drugs as bad or addictive since it was activity to do with friends and there was no opportunity for someone to tell me they were bad.

Dalia's response, like Alice's, illustrates how the social environments found in college persuade individuals to disregard drug use as harmful or “addictive.” Instead, because drugs were perceived as both an acceptable and normal activity among friends, Dalia found that there was “no opportunity for someone to tell [her] they were bad.” What is clear from Alice and Dalia's responses is that drug use in college is rather romanticized. It is viewed as a casual activity that comes with little to no perceived repercussions. For both respondents now, however, drug use is understood to be more of a risky behavior. It is no longer just a casual activity, but a dangerous and potentially addictive bad habit. What is even clearer from these responses is that something clearly changes after college. Something happens once you leave the drug-accepting classrooms, dorms, or open fields of your college campuses. To put it simply, as Louise, age 59, writes, “drug use in college is accepted but the day you graduate no more.”

Although many desisters have come to regard drug use as an unacceptable post-college activity, many of these respondents still possess friends who currently use drugs. Of the fifteen desisters, nine (60%) reported having friends who still use drugs. While the friends an individual has in college have been found to have some influence on certain drug-related behaviors and perceptions at the time, the friends one has post-college does not seem to yield such an influential effect for this group of respondents. Instead, many respondents have stated that even though they still have friends who use drugs, they themselves maintain their own rationale for why they have stopped using. Take Alice for example. When asked if drug use is still considered normalized or accepted in her current social realm she writes, “It was in college, it is with my boyfriend's friends and my school friends. My work friends do not use, my family does not use.” While Alice reports having friends who currently use, her friends that *do* use only occupy one part of her current social environment. What becomes unique about the post-college experience is then this inclusion of the different types of friends one may have. While in college, an individual may have different “types” of friends, either drug users or non-users, yet regardless of these differences the individual’s friendships are still very much contained within the college setting. After college, however, this setting expands. Friends are not just found in one place, but are instead found in all realms of social life, i.e. the workplace, the home, etc. In Alice’s case, drug use does not enter her familial and workplace realms; it only exists among her “boyfriend’s friends” and her “school friends.”

The impact of one’s current social environment in assisting the process of desistance from drug use was also made clear by Olivia, who writes that although drug use is not normalized in her current social realm, “[Drug use] still crosses my path but most of the people I socialize with now are "normies" or don't use at all.” For Olivia, even though drug use still enters

her social environment from time to time, she does not perceive such behaviors as normal or acceptable anymore. Instead, she states that she only tends to socialize with people who do not use drugs. Olivia illustrates a conscious decision to surround herself with non-users, showing that in some cases, friends may still secure a supporting role in reaffirming what sort of behaviors may or may not be considered acceptable within certain groups.

What is interesting about Alice's case when compared to Olivia's is that Alice still operates in a social sphere where the opportunity to use drugs still exists. She is surrounded by her boyfriend, his friends, and other school friends who continue to use drugs, yet she maintains current drug abstinence. Although Olivia also possesses knowledge of friends who use drugs and continues to come across it every once in a while, unlike Alice, she primarily surrounds herself with people who do not use. By doing so, Olivia has fewer opportunities to use by the simple notion that drugs do not secure a presence among her closer friends. Although opportunity does not determine behavior, it is likely that having greater opportunity to use may increase the chances for a desister to use again.

How then has Alice been able to stop using drugs? Maybe she is more so influenced by her work peers or family members who she reports do not use drugs? Or maybe it is something else entirely. In looking further into Alice's survey data one fact stands out. She is the only respondent to report having to be drug tested for work. While employment obligations in general might be enough to influence individuals to abstain from using drugs (Sampson and Laub 2001), drug testing acts as an enforceable sanctioning practice to deter drug use. Alice also notes in an earlier response that she has learned from her past experiences with drugs and now sees the potential risks involved with them that were not so apparent to her in college. It is clear from Alice's case and other desisters alike that there is no one underlying factor that can determine

whether or not an individual will experience drug use desistance or persistence. Instead, it is by reviewing the mix of multiple variables including the less explored attitudinal changes, past and present social interactions, current social bonding mechanisms, as well as combined general factors of gender, race, and socioeconomic status, that we can begin to see why and how such influences have an effect on drug use patterns.

### *Bettering the Self: Identity and Desistance*

Although many desisters have admitted to having friends who still currently use drugs, they themselves have remained adamant about not using anymore. Factors pertaining to employment status and personal relationships have been explored to determine how such variables may interact to influence the desister's decision to stop using drugs. I wish to take this a step further. Other theorists have grappled with the idea of desistance not so much from a social control or social learning stance, but rather a position that finds the process of desistance to coincide with a greater process of identity transformation. Herein lies the notion of the working self, the possible, future self, and the feared self (Paternoster and Bushway 2009).

The desister in college can be identified as embodying the working self—a drug offender who is characterized by the networks and specific preferences consistent with that self (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1103). In college, the desister has enjoyable experiences with drugs, maintains a social network of friends and acquaintances who also use drugs, and further prefers the type of lifestyle in which drug use is normalized and accepted. After college the desister may experience a transformation of the self that is no longer satisfied by the drug using lifestyle of the past. This is referred to as the transformation to the possible self, a type of self that relies on what an individual hopes to become. In relation to the possible self is the notion of the feared self. Conversely, the feared self is situated as the self the individual does not wish to

become. Two desisting respondents stand out in addressing these concepts in their responses. For example, Martha writes:

I don't get a lot of satisfaction out of the drugs I know and I have no desire to find something I could be addicted to, make myself sick, or accidentally kill myself via [overdose]. I would also feel stupid if I found myself in legal trouble over something I don't care about!

Martha acts as a perfect example highlighting the tension between the both the possible and feared self. She knows she does not gain any satisfaction from using drugs and therefore no longer has the desire to get involved with them. Martha notes a number of ideas consistent with the notion of the feared self. She knows that if she were to continue using drugs she could become addicted, get sick, accidentally overdose, and get in trouble with the law. Here, the potential harmful effects that stem from using drugs show Martha what she does not wish to become. Instead, because she is aware of the potential dangers to both her health and civil liberties she is influenced to become someone else, the possible self; someone who does not allow drug use, and all the detrimental effects that come with it, to define her.

What is important to address about the feared self theory is that it implies a transformation in identity independent of social forces—that is, the individual will experiences transformations in the self that will then lead to transformations in their social sphere consistent with social learning and social control conceptions. In other words, the individual must decide to change before anything else. It is when the individual has realized what they wish to become (the possible self) that they will then begin operating within a social realm that coincides with this type of self, i.e. disassociating with deviant peers, gaining employment, etc. (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1105).

While I can acknowledge the validity of this heavily psychological perspective of identify transformation as the precursor to desistance, I wish to explore it from a more sociological



stance. Yes, it is possible that Martha willed herself to change her drug-related behaviors because she feared what she would become if she did not, but it is also likely that social forces were at play to influence this self-transformation. Utilizing a social interactionist theory of identity and self-transformations, Giorando et. al. (2007) finds that changes of the self are not solely mediated through the independent actor, but are instead mediated through numerous social interactions and experiences that inspire the individual to change through self-improvement (*See also Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1106*). When thinking about Martha then, it is likely that her desire to change was mediated by interactions with others whose positions towards drugs and non-use behaviors motivated her to be “better” and refrain from using herself. Martha states in a later response that, “Generally speaking, no one in my milieu uses recreational drugs regularly.” This description is then consistent with both Paternoster and Bushway and Giordano et. al.’s perspectives. It is difficult to say if in fact Martha was influenced by her drug abstaining peers to change herself, or if she made the decision to change herself first and then decided to socialize with like-minded peers. Either way, conceptions about identity transformation become useful in describing yet another aspect of the desistance process.

### *Alcohol as Drug Replacement*

The desistance process, in this study, has been characterized to show how the illicit drug use patterns of certain respondents have been able to cease over time. But what about non-illicit substances like alcohol? While alcohol is easily accessible and legal to use, it has the potential to cause major problems in an individual’s life comparable to drug use issues. To many, frequent alcohol use is considered just as dangerous as frequent drug use (Hart and Ksir 2014). Drinking alcohol, however, does not come with the same negative connotations using drugs typically do. Since alcohol *is* legal, it already becomes situated in a greater socially and culturally accepted

realm, unlike that of illicit drugs. But what does this mean for the process of desistance? While the desisters in this study are significant for their current non-drug using behaviors, the majority of them (60%) still drink alcohol on a frequent basis.

It becomes hard to situate alcohol use in the desistance process because of the fact that it is legal to use. Desistance implies a release of illegal tendencies: crime, drug use, etc., but because alcohol is not considered criminal it does not carry the same weight when thinking about desistance from drug activity. Yet, with all that said, alcohol is still a substance that shares many similar mind-altering, behavioral effects of certain drugs (especially depressants like benzodiazepines and barbiturates). Because of this, one might argue that even though the desisters have relinquished all illicit drug activity, their current and largely frequent use of alcohol may be acting as a replacement for those past habits. As Georgia writes in a response, “I just do not like taking drugs. I would rather drink a good tasting drink.”

### **Understanding Desistance**

The desistance process has been illuminated through the accounts of the 15 desisters in this chapter. Each desister shared similar experiences in college in regards to the perceptions of drugs they had at the time, the type of user they once were, and the number of friends they had in college who also used. Post-college, all these respondents experience desistance from drug use. Today, none of them continue to use drugs. What we learn from the desister, and more broadly the process of desistance, is not necessarily *why* these individuals desist, but rather *how* they have been able to desist. How did the desister go from using one day, to deciding to stop using the next? Social learning and social control theories have been largely employed to assist with understanding this process. Factors of employment, marriage, associations with non-deviant peers, identity transformations all exist to show that desistance cannot solely be explained by one

theoretical framework. Instead, it is a process that requires examining all realms of social, institutional, and personal life to better understand how certain individuals are able to desist from drug use while others are not.

## Chapter Three

### *The Persisters*

Meet Adam. Adam is a 22 year old white male currently living in New York City. He is employed, single, and a frequent drug user. Adam grew up wealthy. He attended a small liberal arts school where drug use was widespread and commonly accepted. All of Adam's friends also used drugs in college. College gave Adam the freedom to do what he wanted, to experiment with the drugs he wanted. He would use drugs like marijuana on a daily basis for both relaxation and socializing purposes. He would use speed to help him complete his school work, and coke and ecstasy when going to parties and concerts. For Adam, there was always a time and place for drugs to be consumed, a drug for every occasion.

In college Adam's drug use began to have a negative effect on his school work. Despite this, he continued using. In fact, his drug use increased each year spent in college. After graduating college Adam has continued using. He currently uses drugs like marijuana, and "harder" ones including cocaine and MDMA (ecstasy) on very frequent basis. All of his friends currently use as well. It is simply just another acceptable activity among Adam and his friends.

Now meet Henry. Henry is a 58 year old white male currently residing in California. Henry is employed, married, and also currently uses drugs. Henry grew up belonging to the middle class. He attended a large university where drug use was also perceived as a normal and acceptable activity. All of Henry's friends used in college as well. During his time in college Henry frequently used drugs like marijuana, speed, and mushrooms. He would use these drugs when going to parties or just for the fun of it. Unlike Adam, Henry's drug use decreased over the years spent in college. After graduating, Henry's drug use decreased dramatically. Although he still continues to use marijuana on a fairly regular basis, he uses less in the presence of others. Henry still possesses friends who currently use drugs, but finds that, in his social circle, any drug besides marijuana is not considered normal or acceptable to use.

There are clear similarities and distinct differences between Adam and Henry. For one, their most apparent difference is their age. Adam is 22 while Henry is 58. Yet, despite their 36 year age difference, they both have persisted in using drugs. A distinction must be made, however, in regards to the frequency and type of drug(s) typically used by each individual. Adam is what we can consider a frequent post-college drug user and Henry, a non-frequent post-college drug user. Adam also uses multiple drugs currently, while Henry only reports using marijuana.

With that said, Adam and Henry are both employed. They both possess friends who currently use drugs and both share relatively accepting and positive views of drugs. But what influences both these individuals to continue to use drugs? How does one come to use drugs less frequently or more frequently over time? Why have these individuals been unable to desist? And furthermore what are the implications of drug use persistence? These are just a couple questions this chapter on persisters will address.

This chapter examines the group of 27 persisters through multiple lenses. First, factors of attitude formations are explored to depict how persisters may have developed perceptions of drugs before college, in college, and post-college through socialization process and interactions with parents and peers. Following a review of these attitudinal influences, the persister is then explored through the lens of college. Questions regarding how college experiences and interactions may have shaped their drug behaviors at the time and how those experiences may translate post-college are addressed. I argue that the type of user the persister is in college, both the frequency of use and type of drugs used at that time as well as the experiences and social understanding gathered from drug-use participation, will indicate the type of user the persister is post-college. The final section of this chapter then deals with conceptualizing the process of persistence, how persisters have been able to continue using drugs over time, what possible constraints are absent in their lives that would typically deter this kind of behavior, and furthermore how this process is not necessarily a tell all event, but may actually operate in stages and therefore not all look the same for all persisters. While this chapter deals with persistence, desisting respondents are referenced repeatedly to mark how both processes of desistance and persistence can be used in relation to one another to explain phenomenons of drug use from a life-course perspective.

*Pre-College Attitudes: The Impact of Parental Influence*

Like that of the abstainers and desisters, early attitude formations regarding drug use must be explored within this group of persisters. When looking back at the responses of these persisters, parental influence on drug perceptions at earlier ages seems to mirror, for the most part, the responses the desisters shared. Many persisters reflected having parents whose views did not tremendously influence their own, or if they did influence them, the influence regularly felt more as if parents were permitting their children to experiment by projecting a sense of openness. Lucy, age 48 states in one of her responses,

My parents were open-minded about drug use as far as I could tell. My mom smoked pot which really bugged me but then I did, too, later. They didn't really ever talk to me one way or the other. Perhaps they more influenced me by remaining neutral[...]My parents were neutral to liberal/open minded, really, when it came to drugs, and I am that way, as well. My stance of informed moderation comes from my family.

Lucy's parents, as she claims, were very open-minded about drugs. As open-minded as they were, however, it does not seem like the topic of drugs use itself was frequently discussed: "they didn't really ever talk to me one way or the other." Instead, Lucy finds that her perceptions of drug use were informed mostly by her parents' neutrality on the matter. She knew her mom used marijuana, and while she was initially disturbed by this realization, it never came of anything once she herself had tried the substance. Although it is unclear if her mother's marijuana use influenced or hindered Lucy's desire to try it, what we learn from Lucy and her parents is that early conceptions of what drug use is and what it can be may potentially influence behaviors. Lucy reflects how her parents shaped her views. She is the way she is, and secures certain beliefs about drugs because of her parents: "My stance of moderation comes from my family." Lucy learned from her parents what drugs could be for her. They were not seen as dangerous because her own mother would use them. Instead, drugs would be "ok" to use if they were used in

moderation. Matthew, age 22 shares similar remarks, “[Both parents] are both open to drugs and still occasionally smoke pot. I think drugs are fine because of them.”

While there was a clear connection between parents who maintained and promoted open-minded views of drugs and the subsequent use of them among both the persisting and desisting respondents, some persisters did show variations when describing how they were *not* influenced by parental views that differed from those described by the desisters. To review, the desisters who reported not being influenced by their parents’ attitudes toward drugs were those who also expressed that the issue of drug use was not explicitly addressed with their parents. With the persisters, however, this process differs. Drugs were discussed in their familial settings and were typically deemed as “bad” or an unacceptable activity to stray away from. As Julia, age 22 writes,

[My parents] have always encouraged minimal alcohol use and zero drug use my entire life. I started smoking weed when I was 12, probably in response to what at the time I thought was strictness or rigidity.

Unlike the desisters who do not adopt the views of their parents simply because of the fact that drug use was rarely discussed, Julia acts as an important example among this group of persisters, illustrating how parental views were regularly disregarded and challenged. Although Julia’s parents held negative views toward drugs, it was because of the “strictness” of these views Julia felt the need to rebel. Similarly, Hannah, age 24, notes: “[My parents are] afraid of the idea and think anyone who uses [drugs] is bad. I naturally rebelled.” Both Julia and Hannah reacted to their parents’ stance on drugs with rebellion. They did not agree or wish to adopt their parents’ views and therefore saw using the very drugs their parents feared as a means to go against them. Instead of working to diminish the chances their child would use drugs, Hannah and Julia’s parents influence had a reverse effect. It is likely then that those who did not adopt their parents’

views on drugs developed views elsewhere, either by other peer interactions or because of inherent personality characteristics. This notion is supported by Pilgrim et. al. (1999) study that finds the interaction between parental influence, peer influence, and individual characteristics to be the determining predictors of adolescent drug use.

### *Peer Influence and the Transition to College*

While past negative drug-related experiences proved to be one of the main reasons behind some abstainers desire to not use in college and post college, positive pre-college experiences with drugs for the persisters produced a reverse effect. Of the 27 persisting respondents, 24 reported experimenting with drugs prior to attending college. Persisters responses generally went like so: “I'd had a good deal of experience prior to college, school was just a place to continue experimenting” or, “I smoked weed my senior year of high school and it made me a calmer, better person” and lastly, “I think that used in moderation, drugs can provide extremely insightful experiences. I've also pretty much been smoking weed daily since I was 16 and I just think it's a nice way to unwind.” Each of these responses highlight a theme that permeates among this large group of persisters: drugs can produce positive and pleasurable effects.

The majority of persisters entered college with solidified notions of what it meant to use drugs and furthermore what effects they could expect to gather from using them. Continuing use in college seemed part of a logical progression. This idea coincides with Becker's understanding of drug use as a social learning process and marks a clear distinction between the group of abstaining respondents and this group of persisters. Before college, the abstainers who had some experiences with drugs found them to produce undesirable effects and therefore decided that drugs were not something they wished to continue using. The persisters, on the other hand,



sharing relatively positive pre-college experiences with drugs, were without a doubt more experienced with the social learning process that accompanies drug use. The persisters, unlike the abstainers, learned to interpret their experiences with drugs as pleasurable which then explains their desire to continue using them. The reverse occurred for the abstainers.

While some persisters entered college with relatively positive ideas about drug use, having had pleasurable experiences with them in the past, other persisting respondents entered college with relatively negative outlooks on drug use, but later experienced a transformation in views. Julia acts a perfect example of this transformation process. She writes, “[I] mostly feared [drugs] but also [thought] that drug use was for losers or burnouts.” In college Julia’s attitudes changed. She states,

[Drug use] was suddenly easy, accessible, and seemingly safe. At parties, in my freshman dorm, outside of class - drugs were everywhere. I had drank and smoked weed before but had never even seen coke or hallucinogenics or harder stuff until I was at college.

For Julia and other persisters alike, drug use in college became seen as something “easy, accessible, and seemingly safe.” Drugs were no longer something to fear, but were instead something perceived as normal, as the activity of using accompanied all areas of social life: in dorms, “outside of class—drugs were everywhere.” Julia’s comments are consistent with Becker’s (1963) notion of labeling which promotes that deviance only becomes deviant when it is labeled as such. Julia’s comments imply the reverse: drug use becomes normalized when it is labeled and understood as “normal”. Following this rhetoric, it makes sense that Julia would no longer perceive drugs to only be used by the ill-defined “burnouts” or “losers”. Instead, because drugs were so widespread, it is likely that the interactions and experiences Julia had with others in college helped her produce new labels for drug use: “easy” “accessible” and “seemingly safe.”

Julia's sentiments are not unique to this group of persisters, but instead mirror the responses of both abstainers and desisters. College is a place where drug use is relatively normalized and accepted. Because they are widespread and easily accessible, the increased exposure to drugs likely played a role in transforming the views of many abstainers, desisters, and persisters. Even the abstainers labeled drug use as "normal". What begins to differentiate these groups, however, is not necessarily their views alone, but rather how their experiences in college differed in order to influence certain drug-related behaviors.

### **The College Experience: Context and Reasons behind Drug Use**

The persisters' rationales for using in college loosely mirror the rationales provided by the desisters. Each group reported the tendency to use drugs in social settings: i.e. at parties or among friends. Where the persisters begin to deviate from the responses of the desisters, however, is in regards to both the social and personal influences that likely increased their desires, and potential opportunities, to use during their time in college. When reviewing the persisters survey responses a number of themes become apparent: college as a place of increased freedom *and* boredom, as well as drug use not just for social interactions but for primarily personal reasons instead. While social situations were still largely reflected upon as the contexts and reasons behind persisters drug use in college, I wish to highlight the themes that differentiate the persisters and desisters in order to demonstrate how different college drug use experiences may have a hand in determining how some respondents were able to desist from drug use later on and why the others continue to persist.

*“Lots and lots and lots and lots of free time”*

Many persisters have referenced the perceived sense of freedom attending college provided them. College was not only a place for academic pursuits but rather a place where increased exploration and drug experimentation could be facilitated. As Amelia, age 22 states: “The school I went to was in the middle of nowhere. Drugs became an activity; college as a time/place for experimentation; [there was an] accessibility of drugs in the college setting.” Similarly Adam, who we know from the vignette, writes: “College gave me the freedom to smoke whenever I wanted and basically did just that.” The reflections from Adam and Amelia highlight not only how the idea of college as place of freedom and experimentation allowed drug use to arise, but more importantly how the college environment itself played a role in increasing these behaviors. Adam notes that he was able to smoke wherever he wanted in college, and likewise, Amelia reflects on how because her college was located “in the middle of nowhere” drugs became a dominant activity and were widely accessible.

What is evident from both Amelia and Adam’s accounts is that college can allow for students to go under the radar with their drug-related activity. While I am sure there were drug policies at both the schools Adam and Amelia attended, I would argue that drug regulations were more theoretical than practical. Here, the college environment interacts with already established ideas of drug use to allow students to continue such behaviors with limited institutional involvement. Students felt free to engage in drug-related activities because, really, who was going to stop them? While persisters and desisters have both acknowledged college to be a site of increased freedoms and time of exploration and experimentation, abstainers did not respond to these same ideas with drug use. This then suggests that while certain colleges may exert less drug regulation among students, it truly comes down to the social networks and subcultures

individuals are possibly engaged in to begin to see how students get involved with drugs in college while others do not.

Entangled with this new sense of freedom in the college setting, however, also came an increase of free time and as a result, boredom. For some persisters, drugs were not just something that were used to accompany some sort of activity, there were the activity. Drugs were used to ward off boredom. As one persister writes, “I used drugs to not be bored.” It is clear that while college has its academic and social advantages it does not necessarily fulfill every aspect of a student’s life. For these persisters, having too much free time in college coincided with more opportunities to use drugs. Although survey participants were not asked about the potential extracurricular activities they participated in during their time in college, it can be inferred from what we already gather from social control theorists like Hirschi (1969), that the more occupied a student was with more “conforming” activities such as sports, clubs, or arts, the less likely the chance that these students would engage in drug use due to boredom.

The reverse may also be true, however—that is, if some subcultures (clubs or sports teams) find drug use to be an acceptable activity, the behavior will most likely exist depending on the type subculture and how it addresses, defines, or normalizes drug use. In order for drug use to exist as an acceptable activity it must first be characterized as “acceptable”. It is a process of interpretation that requires labeling (Becker 1963). I cannot assert whether or not these participants were parts of different subcultures in college, but I can suggest that regardless of whatever subculture or friend group they may have been apart of, drug use was labeled and interpreted as an acceptable, normal behavior and therefore using was never truly understood as problematic.

*“The context determined the drugs”*

Persisters referenced a number of reasons for why they chose to use drugs during their time in college and the typical contexts in which they were readily used. For many, the types of drugs used were generally dependent on the situations that accompanied them. In an insightful response, Adam writes, “Weed I smoked every day to relax and socialize. Hard drugs were for raves and parties, hallucinogenics were for camping, sunny days, being with friends in springtime.” Here, Adam demonstrates how different drugs were used for different intended purposes. Weed was for relaxing and socializing, harder drugs were for larger social gatherings like “raves and parties,” and hallucinogens (mushrooms and LSD) were largely for interactions with and within nature.

A number of persisters also referenced using drugs for academic-related purposes: “I did speed for school work”, “[I used] daily for class”, or “sometimes to study.” Here, drug use becomes intertwined with yet another context for use: school and a specific type of drug that accompanies it: speed. Speed is colloquial for amphetamine, a type of drug typically used to increase performance for people who suffer from attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Hart and Ksir 2014). Speed may be used in reference to a number of what I will refer to as “study drugs” including Adderall, Ritalin, and Focalin. For those who need it, the effects of these drugs can be extremely useful; however, many individuals tend to misuse or abuse “study drugs”. For one, if the individual is not prescribed, using the substance at all is considered abuse. Although not enough information was provided by these respondents to see whether or not their use of these prescription drugs could be considered misuse or abuse, the very mention of using drugs for academic purposes highlights a distinctive

difference between persisters and desisters. None of the desisting respondents admitted to using drugs in any academic context, or for any academic-related purpose.

Personal reasons for using drugs were also expressed by many persisters who felt that certain drugs were able to alleviate issues of stress, depression, and anxiety. Ryan, age 22, states,

For pot a lot of the times [was] alone (before bed, for example) or hanging out - kind of all the time I guess. Opiates, sadly, mostly on my own...opiates came in at a time when I had lot to deal with emotionally.

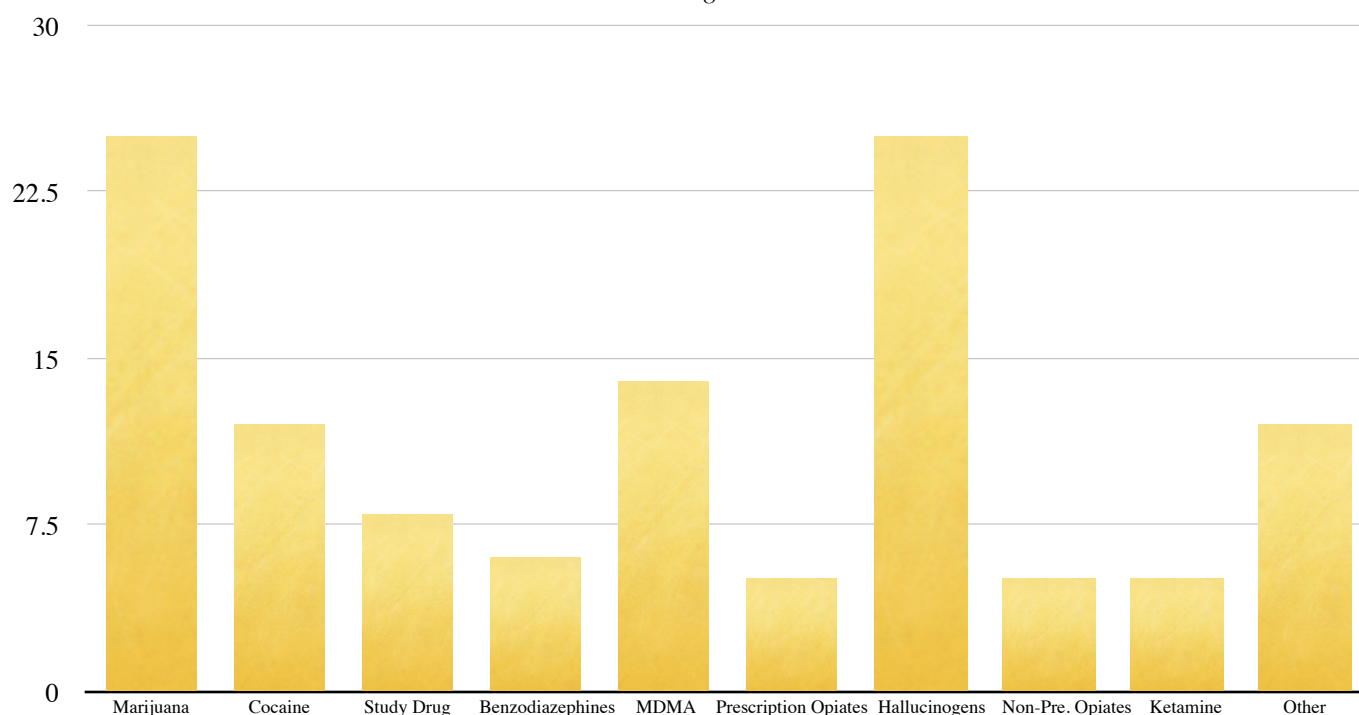
Ryan is a prime example of how drug use in college, while largely a social activity, can at times become very reclusive. As he claims, pot was both typically and frequently used alone. Opiates were also used in solitary to assist Ryan with what he was going through emotionally. While there was one desister who made reference to using drugs alone when dealing with issues of depression and anxiety, more persisters identified with frequent solitary use not just for personal or emotional reasons. This marks yet another important distinction between the groups of persisters and desisters. When use patterns become more individualistic, the user therefore does not need to be within a social setting to feel the desire to use. Instead, because the user has now grown accustomed to using on their own, there are simply more opportunities and situations in which to use. If the desisters' drug use was primarily dependent on the social situations they found themselves apart of, use patterns remained intrinsically social. It is when these patterns crossover to become more individualistic that we then find the persister, who doesn't need to be around friends or at a party to feel the desire to use.

It is evident that the persisters used drugs for more specified reasons than those reflected by desisters. Drugs were used not only in social situations including at parties or simple hangouts with friends, but were also used for school work purposes and in many cases for personal reasons where use typically occurred in solitude. Not only were the context and reasons behind using

more abundant among this group of persisters, but the use patterns themselves were also more frequent, and the drugs used; more distinctive.

*Drug Type and Frequency: Persisters*

*Figure 8*



As with the group of desisters, each persisting respondent's self-reported college drug use has been documented in Figure 8 to demonstrate which drugs were widely utilized by members of this persisting group. Comparing the two figures we can then see how the persisters' use tendencies differentiate from those of the desisters' (see *Desister Chapter Figure 4*). While marijuana use in college is relatively equal among both persisters and desisters, the persisters show a drastic increase in hallucinogen use. 89% of persisters reported using hallucinogens when compared to only 20% of desisters who reported using the same drugs. MDMA (ecstasy) use is also more prevalent among the persisters at 48% (desisters at 33%). Lastly, the category of "other" drugs used included a variety of drugs that were never even mentioned by desisting

respondents including: promethazine, ether, chloroform, poppers, 2C-E, 2-CB, 25i, salvia, MXE, and MDA. While the number of persisters and desisters who used cocaine, prescription and non-prescription opiates, and benzodiazepines remain relatively similar; the large increase of “harder” drugs used like hallucinogens and to a lesser extent, MDMA and other, unique types of drugs demonstrates how distinctions between drug type may act as an important indicator of the type of user one will likely be in college and furthermore the type of user one will potentially be post-college.

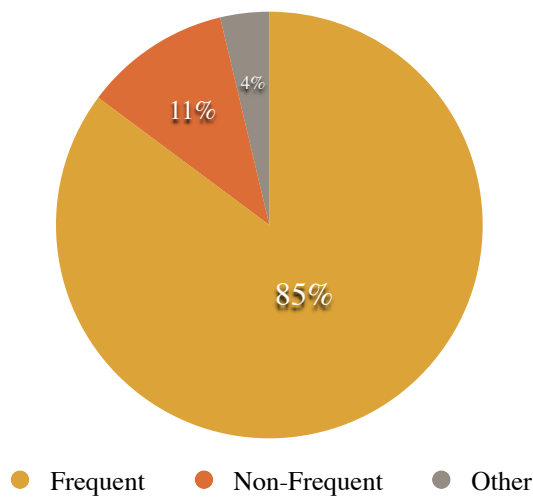
I argue that the type of user one is in college, the types of drugs they readily use and how often, will have an impact on the likelihood that individuals will either experience drug use persistence or desistance post-college. The type of user one is post-college may then be dependent on the experiences with peers, the drug behaviors found in both social and personal settings, and the ways in which drug use becomes defined as “acceptable” in college. It is logical to infer that those who are frequent users in college and who also use a variety of drugs, will have higher chances of continued use later in life compared to those who used fewer drugs on a less frequent basis. Many studies have connected drug use patterns earlier in life to related drug use patterns later in life (Merline et. al. 2004; Sampson and Laub 2001:13; Blumstein et. al. 1986). Figure 6 in the previous chapter also charts this trend. With that said, it is not to say the persisters drug use in college exactly mirrors the drug use patterns they sustain now. Instead, because they have had experiences with drugs in the past, it is likely that their familiarity with them, their current social structure—that is, the friends they possess and the social networks in which they operate, have all helped facilitate their persistence.

The majority of desisters were categorized as non-frequent users in college; while the persisters were predominately frequent users (see Figure 9). Only 11% of persisters were deemed



non-frequent users in college. Only one persister was categorized as an “other” type of user due to the dramatic changes in use patterns over the time spent in college. As stated previously, frequent use patterns in college can be positively associated with the future, in this case current, use patterns of these respondents. While a number of persisters’ drug use has decreased over

*Figure 9*



time, current drug use tendencies seem to mirror those of the past—that is, if a persister was a frequent user in college, the majority of them remain to be relatively frequent users presently. With that said, the number of drugs used has diminished drastically among many persisters. Henry, who we know from the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, reports using drugs including: marijuana, speed, and mushrooms in college on a weekly basis. In the present, Henry continues to use marijuana on a weekly basis but has since stopped using speed and mushrooms. It is evident among the majority of the persisters that while drug use remains to be part of their lives, the type of drugs used currently has decreased enormously. In fact, only six of the twenty-seven persisters (22%) continue to use three or more drugs, while the other twenty-one persisting respondents (78%) only report using one to two types of drugs currently. So, while prior use patterns may mirror those held today, they are not necessarily a tell all. This is evident with the

33% of desisters who were also categorized a frequent users in college. The only differences we see with the frequent college drug-using desister and the frequent college drug-using persister is the very fact that the desister is currently involved in the desistance process, while the persister is not.

### *Post College Drug Use Transformations*

Persisting survey participants were asked to describe how their substance use has changed post-college in order to see if and how the persistence process may differ among respondents. Not all persisters are alike. In fact, there are great variations among users even in this relatively small sample. I have identified four types of users within this persister group. First, there is what I will refer to as the *Type A persister*. The Type A persister is one whose drug use patterns have drastically decreased in terms of types drugs used and frequency used since graduating college. Second, there is the *Type B persister*. The Type B persister instead is one whose use rate has remained consistent over time, yet the actual types of drug still used has decreased. Then there is *type C*. The Type C persister is the one I consider to be most involved or integrated into the persisting process. The Type C persister is one whose use rate has remained relatively consistent over time as well as one who continues to use an array of drugs. Lastly, there is the *type D persister*, which refers to the persister whose use patterns have actually increased over time. Each type of persister will now be explored further to illustrate the variations that exist within the process of persistence itself.

*Type A:* Gwen, age 26, reported using marijuana and mushrooms multiple times a week in college. She now only uses marijuana on a monthly basis. She writes,

I smoke WAY less. Like maybe once or twice a month. This bums me out! I miss smoking as often as I did in college. But working full time and now being in school full time have affected my usage... I think it must be because I want more of a clear head.

While her use has decreased over time Gwen still notes that she misses smoking at the rate she once did in college. She associates her decreased use to her full time employment and full time enrollment in graduate school. Gwen's claims situate her within the social control theory realm and are consistent with Hirschi's (1983) claims regarding employment as a means to deter deviance. While Gwen still uses drugs to a minimal extent, her full time employment and full time school commitments suggest that her attachment to these institutions may in fact influence her use to subside. While Gwen displays a connection to her employment and her academic institutions, the reality is, she continues to use. This fact then also reveals some inconsistencies with a control theory perspective. Although Gwen's drug use *has* decreased, employment factors do not always influence a complete cessation of deviant behaviors.

*Type B:* Unlike Gwen, some persisters remain frequent users today, but that is not to say they too haven't experienced some changes in terms of their current use patterns. Julia, age 22, is an excellent example of this. Julia reported using marijuana, cocaine, klonopin, mushrooms, ketamine, ecstasy, speed, and heroin on a weekly if not daily basis for some of the drugs listed. While the rate at which she uses has remained consistent over time, Julia has stopped using the majority of the drugs she reported using in college. In a response Julia states,

[Using drugs] was definitely an experience I'm glad I had, and looking back on it, it was dangerous and scary. But I learned a lot and wouldn't take it back. I also would never put myself in that position again, and don't feel that that lifestyle fits with my new, post-graduate life anymore.

Julia is thankful for the experiences she had with drugs in college because she now understands how "dangerous" and "scary" they truly were and are. She does not regret the decisions she made to use drugs in college, but has since learned that they are not something she wishes to be using at the capacity she once did. Furthermore, Julia notes that the drug lifestyle she had in

college does not “fit” her “new, post-graduate life.” Julia’s statement is both rational and logical, and while she is aware of potential dangers drugs can present, she still admits to using marijuana on a regular basis. While Julia is still technically a frequent user, her use has dramatically decreased in comparison to what it was like in college.

*Type C:* Then there are persisters unlike Gwen and Julia whose use patterns (drug type and frequency) have remained relatively consistent over time. Adam is a good example of this phenomenon. In a response, Adam writes:

I was dumped by my longtime college girlfriend right after school so I definitely hit the bottle and smoked extra weed for a few months but now that I have a full time job I usually smoke once or twice when I get home to relax and I only drink on weekends or maybe a casual drink or two after work once a week. I do cocaine some weekends if I go out.

As we know from the vignette, Adam was an active user of marijuana, cocaine, MDMA, mushrooms, LSD, and speed in college. Since graduating Adam still admits to using drugs including marijuana, MDMA, and cocaine on a frequent basis. What is important about Adam’s statement, however, is his inclusion of the other factors present in influencing his continued use. He notes that once his relationship with his ex-girlfriend had ended, he was influenced to use more than usual to, what I would imagine, cope with his feelings at the time. Adam then goes on to speak about how his full time job has influenced his use. Although employed, Adam still uses marijuana on a daily basis after he comes home from work to “relax”. Drug use and employment show up in this response just as it did with Gwen perviously. For both Adam and Gwen, while they both continue to use drugs, each has noted that their employment has impacted their use patterns slightly. Adam only reports using marijuana after his workday has ended, while cocaine use is reserved for weekends every once in a while. These patterns illustrate again how one’s employment ties may create limited social control, but not influence a complete cease in drug-

related behaviors. Adam continues to use at the rate he did in college, and furthermore continues to use three or more drugs on a regular occasion.

*Type D:* Lastly there are a few persisters whose use has actually increased since being in college. With that said, the use patterns of these Type D persisters still vary. These are unique and widely individualized cases, however, they are still worth noting. Although I use the term increased use to describe these respondents, I wish to do so sparingly. For example, two Type D persisters only reported using drugs on somewhat of a yearly basis; one of which only actually reported using drugs only once in college. For these two Type D persisters, even though when compared to other persisters, they would still be considered current non-frequent users, their current use is still more frequent than what it was in college.

Another Type D persister is one I find most intriguing. Ashley, age 29, is the only survey participant to initiate drug use after college. She had no prior drug experiences before college or during college, but now uses marijuana on a regular basis. Ashley's use patterns, while difficult to explain, bring forth more questions about the initiation process of persistence and potential factors that aid in assisting it. Ashley reports having friends who use drugs currently and also reports being influenced by her partner's marijuana smoking habits. What puzzles me most, however, is the fact that Ashley also had many friends who use drugs throughout college but remained abstinent from them at that time. What has changed for Ashley? Why did she choose to begin using at a time when most are either desisting or choosing to continue habits of the past? I would argue Ashley's use is solely dependent on her current social environment. She has no experiences with drugs in the past that can be utilized to predict these trends. Instead, it is likely that Ashley's associations to drug-using friends became more pronounced post-college. Yes, she had friends who also used in college, but post-college she now has a partner who is a frequent user of

marijuana. It likely then that Ashley's current romantic ties were strong enough incentive to begin using. Although these are not explicit answers to the questions Ashley's case brings forth, I *do* wish to showcase the fact that this type of persistence does exist, further emphasizing that past experiences with drugs do not always dictate future ones.

What does it mean to have such a variety of persistent users in this category? The Type A, Type B, Type C, and Type D persisters are all alike in the sense that they still currently use drugs, but all differ in regards to actual use patterns. What this shows then is that drug use and furthermore the process of persistence in using drugs varies widely across users. Yes, individuals may continue to use drugs in the present, but the persister who uses marijuana on occasion (Type A) shares different experiences from the persister who still uses multiple drugs on a frequent basis (Type C). What this then suggests is what many scholars including Maruna (2001), Farrington and Hawkins (1991), and Frazier (1976) have tried to work out: how can we define persistence when patterns among individuals who persist differ? Is it unfair to group the occasional marijuana user with a more active user of multiple drugs? I have argued that drug use patterns: the frequency of use and the number and type of drug used, may be used to predict the likelihood of persistence or desistance. While I still believe this to be true, what instead matters most in understanding these processes is acknowledging the fact that they may operate in stages. The occasional marijuana user and the active user of marijuana, cocaine, and MDMA are different because the active user is more so engaged in the process of persistence, while the non-frequent marijuana user is likely on the road to desistance.

### **The Persistence Process**

It makes sense that earlier experiences with and perceptions of drugs among persisters and desisters would be similar. Both groups had large percentages of respondents to have

experimented with drugs prior to entering college, and both reflect experiencing some transformation in their views of drugs over time. Persisters and desisters varied to some degree in terms of their attitudes towards drugs before attending college yet in college many of them turn to adopt relatively indifferent or positive, more lenient attitudes toward drugs. Both groups also go on to use drugs throughout their time in college (with the exception of Ashely who only begins using drugs post-college). Differences between the two groups, however, begin to arise when exploring actual drug use patterns within the college setting. Desisters were generally found to be non-frequent users in college and would typically only use drugs in social settings. A greater percentage of persisters, on the other hand, were categorized as frequent users in college and also reflected using multiple types of drugs in multiple different settings: social, academic, or alone. While many scholars have theorized what events and social processes can initiate or assist the desistance process, the reverse is typically argued for those who persist. But is it really that simple? If social control theories suppose that drug use desistance will occur once an individual has made normative transitions through the life-course, how can we explain the persisters who also make similar transitions?

One relatively recent development in theorizing persistence of and desistance from deviance comes from a melding of two prominent positions on the issue: social control and social learning (Ulmer 2000:316). The former, widely publicized by works of Hirschi (1996) dictates that the strength in commitment and bonding to normative, conventional institutions will deter deviance. This means that the commitment an individual has to a job, a spouse, or even more so, to a family will work to constrain the individual from adopting or continuing deviant behaviors. Persistent drug use is then associated with having weak commitments or bonds to the aforementioned institutions. Social learning and interpretation conceptions, on the other hand,

proposed most notably from theorists including Becker (1964), Warr (1993), Sutherland (1947), and Akers (1996) demonstrate how deviance both arises and continues due to defining social interactions, personal relationships, and associations with deviant peers. For the social learning, interactionist theorist, desistance from deviance like drug use stems from conforming social learning processes—associating with non-deviant peers and establishing new ideas of acceptable, normative behavior. Both theoretical frameworks prove relevant when considering why and how this group of persisters has continued using drugs over time.

Employment, one of the widely accepted factors used in explaining desistance from deviant lifestyles, does not prove to be necessarily relevant among my sample of persisters. Of the 27 persisting respondents 20 (74%)<sup>2</sup> reported being currently employed. While the persisting group alone contained the most unemployed respondents at 26%<sup>3</sup>, the sample makes clear that employment status may not be the most influential in deterring deviance like many control theories suppose. Figure 10 depicts the association between reported employment status

**CurrentUse \* Employed Crosstabulation**

			Employed		Total
			Yes	No	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	20	7	27
		% within Employed	45.5%	70.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	37.0%	13.0%	50.0%
	No	Count	24	3	27
		% within Employed	54.5%	30.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	44.4%	5.6%	50.0%
Total	Count	44	10	54	
	% within Employed	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	81.5%	18.5%	100.0%	

*Figure 10*

<sup>2</sup> This is the percentage of employed persisters within the persister group, not sample as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> This is the percentage of unemployed persisters within the persister group, not the sample as a whole.



and current drug use of the entire sample. The table shows that out of all currently employed survey participants, nearly 46% are still using. Those who are unemployed, conversely, represent that largest percentage of current users at 70%. This then suggests that while unemployment is correlated to continued drug use, employment is not a strong indicator of non-use since a moderate percentage of current users are also employed. The correlation value depicts a weak, negative association between employment and current use ( $\phi = -.191$   $p > .05$ ).

Employment then does not secure the same weight in facilitating desistance as social control proponents including Hirschi, Sampson, and Laub have asserted. In fact, in a response, a persister sheds light on how employment may instead help foster persistence. Rachel, age 24 states: “[I] do [drugs] a lot more now. Probably because I have the income for it. Even though I have to 9-5. Albeit, I party hard, but very responsibly.” Rachel, although employed, does not experience desistance. Instead, Rachel’s employment provides her with the monetary ability to keep using drugs; she has “the income for it.” She also attributes using more drugs now because she has the funds to do so. Having the financial capability to continue using drug is yet another important distinction between this group of persisters and the groups of abstainers and desisters.

Out of the 54 survey participants, 14 reported belonging to the upper class. Of those 14, 10 are persisters (see Appendix III Table 7). This means that 71% of respondents belonging to the upper class are persistent drug users, which provides us with a class-based argument that is relatively logical. Those who have the money for it can continue to use drugs because they lack cost constraints. In regards to employment then, because upper class individuals already have the funds, gaining employment may not be a necessity *or* if they are employed, work commitments may not be enough to deter them from using in the first place.

To refer back to Rachel, although she is employed, her commitment to her job may not be strong enough to deter her from using. With that said, Rachel's employment may place some constraints on her potential actions. While she claims that she still parties hard, she does so in a "responsible" manner. This may signify that while her employment status does not seem to deter her drug use, it *does* provide her with a structure that may influence when and where she is able to use. Commitments are also referenced in another response by a persistor who writes, "Everyone uses and everyone feels like it's the time to use because of the lack of responsibility [sic] in life. No one has kids, some have jobs but no one uses during the week." Here, the respondent demonstrates how her lack of commitments and greater responsibilities allows her to perceive this time, as a time when drug use is most acceptable. She does not have children and while she does have a job, we have already gathered from other persistors that jobs alone are not enough to deter drug use. Jobs may however exert minimal constraints on using: "no one uses during the week."

This post coincides with yet another important theoretical framework: Arnett (2004, 2007) notion of *emerging adulthood*. Emerging adulthood implies that there is a time in a young adult's life characterized by instability and exploration. It is during this time that the emerging adult (between the ages of 18-25) is able to explore new opportunities, fail, succeed, and fail again, before figuring out what happens next. Because the majority of persisting respondents can be characterized as emerging adults, responses like the one cited above suggest that many of these persistors are aware that this is the only time when their drug use behaviors may be acceptable. They are not yet attached to larger social institutions believed to deter deviance (Hirschi 1983; Sampson and Laub 2001).

What is clear among this group of persisters is that they all remain, to a certain extent, committed to using drugs. But why is this the case? What fosters this commitment? For some, we could argue from a social control theory perspective that because nearly 26% of persisting respondents are unemployed, they lack the bonds to normative, social institutions that might inhibit their drug-related behaviors; but this does not explain for the 74% of persisters who are employed. This is why I agree with Ulmer (2000) who argues for a combined social learning and social control approach to theorizing desistance and persistence. It is evident that both perspectives can work hand in hand to be able to describe what forces are at play in facilitating both processes of persistence and desistance. Solely being employed does not influence drug use desistance, and the reverse does not only determine the likelihood of persistence. Employment can, however, intervene with other variables to assist with each process.

### *The Persisters' Social Environments*

Here is what we know about the persisters. Each continues to use drug(s) currently in varying degrees. The four-type persister model highlights this. Persisters' use patterns have been traced back to the experiences they had in college, and a connection has been established between use rates of the past and continued rates in the present. We know what may have influenced these respondents to use in college, but what now needs further exploration is what influences their persistence today.

Respondents were asked to describe their current social realm, identifying what social forces may have a hand in influencing persistence. This included if persisters currently possess friends who use drugs as well as if drug use is deemed acceptable in different realms of their social life—that is, among friends, family, as well as possible colleagues in the workplace. While nearly 60% of desisters noted that they too possess friends who currently use drugs, a larger

portion of persisters (approximately 93%) reported having friends who also currently use.

Although having friends who use drugs in the present does not become an indicator of potential use among the desisters, it is possible that the friends the persisters possess secure some role in influencing these respondents' continued use. A further observation into the nature of these friendships is needed to solidify this potential correlation.

*Figure 11*

**CurrentUse \* CurFriends Crosstabulation**

			CurFriends		Total
			Yes	No	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	25	1	26
		% within CurFriends	64.1%	7.1%	49.1%
		% of Total	47.2%	1.9%	49.1%
	No	Count	14	13	27
		% within CurFriends	35.9%	92.9%	50.9%
		% of Total	26.4%	24.5%	50.9%
Total	Count	39	14	53	
	% within CurFriends	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	73.6%	26.4%	100.0%	

Figure 11 asserts that there is indeed a strong and statistically significant association ( $\phi=.502$   $p<.05$ ) between respondents who have friends who currently use and continue to use drugs themselves currently. The table finds that a larger percentage (64%) of those who currently use (persisters) also report having friends who use, opposed to the 34% of respondents who do not use, but still possess friends who currently use. There is a larger, important finding, however, in the other column. Those who do not currently use (abstainers and desisters) have the largest percentage of friends (93%) who do not currently use as well. This then suggests that there is a notable association between having friends who currently use, and the current use of respondents.

As we know from the desisting respondents, having friends who currently use drugs does not determine whether or not use will actually take place, but instead may increase possible drug use opportunities. For the persisters, having more friends, family, co-workers, or acquaintances who use then increases their opportunity to use. Although the persisters clearly sustain the largest percentage of friends who currently use, and statistical analysis has shown that having friends who use is associated with respondent use, drug use cannot be determined by mere opportunity. Having more friends who currently use can also be understood from interactionist perspectives that find those who surround themselves with deviant peers will be more likely to interpret deviant behaviors such as drug use as “normal” and “acceptable” (Warr 1998; Becker 1963; Sutherland 1947). Because I cannot explicitly determine how friend groups may shape understandings of drugs use and furthermore increase use opportunities, more information and analysis are needed to situate the impact of friendship on drug use persistence.

In a response, Adam writes, “All of my friends drink, most of them smoke, and none of them would care about other drugs if they didn't do them themselves.” Adam clearly operates within a realm of normalized drug use. He admits that the majority of his friends drink and smoke (marijuana), and more importantly, none would care about “other drugs” because it is likely that they too have already done them. Here, the attitudes Adam and his friends already share regarding drugs are reinforced by the action of using them. They have all had experiences with drugs and more importantly, other users, that have allowed them to form accepting stances on not just different types of drugs, but the act of using itself. Because Adam socializes with others who share views on drugs that mirror his own, it is likely that until Adam disassociates with these friends, or until he and his friend experience transformations of the self towards the possible-future self (Paternoster and Bushway 2009), he will be unable to desist from drug use.

The importance of friends in facilitating the persistence process is not just about their behaviors influencing the persisting respondents, but is also about how the persisters may tend to associate with like-minded peers, whose attitudes and behaviors may either become adopted or compliment their own. The same phenomenon can be seen with the desistance process. For example, Olivia, a desister referenced in the previous chapter, highlights that although some of her friends still use drugs, she herself tends to only associate and socialize with individuals who do not use at all. Deviant peer associations is one the main theoretical frameworks used to explain each process of desistance and persistence (Warr 1993, 1998). Those who maintain relationships with deviant peers, like Adam, will experience more difficulty desisting from drug use than individuals like Olivia who have detached themselves from these types of peers. For the persisters, it is likely then that maintaining relationships with deviant peers may play a greater role in fostering persistence.

To further emphasize the role friends secure in influencing persistence, here is another persister whose use patterns seem to be heavily impacted by the friends she surrounds herself with. Julia states:

Now anything more than weed and alcohol needs to be kept quiet amongst a select few for the most part, and I don't usually do those drugs anymore unless I'm seeing old college friends.

Julia's comment showcases just how influential her friends are in assisting her continued use, and more importantly, how drug use becomes interpreted differently between friend groups. Although she states that any substances besides marijuana and alcohol are not considered "normal" among some of her friends, the use of more "deviant" substances are only "ok" when being used with past college friends, or the "select few" she refers to in her post. For Julia, her persistent drug use is dependent on the social environment she finds herself in. Among those who do not necessarily

accept the use of other substances beyond marijuana and alcohol, Julia's use will conform to these relative social norms or cues. This idea is again consistent with Becker's (1964) social interpretation and labeling concepts. When Julia is with her old college friends or the "select few", she is able to use the drugs that are not readily accepted by her other group of friends. Instead, when Julia is with her other friends, she only tends to use marijuana and alcohol since those are the only substances considered "ok" to use amongst them. Here, drug use persistence again is linked to the types of deviant peer associations one has, and furthermore to the interpretations and labeling process that situate drug use as "acceptable" and "unacceptable" among different friend groups. Regardless of each friend group, associations with both demonstrate how persistent use is made possible by such associations with other using peers.

### **Persisters and Desisters: Are they really so Different?**

There are clear demographic differences between desisting and persisting respondents, specifically in regards to class, gender, and age distinctions. As previously noted, a large percentage (71%) of upper class survey participants are also persisters. Although the majority of survey participants in general reported belonging to the middle class, the increase of persisting respondents who belong to the upper class demonstrates that there may in fact be a class-based aspect to the process of desistance and persistence worth further exploration. Important gender distinctions also arise when looking at these groups of respondents. Previous studies on desistance have noted that men are less likely than women to experience desistance (Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). These findings are consistent with my own. Out of the fifteen desisters, only one is a male. Most of the male respondents instead are persisters. Of the 20 male survey participants, 15 (75%) belong to this persisting group. Lastly, there are distinctions between age of persisters and age of desisters that are worth noting. Age-graded theories of desistance make

clear that “aging out” of deviance, and more specifically drug use goes hand in hand with desistance (Sampson and Laub 1992, 2001; Massoglia and Uggen 2010; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hoffman and Beck 1984).

Figure 12

**CurrentUse \* NAGE Crosstabulation**

			NAGE		Total
			Under 35	35 and Above	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	24	3	27
		% within NAGE	54.5%	30.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	44.4%	5.6%	50.0%
	No	Count	20	7	27
		% within NAGE	45.5%	70.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	37.0%	13.0%	50.0%
Total		Count	44	10	54
		% within NAGE	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	81.5%	18.5%	100.0%

While the majority of my survey participants are in their twenties, there were a number of respondents in their forties and above. I have argued that it is not age specifically that can predict desistance or persistence, but is instead the normative transitions, events, and attachments the individual must possess to experience desistance. With that said, when observing my sample as a whole, age does become an important distinguishing characteristic of all three groups. While the majority of desisters are in their twenties, there is a larger percentage of current non-using respondents forty and older (see Figure 12). Figure 12 depicts the percentage of respondents belonging to each age group and their current drug use activity. 55% of individuals aged 35 and under are persisters, while 70% of respondents aged 35 and above are either desisters or abstainers. These general trends are then consistent with other works that find there to be an “aging out” process of drug use (Sampson and Laub 2001:5; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hoffman and Beck 1984).



While there are clear distinctions between persisters and desisters, I also see a lot of similarities between the two groups. For one, both persisters and desisters share similar social experiences in college that facilitate drug use during that time. Most persisters and many desisters also still possess friends who currently use drugs and also find drug use to be widely normalized in their social realms. And lastly, the majority of persisters and desisters are also employed. While I do not wish to claim that the process of persistence and desistance are similar, because as we know they clearly are not, I do wish to highlight instead, how some transitions and experiences that coincide with desistance may mirror some persisting ones as well. Yes, the end result differs; the persister still uses drugs while the desister does not. But what is more important is the variations of these processes—that although desistance implies a cease in deviant behavior it does not necessarily look the same for all desisters, just as persistence, as we have gathered from the many types of persisters (Types A-D), does not look the same for all. I would even argue that certain “mellowed out” persisters (Type A or B) are in fact more like desisters than the more drug active persisters (Type C).

While different types of persisters either maintained their pro-drug stance, some persisters (typically Types A and B) possess views on drugs that mirror the sentiments of many desisting respondents. This then leads me to believe that actual drug related behaviors are not only mediated by the social contexts and associations one has, but are also reliant on the basic perceptions one has about the act of using drugs itself. Some persisters know that drug use is not as acceptable of an activity as it once was in college. They know it may not fit in well with their current lifestyles. These are similar reasonings behind why desisters have felt the need to desist. What these persisters then become are the potential future desister. When they will desist is

unclear, but the possibility of it happening is likely because of the transitions she has already begun making. The Type A or B persisters can then be understood as the precursor to desistance.

## Discussion & Conclusion

This project has provided a look into the unique and varying processes of abstinence, desistance, and persistence through the exploration of three groups of drug users and non-users. Analysis of individuals categorized as *abstainers*, *desisters*, and *persisters* contributes to our understanding of drug use and non-use patterns over time. In the case of this project, abstinence has been identified through the non-use behaviors of respondents in college and post-college. While the group of abstaining respondents may share different experiences with drugs over time when compared to their desisting and persisting counterparts, my review of the overall processes of abstinence, desistance, and persistence begins to reveal more overlapping tendencies than previously imagined.

What distinguishes these three groups primarily comes down to the experiences each type of respondent had in college. For the abstainers, drug use, on a personal level, never really existed among respondents besides the select few who had drug experiences before attending college. While each abstainer had a number of friends who used in college, they never felt influenced to use themselves. This then demonstrates that friends may only play a minimal role in influencing drug-using behaviors. In college, many abstainers reported adopting more lenient views of drug use mostly because they became accustomed to the very presence of drugs on their college campuses. On the other hand, some abstainers held on to their prior negative views of drugs throughout college. Regardless of the attitudinal transformations made or not made, drugs use never became an issue for this group of respondents.

Unlike the abstainers, the desisters had multiple experiences with drugs in college. Although use patterns did vary slightly, the majority of desisters were categorized as non-frequent users in college. Desisters also reported having many more friends who used in college

than the abstainers did. While attitudinal changes occurred for some desisting respondents as well, the majority of them already entered college with relatively indifferent views of drugs. Desisters also reported having more drug experiences before attending college, which provided most desisters with drug expectations that could be met in the college environment. Drug use in college for the desisters was primarily a social phenomenon; drugs were used for partying or simply as an activity between friends.

The sharpest contrast between each group is most evident among the persisters whose in college use patterns differed dramatically from the desisters and quite obviously from the abstainers. In college, not only were the majority of persisters (85%) identified as frequent users, but the variety in their choice of drugs used was also much larger than the drugs reportedly used by the desisters in college. While the majority of desisters reported using drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and to a lesser extent, MDMA, persisters had the highest percentage of respondents reporting the use of perceived “harsher” drugs like hallucinogens (89%) and MDMA. Not only did drug use patterns differ among these two groups, but distinctions between the contexts and reasons for using were also prominent among persisters and desisters. Desisters typically reasoned their drug use for social purposes and their contexts of use were primarily social as well. While persister use was also largely situated around social contexts, many persisters also noted using drugs on their own for both personal and academic purposes. These distinctions inform the rationale of my argument: the experiences an individual has in college can be used as an indicator to determine the likelihood of drug use persistence or desistance later in life. The desister is one who has experiences with fewer drugs in college and also uses on a less frequent basis for primarily social reasons and contexts. The persister, on the other hand, is typically a

frequent user of multiple drugs in college and also uses for a larger range of reasons and in greater contexts that are just social.

While the distinctions between the groups of abstainers, desisters, and persisters are largely definable in college, the distinctions between respondents belonging to each group post-college become a tad blurred. The boundaries between abstinence, desistance, and persistence become less static in the post-college arena. For example, the experiences of the abstainers post-college seem to mirror that of the desister's post-college situations. By this I am referring to the transformation in deviant peer associations. Desisters post-college, experience transformations in their social networks that resemble those of the abstainers. Desisters, like the abstainers, maintain fewer friends who currently use drugs. While having friends who continue to use drugs does not necessarily determine whether or not an individual will also use, distancing from peers who use marks a clear distinction between the abstaining and desisting respondents, and the persisting respondents. Desisters and abstainers have made the choice to not use currently, and while their current social environments may aid in facilitating non-use, deciding not to use is also largely associated to personal choice and attitudinal factors.

A blurring of the process of persistence also continues when examining the variations between persisting respondents post-college. A four-type persister model was used to showcase these variations. To reiterate, the Type A persister is one whose drug use patterns have drastically decreased in terms of drugs used and frequency used since graduating college. The Type B persister instead is one whose use rate has remained consistent over time, yet the actual amount of drug still used has decreased. The Type C persister is one whose use rate has remained relatively consistent over time as well as one who continues to use a multiplicity of drugs. And finally, the Type D persister is one whose use patterns have actually increased over time. It has

become clear through examining the different types of persisters that some persisting respondents share more similarities with desisters than other types of persisters. By this I mean, in the post-college arena Type A and B persisters share more consistencies with the experiences of desisting respondents. The Type A and B persister has experienced a decreased in drug use over time, they possess fewer associations with friends who currently use, and reflect attitudes that view drugs use as an inappropriate post-college activity. This then leads me to believe these persisters are likely to experience desistance sometime in the future.

The blurring of the processes of abstinence, desistance, and persistence seen with many respondents belonging to each category suggests that each process is not so linear, but in fact a fluid process reliant on multiple variables to influence each. This study has relied on numerous theoretical frameworks to describe each process, yet because the very concepts of abstinence, desistance, and persistence are not so easily definable I do not think it is wise to solely adhere to one particular frame of thought. Explanations of drug desistance or abstinence cannot simply rely on ideas associated with social control because the factors that are widely used as an indicator of deterring deviance (i.e. employment and marriage) *do* exist among the persisters, but do not have the same deterring effect. Instead, my study highlights the necessity of a combination of theories: both social control and social learning. Future research should be conducted to better understand these processes and the theories that support them.

### *Project Implications*

I believe the study I have presented has both engaged in a dialogue with prominent theorists in the field to raise greater questions regarding the processes of drug abstinence, desistance, and persistence as well as provided insight into a largely unexplored area of study. While I believe my work may be useful to future scholars who wish to examine drug use from a

life-course perspective, the project itself does not come without its faults. For one, because of the time constraints of an eight-month long project, my research had to be conducted in a relatively swift manner. The survey used to guide all the data in this project was only available online for a few months and since participants were recruited through snow-ball sampling methods, the number of participants acquired was largely reliant on my own, extended interpersonal and online social network. While I still believe I was able to gather important and insightful data, the sample size of the study itself was relatively small. Because of the size, most of the statistical information featured in this study is not significant enough to make generalizations to a larger population. There was also minimal diversity among participants which made it difficult to make many demographic based arguments. Such arguments are important to examine when thinking about drugs use patterns over time.

What my study *does* provide is an in-depth look into a matter of moments. It examines the survey participants' lives through the lens of self-reported college experiences and the lens of self-reported present experiences. While time spent in college and the time of the present are just two snapshots into the lives the participants lead, one of the purposes of this project was to see what effect, if any, college has had on these survey participants drug use trends. Participants were instructed to speak about experiences in college and experiences of the present. They did not have to address any experiences that may have occurred between those times; just college and just now. Looking into these two distinct time-points has proven useful in explaining how drug use patterns change or remain relatively similar over time. While it might have been interesting to ask participants about the time gap in between college and now, it was not explicitly necessary for this type of research. If anything, being able to look into the discrete moments of these individuals lives, ask them questions about a specific time in the past and

questions about the present, allowed me to focus in on different parts of the abstaining, desisting, and persisting processes. The persister who continues to use today, for all I know, may stop using next week. Even more so, the desister or abstainer who has not used in years may decide to pick up a joint tomorrow. The processes of abstinence, desistance, and persistence are just that—they are processes. They are not a set in stone status, but a status that has a foundation in a continuous stream of decisions that are widely influenced by social, institutional, and personal forces.



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## Appendix I Survey Questions

### *General Section*

1. Sex: Male, Female, Other (Select one)
2. Age? (Write Out)
3. Race: White, Black, Asian, Hispanic (non-white), Other (Select one)
4. In which state do you currently reside? (Write out)
5. Are you living in a city, suburb, or rural area? (Select one)
6. Are you currently employed? (Yes/no)
  - a. If yes, what do you do (Write out occupation)
7. Level of Education Completed: Some College, College Graduate, Some Graduate School, Graduate Degree (Select one)
8. What type of college did you attend: Small Liberal Arts College, University, Religious College, or Community College? (Select one)
9. What was your major? (Write out)
10. Religious Affiliation: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Other (name), None?
11. Do you consider yourself to be religious? (Yes/No)
12. Political views: Liberal, Moderate, Conservative, or Other? (Select one)

### *Family Section*

13. Did either or both your parents complete college? (Yes/No)
14. Have your parent(s) influenced you at all in your decision to participate or abstain from using drugs? (Write out response)
15. Have your family's views towards drugs shaped yours at all? If, so in what ways? (Write out response)
16. How would you define your social class when you were in college? Upper class, Middle class, Working class/Lower class (Select one)

### *Past Experience Section*

17. Had you ever used any illicit drug before attending college?
  - a. If yes, at what age were you when you first experimented and with which illicit drug(s)? (Write out)
18. What were your views towards drugs before going to college? Negative, Indifferent, Positive (Select one and explain)
19. Did you drink alcohol during your time at college?
  - a. If yes, how often? Never, Once a semester, Once a week, Multiple times a week (Select one)
20. Did you ever use any illicit drugs in college?
  - a. If yes, list all. (Write out)
  - b. If yes, how often would you say you used drugs in college: Once a semester, Once a month, Once a week, or Multiple times a week? (Select one)
  - c. What were the influences that led you to decide to use drugs? (Write out response)
  - d. \*If "once a week" or "multiple times a week": What were the circumstances that led to you to use regularly?

- e. What were the contexts or situations in which you typically used? (Write out response)
  - f. Did your use increase or decrease over the years spent in college?
    - 1. Increase or Decrease (Select one)
  - g. From whom did you gain access to drugs? College friends, Pre-college friends, Dealers I did not know well, Family members, Other (Select one or define "Other")
  - h. Did you friends use drugs? All of them, Most of them, Only a few, Almost none, None (Select one)
  - i. Did you perceive drug use as accepted or normalized among students on campus? (Yes/No)
    - 1. If yes, what drugs were most accepted or normalized? (Write out response)
  - j. Do you believe that using drugs negatively or positively affected your school work?
    - 1. Negatively, Somewhat negatively, Neutral, Somewhat positively, Positively (Select one)
  - k. Do you believe that using drugs negatively or positively affected your social life?
    - 1. Negatively, Somewhat negatively, Neutral, Somewhat positively, Positively (Select one)
21. Did your attitudes about drug use change while attending college? (Yes/No)
- a. If yes, why? (Short answer explanation)

#### *Current Situation Section*

- 22. Are you currently single, married, divorced or widowed? (Select one)
  - a. If single, are you currently in a serious relationship?
  - b. If single, are you currently cohabiting?
  - c. If yes to all, what is your partner's stance on drugs (Write out response)
  - d. If yes to all, are your attitudes towards drugs influenced by your partners? (Yes/No)
- 23. Do you currently use drugs?
  - a. If yes, how often? (Never, Seldom, Once a month, Once a week, or Multiple times a week)
  - b. If yes, which drug(s) do you use? (Write out response)
- 24. Do your friends currently use illicit drugs? (Yes/No)
- 25. Is drug use normalized or accepted in your social realm (i.e. amongst friends, family, workplace?) (Yes/No and explain why)
- 26. How often do you drink alcohol? Seldom, A couple times a month, Once a week, Multiple times a week (Select one)
- 27. Based on your personal experience, how has your substance use changed after college? Why? (Write out response)
- 28. Have your attitudes towards drugs changed since being in college? Why?
  - a. If yes, what are your views now? Positive, Indifferent, Negative (Select one and explain)

## Appendix II

Table 1: Age Frequency of Respondents

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	21.00	3	4.6	5.6	5.6
	22.00	19	29.2	35.2	40.7
	23.00	8	12.3	14.8	55.6
	24.00	9	13.8	16.7	72.2
	25.00	1	1.5	1.9	74.1
	26.00	2	3.1	3.7	77.8
	29.00	1	1.5	1.9	79.6
	34.00	1	1.5	1.9	81.5
	48.00	1	1.5	1.9	83.3
	50.00	1	1.5	1.9	85.2
	52.00	2	3.1	3.7	88.9
	58.00	2	3.1	3.7	92.6
	59.00	1	1.5	1.9	94.4
	60.00	1	1.5	1.9	96.3
	61.00	1	1.5	1.9	98.1
	62.00	1	1.5	1.9	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 2: Respondent's Gender Frequency

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	20	30.8	37.0	37.0
	Female	33	50.8	61.1	98.1
	Other	1	1.5	1.9	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 3: *Race Frequency of Respondents*

		Race			Cumulative Percent
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	White	39	60.0	72.2	72.2
	Black	1	1.5	1.9	74.1
	Asian	6	9.2	11.1	85.2
	Non-White (Hispanic)	2	3.1	3.7	88.9
	Other	6	9.2	11.1	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 4: *Class Frequency of Respondents*

		Class			Cumulative Percent
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	Upper Class	14	21.5	25.9	25.9
	Middle Class	34	52.3	63.0	88.9
	Working/Lower Class	6	9.2	11.1	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 5: *Respondent's Current Living Location*

		Local			Cumulative Percent
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	City	32	49.2	59.3	59.3
	Suburb	17	26.2	31.5	90.7
	Rural	5	7.7	9.3	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		



## Appendix III

Table 1: Respondent's College Drug Use dependent on College Friend Use

**CollegeDrug \* CFU Crosstabulation**

			CFU			Total
			Many Friends	Few Friends	No Friends	
CollegeDrug	Yes	Count	35	6	0	41
		% within CFU	85.4%	50.0%	0.0%	75.9%
		% of Total	64.8%	11.1%	0.0%	75.9%
	No	Count	6	6	1	13
		% within CFU	14.6%	50.0%	100.0%	24.1%
		% of Total	11.1%	11.1%	1.9%	24.1%
Total	Count	41	12	1	54	
	% within CFU	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	75.9%	22.2%	1.9%	100.0%	

Table 2: Respondent's Current Drug Use dependent on Employment Status

**CurrentUse \* Employed Crosstabulation**

			Employed		Total
			Yes	No	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	20	7	27
		% within Employed	45.5%	70.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	37.0%	13.0%	50.0%
	No	Count	24	3	27
		% within Employed	54.5%	30.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	44.4%	5.6%	50.0%
Total	Count	44	10	54	
	% within Employed	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	81.5%	18.5%	100.0%	

## Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.000	1.000
	Cramer's V	.000	1.000
N of Valid Cases		52	

Table 3: Respondent's College Drug Use dependent on Religiosity

**CurrentUse \* Relig2 Crosstabulation**

			Relig2		Total
			Yes	No	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	4	22	26
		% within Relig2	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	7.7%	42.3%	50.0%
	No	Count	4	22	26
		% within Relig2	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%
		% of Total	7.7%	42.3%	50.0%
Total	Count	8	44	52	
	% within Relig2	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	15.4%	84.6%	100.0%	

**Symmetric Measures**

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by	Phi	-.146	.293
Nominal	Cramer's V	.146	.293
N of Valid Cases		52	

Table 4: Respondent's Current Drug Use dependent on Religiosity

**CollegeDrug \* Relig2 Crosstabulation**

			Relig2		Total
			Yes	No	
CollegeDrug	Yes	Count	5	35	40
		% within Relig2	62.5%	79.5%	76.9%
		% of Total	9.6%	67.3%	76.9%
	No	Count	3	9	12
		% within Relig2	37.5%	20.5%	23.1%
		% of Total	5.8%	17.3%	23.1%
Total	Count	8	44	52	
	% within Relig2	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	15.4%	84.6%	100.0%	

Table 5: Respondent's Religions

		Relig			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Catholic	7	10.8	13.0	13.0
	Protestant	2	3.1	3.7	16.7
	Jewish	17	26.2	31.5	48.1
	None	19	29.2	35.2	83.3
	Other	9	13.8	16.7	100.0
	Total	54	83.1	100.0	
Missing	System	11	16.9		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 6: Respondent's Religiosity

		Relig2			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	8	12.3	15.4	15.4
	No	44	67.7	84.6	100.0
	Total	52	80.0	100.0	
Missing	System	13	20.0		
Total		65	100.0		

Table 7: Respondent's Current Use dependent on Class

CurrentUse * Class Crosstabulation						
			Class			Total
			Upper Class	Middle Class	Working/Low er Class	
CurrentUse	Yes	Count	10	16	1	27
		% within Class	71.4%	47.1%	16.7%	50.0%
		% of Total	18.5%	29.6%	1.9%	50.0%
	No	Count	4	18	5	27
		% within Class	28.6%	52.9%	83.3%	50.0%
		% of Total	7.4%	33.3%	9.3%	50.0%
Total		Count	14	34	6	54
		% within Class	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	25.9%	63.0%	11.1%	100.0%