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Entertainment

THE POWER OF 420

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Transforming the universal code into a collective consciousness for stoners.

By Karen Bettez Halnon

Marijuana-smokers, like other close-knit groups, have a special language. But often, people in the straight and narrow world just don't understand it. Strange and alien to outsiders are words such as "nugs," "dank," "permagrin," "wake 'n' bake," "blunt," "bogarting," "Rastafarian," "Towlie," or even "coffeeshops." After 30 years of full-blown marijuana counterculture, outsiders still remain oblivious to the most special marijuana catchphrase of all: "Four hundred and twenty what?"

What outsiders miss, the discerning (and very possibly, slightly reddened) eye can find all around. The 420 imprimatur is on bongs, T-shirts, patches, and coffee mugs. Marijuana fans find it frequently in stoner magazines, headshops, and in music lyrics. They feel lucky if they own 420 phone numbers, street addresses, or birthdays. It's found at smoker Websites, on Saturday Night Live, and in news media on or around every April 20. For many smokers, 420 is a guiding light and inspiration. In a word, for those with a raised consciousness of it, 420 is an essential part of everyday life.

Curious about this hidden yet vibrant phenomenon, I did some research. The results of my sociological investigation were fascinating. Especially intriguing was the potency of 420 unique in the multiple ways it inspires and cultivates identity, community, and even reality.

It's difficult to even think of another single numerical expression that compares. 411 or 911? Lucky 7? Demonic 666? Trinitarian 3? Sexual 69? Tragic 9/11? LSD- 25? Or even the infinite 3.1416? While these numbers are significant, none by themselves embrace and reflect a community to the extent of 420.

In documenting 420, I hope to express the sociological "surprise" of 420. However, sociological surprises do not necessarily provide new information. The surprise of sociology is when it shines new light on our everyday behaviors and experiences. Everyone on the inside knows that 420 is a most special number. My goal is to explain some of the sociological reasons for its special status as spirit and guide for marijuana-smokers. In doing so, I drew upon the insights of nearly a hundred 420 "smokers."

LEARNING THE "SECRET CODE"

"Learning" is extremely important in achieving an identity. In fact, it is the basic and necessary way any identity is achieved. And, if learning takes place with friends or family, achieving that identity is even more likely.

Following this pattern, most pot-smokers first learned about 420 from high-school or college friends, or from brothers or sisters. One smoker learned about it from

"good friends in the military" who "introduced 4:20 as an alternative to 1620 military time." Others explained that they "became part of the 'crew' by hitting 420," or learned about it when "sharing marijuana with new friends," at rock concerts ó Phish shows in particular.

One of the first lessons smokers learned was that while the meaning of 420 is "obvious" to insiders as "universal" or as an "international symbol" for marijuana, marijuana-smoking, and marijuana subculture, it's also a "secret code" or "secret advertiser." Smokers recounted comedic stories, such as when in high school a teacher asked a student what time it was and he said, "420," eliciting the laughter of in-group classmates and the bewilderment of his teacher. Another smoker explained that 420's "secret" quality allowed him to get a pro-marijuana symbol past high-school authorities, a criminal number-420 mug shot in the yearbook without the faculty editor noticing. Others explained that it allowed them to wear blatant symbols of marijuana to school (420 written on hats, T-shirts, and the like) without encountering negative sanctions, as they would if they wore less obscure symbols, such as marijuana leaves. Still others explained that 420, as a secret code, allowed them to safely and accurately identify others who smoke marijuana. For example, one smoker explained: "420 is like a secret advertiser- a good way to keep scattered tabs on who puffs."

All of this is fascinating to the sociologist, because secrets and humor are very effective means of binding groups closer together. Secrets create a social boundary between outsiders and insiders, making insiders feel closer together. Humor, at least for those who share in it, enhances feelings of relaxation and warmth. Together, secrets and humor cultivate closeness, commitment, and group solidarity.

420 "TIME"

Smokers explained that 420 is "a time that is in-between day and night, a break- a good time to relax and chill." Others said: "If my friends and I are ever up at 4:20 AM, we always celebrate by smoking a bowl or joint. It is simply a justified reason to smoke."

For novices, 420 motivated smoking behavior by organizing time. The newly inducted learned that 420 meant "a" or "the" "time to smoke." For example, smokers explained how they learned that 4:20 in the afternoon was "prime time" for smokers, the "pot-smoker's happy hour," the "best time to smoke," or the "international smoke time." One expressed the general sentiment of the novice: "You have to smoke at 4:20 if you have herb." Smokers explained how they set their alarm clocks, or how clocks in general served as reminders to smoke at 4:20. Nearly all smokers agreed that for the novice, 420 became an excuse or a reason to smoke, and frequently involved excessive smoking.

This pattern is sociologically significant, because a crucial ingredient in the recipe for identity achievement is immersion into identity-shaping activities. In other words, smoking lots of weed in the beginning normalizes getting high and increases the chances of defining oneself as a smoker of weed. The sociologist would also take important note of the fact that the organization of time is one of the most basic frameworks that supports and legitimates a "reality." Stated otherwise, 4:20 time gives legitimacy or a sense of truthfulness to pot-smoker reality.

Putting such sociological value aside, more seasoned smokers complained and resisted. They criticized that such time structuring created a "ritualistic use of 420" or that it turned "marijuana-smoking into a joke." One smoker, who described himself as "patriotic to the weed," claimed that 420 should not be guided by time, but rather a more spontaneous "pledge and a tribute."

Whether a novice or seasoned user, what nearly everyone agreed upon is that 4:20 (PM or AM) meant a source of unity or oneness in the pot-smoker community. It was variously described as a "time to unite with all smokers," a

"smoker's club," and a way that "brings users together for smoking, community, and solidarity." Smokers repeatedly claimed that 420 created a "common bond" among "friends" and "fellow smokers." They know that when they light up at 4:20, thousands, if not millions, of others are doing the same for the same reason.

Most pot-smokers would probably accept as fact that 420 originated in San Rafael, California with Steve Waldo, who used the expression "420 Louie" in high school. Waldo used it as a secret code to remind friends to meet for smoking sessions at the Louis Pasteur statue, 70 minutes after the 3:10 dismissal. However, whether or not the smokers I talked with actually knew of the veracity of Waldo's claim, it made little difference in their indifference to determining 420's true origin. One expressed the typical view: "The actual meaning of 420, or where it came from, seems unimportant to me compared to the feeling of 420. That is the true meaning." Another was of a similar opinion: "Most people do not desire to know where 420 came from, but rather enjoy it for its cultural importance." A third explained, after reviewing a number of possible theories: "While some of these reports are more believable than others, they all represent how important the number is to the marijuana community." Emphasizing the value of learning from talking about 420, a fourth smoker expressed the general point: "I think the most valid meaning of 420 origins is the underlying things you learn."

What fascinated me about origin theories was that while smokers actively discussed and debated them, they didn't care about determining the ultimate truth. This apparent contradiction made more sense when I realized that the dozens of theories discussed and debated, even though wrong or unprovable, were equivalent to a 101 course in marijuana cultural literacy. It was, as smokers repeatedly told me, more important to discuss and debate than to discover truth, because of the underlying things that you learn.

Smokers learned, for example, about taking a defiant attitude toward police enforcement of antimarijuana laws, and about the meaning and importance of people and things such as Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, Cheech and Chong, Jamaica, Haight-Ashbury, Amsterdam, and THC. While these 101 lessons are an important part of the socialization of new smokers, origin conversations are important for all smokers. They provide a subject for many deep, philosophical, and scientific conversations. Smokers said that "stoner philosophizing about origins was especially meaningful when sharing a bowl, joint, or bong," and in effect, was "a learning session." Exploring but not necessarily proving origin theories provides many important lessons in marijuana culture. In other words, 420 origins serve as a good, celebratory, and often humorous, teacher.

The most common origin theory was that 420 is or was a Los Angeles "police code for marijuana-smoking in progress." Researching the validity of this claim, I called the Los Angeles Police Department and asked if 420 was the "real" police code for marijuana-smoking in progress. The answering officer explained that 420 in the "penal book" referred to "preventing or obstructing entry upon or passage upon public lands." I then asked what the code would be for marijuana-smoking in progress. He said the California Health and Safety Code for "any narcotic drug" including marijuana is 11350.

Steve Waldo, writing in HIGH TIMES ("4:20 & the Grateful Dead," May '01 HT), explained further:

"Although it has often been rumored, 420 is not a police code for drug-law

enforcement in California, and in San Rafael, is part of the state Health and Safety Code, in which all sections have five-and six-digit numbers, sometimes separated by a decimal point. Pot-related activities and violations fall in the middle 11300s."

The police-code origin theory, while false, calls attention to the fact that marijuana is an illegal substance, pointing to a central value difference between what is law and what is valued among marijuana-smokers. To embrace the police code as a smoking symbol is to learn to stand in defiance against laws that make smoking illegal. To call attention to California is to learn about a state that is leader in the fight to legalize the medical use of marijuana.

A second origin theory was that 420 references THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) as: "the number of chemicals in THC," the "number of molecules in marijuana," or the "number of elements in the marijuana plant." Skeptical about these biochemistry claims, I solicited evaluation from Peter Webster, review editor of the International Journal of Drug Policy, who responded to my e-mail query as follows: "THC, or the principal active ingredient of cannabis,

is a single chemical entity, i.e., one chemical. There are, however, many other closely related but less psychoactive chemicals in cannabis, some of which may be more important in medical applications. Each, however, is a different chemical, since its molecular structure is unique. Again, THC is ONE chemical. Marijuana contains perhaps many thousands of different molecular entities, from the couple of hundred cannabinoids, such as THC, to chlorophyll, fats, fibers such as lignin, cellulose, sugars, enzymes, and a wide range of other organic chemicals, to minerals, water, etc. The number of elements: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur, chlorine, sodium, potassium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, many trace metals, and probably many others in trace amounts- in effect, most elements in the first part of the periodic table!and probably even some traces of heavy metals, whatever is in the environment in which it grows."

While false again, the THC origin theory aids in learning about the primary psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, which is standard knowledge for any marijuana-smoker.

A third set of related theories revolved around Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead. Smokers claimed, for example, that 420 was the "address of the Grateful Dead's home at Haight-Ashbury," that "pot-smoking is almost synonymous with the Grateful Dead," and that 420 referred to the "exact time of Jerry Garcia's death." In researching these claims I found that, according to Rebecca Adams in *Deadhead Social Science*: "By late 1966, the Dead were headquartered at 710 Ashbury, near its intersection with Haight, the symbolic heart of the hippie community." And according to the San Francisco Bay City Guide (March 2001): "The Grateful Dead were onetime residents of the Haight (710 Ashbury Street)." Finally, while staying in San Francisco, I took a cab to Haight-Ashbury myself to confirm the 710, not 420, address.

In researching the exact time of Jerry Garcia's death, I found that, according to a People magazine (Aug. 21, 1995) cover story, he died on Wednesday, August 4, 1995 at 4:23 AM exactly. Other newspaper articles similarly reported that Garcia passed away in his bed at Forest Knoll after being found by a nurse who tried to revive him. The time of death again was 4:23 AM. Thus, a third origin theory, while false again, aids in cultivating marijuana-culture literacy through its focus on classic stoner musician Jerry Garcia, stoner band the Grateful Dead, and the quintessential 1960s drug/hippie community, Haight-Ashbury.

A fourth set of origin theories revolved around times that are, like the theories above, loaded with marijuana-smoker culture. One explanation was that 420 means teatime in Amsterdam or Holland. Probably, like Britain, the time is closer to 4:30. Another explanation was that Tommy Chong (of Cheech and Chong, stars of the marijuana cult film *Up in Smoke*) was born on April 20 at 4:20 AM. In fact, he was born May 24, 1938.

Another explanation states that 420 originated from "the date Haile Selassie visited Jamaica for the first time." The late Ethiopian emperor, venerated by Rastafarians for signifying the rebirth of black rule in Africa, visited Jamaica for three days in April 1966, but he arrived on the 21st. Thus, a fourth set of origin theories aids smokers in learning about the importance of Amsterdam, a city that tolerates "soft drug" use and where marijuana can be smoked freely in coffeeshops; educates them as to a major marijuana cult film and its figures; and reveals the ritualization of ganja by Rastafarians.

Smokers also claimed that 420 originated from the first recorded use of marijuana. In researching this claim, I found that 2737 BC is frequently reported in academic texts as the earliest reference to use of marijuana because of its mention in a Chinese treatise by Emperor Shen Nung. However, Erich Goode (In *Drugs in American Society*, 5th edition, p. 213) tells us that "there is no definite date of the earliest recorded use of marijuana, although descriptions of cannabis use can be found in ancient texts from China, India, Persia, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. For example, marijuana is mentioned as a "healing herb" in The Divine Husbandman's *Materia Medica*, circa first or second century AD. In 650 BC, the use of cannabis is mentioned in Persia and Assyria. In 400 BC, the use of cannabis is mentioned in Rome. This time origin theory, while false or unprovable again, serves in learning that marijuana-smoking has a long and deep historical

tradition, and thus naturalizes its use for smokers.

Drawing more generally upon the illegal drug culture was the theory that 420 originated from the date Albert Hofmann discovered LSD-25. LSD-25 was first synthesized at Sandoz Laboratories in Basel, Switzerland, in 1938. It was reshelved until April 16, 1943, when Hofmann made a "fresh batch," swallowed 250 micrograms, and experienced the first extremely intense acid trip "for science" (Acid Dreams, Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain: xvii-xviii). This origin theory teaches about Albert Hofmann and LSD, and by doing so asserts the value of using illegal drugs.

Perhaps the most creative but dubious time theory was that 420 originated from the position of a "dangling doobie" in the mouth of a Jamaican getting off work. The position of the joint is said to resemble an analog clock at 4:20. A final but certainly not exhaustive explanation is that 420 originated from Adolf Hitler's birthday. One smoker explained: "Hitler represents in sharp opposite contrast all that the marijuana-smoking community stands for." This theory, like the theories above, cannot be proven to have any direct reference to 420. And even though Hitler was in fact born on April 20, 1889, there is no evidence that 420 originated from that date. By learning the dangling doobie and Hitler theories, smokers learn about the value of Jamaica and Jamaican weed, and the peaceful, laid-back spirit among smokers.

To summarize, by discussing and debating numerous 420 origin theories, marijuana-smokers are able to converse with stories filled with an array of important symbols of pot culture: Jamaica, California, Rastafarians, Cheech and Chong, Haight-Ashbury, the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia, hippies, and THC. Through these conversations, smokers also learn many other lessons about the importance of defying laws and legal authorities that prohibit marijuana-smoking: the value and significance of locales where it is legal or at least tolerated; the deep historical tradition of marijuana-smoking; the spiritual justifications for it; and the easy, relaxed attitude of marijuana-smokers.

Thus, what is most important is not determining the true origin of 420, but rather engaging in conversations filled with marijuana-smoker lessons. Because these origin theories are either wrong or unprovable, they provide for an ongoing learning conversation. The sociological significance of ongoing conversations—especially if they are rich in memory, tradition, common beliefs, and values—is that they are a basic and necessary means of maintaining any kind of relationship. The value of 420 origin stories is much like that of repeated storytelling in a close-knit family. Stories—whether true, false, or embellished—strengthen the family's sense of belonging, identity, and values, bringing it closer together. Even if we suspect that Aunt Lucy or Uncle John is not telling the truth, that doesn't stop us from reveling in their old stories. The retelling of stories itself becomes a cherished ritual, and a means of communicating what is valued and important to the family. This being said, the definitiveness of the Waldo theory is, at best, a mixed blessing to the pot-smoker community.

THE POT-SMOKERS' HOLIDAY

April 20 at 4:20 PM is the "pot-smokers' holiday," also variously described as the "hippie New Year," "national smoke time," "national pot-smoking day," "the holiday," "pot appreciation day," "the ultimate session," or "a day of tribute to the scene." One enthusiastic smoker reported: "Every group has its holidays, and pot-smokers are no exception. April 20th is the day of worship observed by smokers around the world." Another said: "It's comforting to know that hundreds of thousands of other people are lighting up with me on 4/20. It's about the community identity of marijuana-smokers."

For marijuana-smokers, April 20 is especially imbued with emotional and spiritual meaning, because it produces an intense collective bonding among them. Smokers emphasized the special quality of the holiday: "We are talking about the day of celebration, the real time to get high, the grand master of all holidays—April twentieth."

That statement also implies a sense of family within the pot-smoking culture.

"Tokers are brothers and sisters, therefore more closely connected than any other association." Another smoker expressed the anticipation and joy of the holiday:

"At 4:19 PM, everyone suddenly got quiet and the countdown began. When the time turned to 4:20, it was like New Year's. Everyone was cheering and shouting, jumping, hugging, and of course, smoking. It really was incredible. I felt connected not only to the people around me, but to everyone else in the world who was doing the same thing at that exact moment."

While 4/20 celebrations give smokers a sense of worldwide community, they also reinforce old friendships, or create new ones at rallies. Friends travel long distances, even across the country, to party together. As a result, friendships are refreshed or "become stronger than ever." And people who might be strangers in other settings are bonded through their common allegiance to marijuana. One smoker explained: "It is a time when you can approach people that you do not really know and indulge in pot-smoking with them. You develop friendships with people because of the activities on 4/20 and at 4:20."

The sense of worldwide "we-ness" and the friendships established and renewed at 4/20 celebrations are due largely to the fact that April 20 is a public forum for the fight for legalization. A smoker explained: "It is an exercise in solidarity, all of the pot-smokers coming together to smoke and the police being utterly powerless to do anything about it. I think this is the most valid expression of 420, as it puts the recreational use of marijuana in full view of the public, which is perhaps the first step towards gaining legitimacy." Others explained: "4/20 at 4:20 is a time to come together. To share one's lifestyle with others who feel the same way. To come together and stand strong and proud for marijuana," and "Personally, I feel it (April 20) to be a political statement. It is a good time to gather to show one's support of legalization of marijuana."

As a matter of efficient crowd control, police and university authorities generally tolerate the shorthand seldom dangerous yearly public statements by pot-smokers. One smoker said that not only is 4/20 a time to stand proud for marijuana, but also a day of tolerance: "It's a day of tolerance and the authorities let us [hippies] have our fun and smoke pot." Another said in proud defiance: "Pronounced 'four twenty,' it is a day of police non-enforcement of drug laws in certain areas, and a day to celebrate a ritual that has survived thousands of years, only to be condemned by our American government. It's one of the most liberating feelings to smoke pot in public and not be afraid of being caught."

The experience of such a holiday provides pot-smokers with hope and inspiration or with a vision of a future when they will be liberated from repressive antimarijuana laws.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SURPRISE OF 420

In this article I have attempted to explain the sociological surprise of 420, or how that special number is imbued with the ability to cultivate an especially strong marijuana-smoker identity. As "secret code," it creates a social boundary between outsiders and insiders, and enhances a sense of "we-ness" among insiders. As "time," it legitimates smoker reality and structures and motivates excessive smoking behavior among novices, thus providing a valuable "immersion" experience. As "origin conversations," it facilitates learning about many important fundamental facts and values of the marijuana and illegal drug-user cultures. As "pot-smokers' holiday," it provides a special family holiday ritual, a "day of tolerance," and a public opportunity to "stand proud for marijuana." Most important, as pot-smokers' holiday, 420 creates an intense sense of group belonging among friends, strangers, and crowds, and across geographical boundaries. Sociologists call this "collective consciousness," or a kind of mystical, spiritual, or extraordinary sense of belonging, where the group exists as a reality greater than itself.

In sum, the ultimate sociological surprise or fascination of 420 is that a single expression has the unique and powerful ability to cultivate, support, and reinforce pot-smoker identity, community, solidarity, and reality itself. The modest surprise offered here is merely explaining in a more comprehensive way what smokers already know.

