Gendered Dimensions of Smoking Among College Students

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Ethnographic research, including interviews, focus groups, and observations were conducted to explore gendered dimensions of smoking among low level smokers, including the acceptability of smoking in different contexts; reasons for smoking; the monitoring of self and friends’ smoking; and shared smoking as a means of communicating concern and empathy. Important gendered dimensions of smoking were documented. Although males who smoked were described as looking manly, relaxed, and in control, among females, smoking was considered a behavior that made one look slutty and out of control. Young women were found to monitor their own and their friends’ smoking carefully and tended to smoke in groups to mitigate negative perceptions of smoking. Gender-specific tobacco cessation programs are warranted on college campuses.

Keywords: smoking; ethnography; gender; college students; emerging adults

Social smoking among college students in the United States is a phenomenon that requires careful attention (Moran, Wechsler, & Rigotti, 2004). In contrast to smoking among high school students that peaked in 1996 to 1997 and...
is presently at its lowest level in many years, smoking among college students is on the increase (Lantz, 2003). Several surveys of college students have documented continued high rates of smoking, with almost 30% of students reporting smoking within the past 30 days (Everett et al., 1999; O’Malley & Johnston, 2002; Rigotti, Lee, & Wechsler, 2000). Longitudinal data from multisite studies document an increase in the 30-day prevalence of smoking among college students (1990 to 1999) from 23% to 31% or by about one third. During the same period, daily smoking increased from 14% to 19%, or by about 40% (Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 2001). Notably, the relative increases in smoking among college students during the 1990s were much greater than among young adults who did not attend college (Johnston et al., 2001).

The college years appear to be a time of increased risk to smoking initiation as well as movement from intermittent or social smoking to more regular patterns of use. In a study of more than 100 college campuses, Wechsler and colleagues found that 11% of college students had initiated smoking during college and more than one quarter (28%) of those who had smoked prior to college became regular smokers during the college years (Wechsler, Rigotti, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998). Although rates of smoking and tobacco dependence have been reported to increase steadily during the college years (Bachman, Wadsworth, O’Malley, Johnston, & Schulenberg, 1997; Chassin, Presson, Rose, & Sherman, 1996; Sher, Gotham, Erickson, & Wood, 1996), recent research investigating the daily smoking patterns of college freshmen do not confirm a steady increase in smoking trajectory but strong weekday and weekend cyclical patterning (Colder et al., 2005).

College students can be characterized as emerging adults, a developmental period characterized as an age of identity exploration, instability, and of feeling in-between (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood is a time of increased vulnerability to substance use—a time when youth who did not engage or engaged only minimally during early adolescence tend to escalate their use (Tucker, Ellickson, Orlando, Martino, & Klein. 2005). During this developmental transition, emerging adults have increased opportunities to experiment with a range of behaviors including drinking and smoking (Maggs, 1997; O’Malley & Johnston, 2002). According to a recent study, binge drinking was highest among 21- to 25-year-olds (44%) and 18- to 20-year-olds (37%)(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004). Daily cigarette smoking also is prevalent among 18- to 24-year-olds (24%) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005) and continuing to rise, particularly among those attending college (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005; Lantz, 2003).

How might a developmental paradigm of emerging adulthood be used to help explain substance use? Arnett (2005) proposes several hypotheses,
including increased identify confusion and sensation seeking leading to increased substance use and greater instability of life events (e.g., changing residence, school, relationships) that may lead to negative mood states and increased substance use. In addition, emerging adults who are prone to substance use may establish friendships with similar others and encourage substance use within their social network. Consistent with these hypotheses, studies have shown that as teens move out of their parent’s household into college residence halls, substance use increases (Kypri, McCarthy, Coe, & Brown, 2004). And, those emerging adults with a propensity for substance use may be likely to develop and keep friendships that maintain substance use (Kobus, 2003). It is also noteworthy that emerging adults are legally able to purchase cigarettes and thus a group heavily targeted by the tobacco industry (Ling & Glantz, 2002).

Gender and Smoking

College smoking appears to be equally popular among young men and women, as few gender differences have been reported in the literature (Everett et al., 1999; Rigotti et al., 2000). Results from the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey show that among students who had ever tried smoking (70%), women were as likely as men to report being current smokers. They were also just as likely to be current frequent smokers, current daily smokers, and ever-daily smokers (Everett et al., 1999).

One gender difference that has emerged in the smoking literature as predictive of smoking for females is lifestyle characteristics. Emmons and colleagues found that participation in a hedonistic lifestyle, where parties and leisure activities are rated as very important, was predictive of smoking in college (Emmons, Wechsler, Dowdall, & Abraham, 1998). Females who engage in other risk behaviors—including marijuana use, binge drinking, and having multiple sex partners—have been found to be more likely to smoke than males (Emmons et al., 1998). These findings suggest that smoking needs to be studied in context and in relation to other forms of risk behavior and not as an independent behavior.

Although smoking prevalence rates for males and females appear to be similar, several questions remain to be addressed in the college population. Are there different factors that contribute to the initiation and continuation of smoking among males and females? Are there gendered dimensions in patterns of use—including where, when, and how much one smokes—particularly in early stages of use?

To date, studies conducted on college campuses have not explored the meaning of smoking among college students, gendered norms for smoking,
and differences in the acceptability of smoking at different levels of amount and frequency. Little is known about how smoking serves as a consumption event that facilitates social interaction among college students and how smoking is used as a resource for negotiating identities and as an idiom for communicating emotive states. Although much emphasis has been placed on the measurement of how much and how often youth smoke, less is known about the different meanings that cigarettes have and convey to smokers (Mark Nichter, 2003; Stromberg, Nichter, & Nichter, in press).

It is important to note that previous studies on youth smoking have been largely dominated by quantitative methodologies. Although there have been several qualitative studies of smoking among young people, the samples have largely been comprised of adolescents between the ages of 13 to 17 (e.g., Lloyd & Lucas, 1998; Michell & Amos, 1997; Mimi Nichter, Mark Nichter, Vuckovic, Quintero, & Ritenbaugh, 1997; Plumridge, Fitzgerald, & Abel, 2002). Findings from these studies have underscored the importance of listening to the voices of teens to understand decisions to smoke in particular times and spaces. These studies also help us to appreciate that adolescents are not a homogenous group, as evidenced by the fact that they express their transition through adolescence in divergent ways. Although there have been some recent ethnographic studies of smoking among emerging adults (Amos, Wiltshire, Bostock, Haw, & McNeill, 2004; Mimi Nichter et al., 2004; Stromberg et al., in press), gendered dimensions of smoking have not been adequately explored. There is clearly a need for additional studies that investigate how smoking changes as males and females have greater access to times and spaces where smoking can occur (Mark Nichter, 2003). To understand patterns and trajectories of tobacco use among emerging adults, it is important to pay attention to both factors that may influence increases in smoking as well as factors that protect against escalation of smoking in particular contexts.

Interviews with college freshmen during a pilot project conducted by two of the authors (Mimi Nichter and Mark Nichter) at a large Southwestern university suggested that important gendered dimensions in smoking might well exist, particularly among those smoking at low levels. During a year-long ethnographic study on the freshmen experience, several female informants described perceived restrictions on their smoking (including monitoring by friends), and both males and females described divergent ideas about the acceptability of smoking at different levels. These initial insights into gendered dimensions of smoking warranted further investigation. We had a unique opportunity to do so the following year (2002 to 2003) as part of a comprehensive study of college freshmen at a Midwestern university that included both qualitative and quantitative components.
The goals of this article are to qualitatively explore gendered dimensions of smoking among college freshmen, including norms and acceptability of smoking for males and females, the monitoring of self and friends' behavior, norms of sharing, and the ways in which smoking was used to communicate concern and empathy for one another. Most of the data presented in this article are drawn from interviews and focus groups conducted at both field sites. When appropriate, we highlight quantitative findings as a means of comparison.

METHODS

Design

This article draws on two ethnographic studies conducted in 2 consecutive academic years (2000 to 2001, 2002 to 2003). The first study was a 1-year pilot study on the freshmen experience at a large Southwestern university. Data from the pilot study identified key questions and issues for follow up in a larger study on smoking among college freshmen (University project of the Tobacco Etiology Research Network, known as UpTERN) conducted the following year at a large Midwestern university. Results presented in this article include those from the formative pilot study, but rely mainly on the UpTERN study, detailed further on.

During the pilot study, open-ended interviews were conducted with 26 freshmen (16 females and 10 males) who smoked at parties or at low levels. All participants were Caucasian, with ages ranging from 18 to 19 years. Each student was interviewed three to five times during the year. In addition, four focus groups (involving 5 to 6 students each) were conducted on the topic of gender and smoking, and observations of smoking were made on campus by research assistants (3 graduate students and 2 undergraduates).

In the fall of 2002, a year-long study of incoming freshmen was initiated at a Midwestern university (Tiffany et al., 2004). The goal was to obtain detailed assessments of the trajectories of smoking across the year through weekly Web-based quantitative data collection (Colder et al., 2005) as well as through ethnographic interviews and focus groups.

Quantitative Data Collection

Participants for the Web-based quantitative study were selected from responses to a screener survey administered to incoming freshmen (n = 4,690) during the orientation program in the summer of 2002 (response rate 71%). Students who had smoked one or more puffs of a cigarette in his or her
lifetime were invited to participate in the study \((n = 2,001)\). Of the 2,001 freshmen who were eligible for the study, 912 agreed to participate. Of these 912 students, 54% were male. Ninety four percent of the sample was Caucasian, with an average age of 18 years. Forty five percent of the sample reported they had smoked in the past 30 days.

Study participants \((n = 912)\) completed 35 consecutive weekly online surveys between September 2002 and May 2003. The weekly participation rate for survey completion was 87%, with an overall study retention rate of 96%. Students were paid a weekly honorarium for their participation in the study. Each week, participants were asked to provide a 7-day time-line follow-back report on their tobacco smoking. Using a Web-based survey protocol, participants were asked to enter the number of cigarettes they smoked on each of the previous 7 days. Students were also asked to report on alcohol use and marijuana use during the previous week as well as to provide information on mood and other health risk behaviors. Results of the quantitative study have been reported elsewhere and data analyses are ongoing (Dierker et al., 2006).

**Qualitative Data Collection**

Students’ responses to smoking questions on the weekly Web-based surveys were used to identify informants for the qualitative component of the study. Based on our pilot study findings, initial observations, and extant literature, we recognized that college students smoked at varying levels. We were particularly interested in two groups of college students: those who smoked most of their cigarettes at parties and those who smoked at parties but also at low levels during the week. We were less interested in those who already had established patterns of smoking, and thus, they are not represented in this article.

Qualitative data for this article are drawn from in-depth interviews with students whom we classified as party smokers and those who we refer to as low-level smokers. Following extensive discussions among the authors and preliminary descriptive data analyses, we determined the criteria on which to classify students into these two groups. Party smokers were identified based on the following criteria: (a) those participants who reported smoking on four or more of the weeks that they completed the survey by the middle of first semester and (b) greater than two thirds of reported cigarette smoking took place in a party context. This categorization seemed to best capture a group of students who were actually developing a pattern of party smoking, as opposed to those students who may have only smoked a
cigarette at a party very infrequently. It is important to note that we were able to identify this category (and that of low-level smoking described further on) because we had fine-grained weekly quantitative data from a large college sample.

Following the UpTERN research design, one half of the students who participated in the Web-based surveys were accessible for the ethnographic component. This design ensured that one half of the entire sample remained clean from potential bias or behavioral change that might be introduced through the interviews. Once the party criteria were established, a random sample of students who met these criteria were selected for interviews ($n = 91$). We randomly selected 40 of these students for interviews, and 35 agreed to participate (18 males and 17 females).

We were also interested in interviewing those students who had progressed from smoking a majority of their cigarettes in the context of parties, to those who smoked also on weekdays, albeit still at low levels. Preliminary data analyses in Month 4 of the study provided us insights into the range of smoking behavior in the sample. Based on a review of these data, we established specific criteria for defining this group. Low level smokers were identified as (a) those students who reported regular weekday (typically 3 or 4 cigarettes a day) and (b) weekend smoking during a 3-week period during the first semester of the UpTERN survey. Of the students available for the ethnographic component, 57 students met these criteria. We randomly selected 30 students for interviews and 24 agreed to participate (15 males, 9 females).

Based on our pilot study findings and initial observations during the UpTERN study, we recognized the importance of fraternities and sororities in the social lives of freshmen. The Greek system was found to be a highly pervasive organization on both college campuses, with large memberships. During first semester of freshmen year, both males and females commonly attend parties at fraternity houses. At both campuses, many (but not all) fraternity houses are important sites for tobacco and alcohol consumption. They are also socialization sites, where incoming students observe the behavior of upperclassmen and learn what is normative on campus. Therefore, we decided to conduct focus groups in fraternity and sorority houses to learn about smoking and drinking behaviors in these contexts. Focus group participants were nonfreshmen because we were interested in interviewing fraternity and sorority members (not incoming pledges). Focus group questions centered on issues such as the prevalence of smoking among house members, spoken and unspoken rules within the house concerning smoking as well as alcohol use; smoking at parties; and the
monitoring of excessive drinking and smoking among house members. In all, we conducted 11 focus groups (4 sororities; 4 fraternities; 3 mixed groups).

Core interview questions relevant to the present analyses used for individual and focus group interviews are included in the appendix.

**Interviewer Training**

Open-ended semistructured interviews were conducted by a team of four undergraduate and two graduate students who had participated in a 2-day training workshop on interviewing skills led by two of the authors (Mimi Nichter and N. Taylor). An interviewer training manual was developed by Mimi Nichter specifically for the UpTERN project. The manual included narrative examples from smoking interviews conducted during the pilot study and focused on a range of issues including developing rapport with participants, keeping on task with talkative participants, how and what to observe about body language and gesture, how to respond to possible questions about the study, etc. Following the training, each interviewer observed one of the two trainers conducting an interview and were then observed by one of them when they conducted their first two interviews. When each of the interviewers had conducted an interview of their own, the group came together to discuss the interview process. The team was also trained in writing interview notes (1 to 2 page reports on each interview that detailed the content as well as the context of the interview). Interviewers were also given guidelines for writing structured observation reports on smoking on campus.

All interviews took place on the college campus in a place that was convenient for the informant. Interviews, on average, took 1 hour to complete and informants were paid $15. Focus groups were conducted by the authors and were typically longer, lasting 1.5 to 2 hours. Focus group participants were also paid $15. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Observations of smoking on campus, including outside the residence halls and in party contexts, were conducted by the researchers to facilitate the development of interview guides.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and coded by one of the graduate students using the ATLAS.ti 5.0. Graduate student coders were given a 2-day training in the software and inter-rater reliability was established. The coding scheme used for the data was developed based on the themes and concepts developed in the interviews and emergent from the data.
Although this article largely draws on ethnographic interviews and focus groups, some quantitative data are presented. Several research questions guided the quantitative data analysis:

1. Are females more likely to be party smokers than males?
2. Among party smokers, do females smoke fewer cigarettes than males?
3. Are males more likely to fit the criteria of low level smoker than females?
4. Are males more likely than females to report smoking alone?
5. Are females more likely to endorse empathetic smoking than males?

Quantitative analyses were conducted using data from the first semester of the UpTERN project. The particular subsample used for each analysis is described in the relevant results section further on. Quantitative data analyses used the SAS software Version 8.2 for Linux and consisted of contingency table analysis, analysis of variance, and generalized estimating equations (GEE; Diggle, Liang, & Zeger, 1994).

RESULTS

Smoking Contexts: An Overview

Before moving to a discussion of gendered dimensions in smoking, it is important to provide the contexts in which tobacco use most commonly occurs on these two college campuses. For those males and females who smoked occasionally, smoking occurred most commonly at parties, on weekends, and while drinking alcohol. More than one half of the smoking that took place on Fridays and Saturdays within the UpTERN sample took place in the context of drinking alcohol. Much of the initial partying that goes on during the early months of freshmen year is at fraternity houses, where drinking and smoking are largely normative, particularly on weekends. Fraternity house rules regarding alcohol and smoking vary widely. In interviews and focus groups, both males and females described how alcohol lowered their inhibitions leading them to smoke more freely. Smoking and drinking were described as going well together—such as “drinking milk with cookies” or “like eating peanut butter with jelly.” For those who had little experience with tobacco, drinking seemed to mitigate the negative physical effects of smoking often reported by novice smokers, such as throat irritation or coughing.

Another context in which smoking took place was outside the residence halls. Although both campuses prohibited smoking inside residence hall
rooms and immediately outside classroom buildings, the 10-foot rule actually made smoking a highly visible or public act and often times, a social event with smokers congregating together in small groups. Although high-level smokers occasionally broke the rules and smoked inside the residence halls, party and low-level smokers tended not to do this.

**Gendered Norms: Perceived Acceptability of Smoking**

In interviews, several questions directly focused on the topic of gender and smoking (see Appendix). Qualitative data analysis revealed that for many male and female students, smoking among women was viewed negatively. Surprisingly, even young women who smoked at parties commented that it was “just not as cool for a girl to smoke as a guy.” To better understand this issue, we explicitly asked informants to describe what image was projected by a female who smoked. Responses to this direct question were largely negative and included answers such as “smoking looks really trashy,” “it’s slutty,” “it looks unladylike,” “it makes you look like you’re not classy,” and “uncontrolled.” Expanding on these negative perceptions, one female explained,

> When you see a girl smoking, it makes you think less of that girl in a way; it’s like she’s more rough around the edges; it’s not like she’s being manly, but, like, she’s not as ladylike as she’s supposed to be. I just think that with guys, they don’t have to have that image, they’re allowed to have more of a rough or tough guy image.

This negative image was particularly true if a young woman was seen smoking alone at a party or if she was seen smoking too many cigarettes. One young woman explained,

> I guess to a lot of people seeing a girl smoking is just automatically a negative thing. It’s just a complete turn off. Maybe once they got to talking to her, they would either realize that she was just a social smoker or that, you know, although she did smoke, it shouldn’t affect how they felt about her.

The majority of the males we interviewed confirmed the perception that smoking among females was a “big turn off.” As one low level male smoker explained, “I really think it’s trashy. I wouldn’t want to be seen with a girl who smokes even though I’m a smoker. I know it’s a double standard but that’s how I feel.” He went on to explain that women were “just expected to have more control of themselves.”

This negative discourse about female smokers was described by another male informant as part of a more pervasive surveillance of women’s behavior,
I think with women smoking . . . it’s like our society as a whole . . . there are
way more societal norms placed on women, what’s acceptable and what’s not,
than there are on men. If I smoke six cigarettes at a party and a girl smokes
four or five, I’m going to be like, “Wow… what’s wrong with her?” If she has
one or two, that’s way more acceptable. In a party situation, no one questions
how many cigarettes a guy smokes, it’s the girls who have to watch it.

Images of smoking being trashy and slutty were articulated across
informants and especially endorsed by women pledging a sorority. Sororities
call attention to and make gender rules explicit (DeSantis, 2005). Sorority
sisters are not allowed to smoke in their letters (that is, while wearing soror-
ity clothes), and if they smoke, they are supposed to do so discreetly in
public. Sorority sisters are frequently reminded that if they attend a party at
a fraternity house where smoking is allowed inside, they should not smoke
on the dance floor or in a place where they are likely to be seen. There was
a strict code of behavior articulated in sororities; as one pledge remarked,
“Sorority girls are just supposed to be so perfect.” At issue is not just
whether women follow these rules “to the letter” but the extent to which
gendered norms mediate behavior. Sorority rules reproduce gender ideals
that may be broken by individuals in particular contexts but may not be
entirely rejected. It is important to recognize that much of freshmen party-
ing at these universities occurs at fraternity houses, and thus, notions of
appropriate behavior for women may be widely known. Although fraternity
members interviewed were well aware of the earlier referenced rules for
sorority members, fraternities in which alcohol was available at parties did
not dictate these specific rules to their male members.

The Veteran Partier

In contrast, descriptors articulated by males and females about male smok-
ing at parties were largely positive. Male smokers were described as “looking
masculine or manly,” “looking like a tough guy,” and “giving off a bad boy
image.” Smoking enabled one to look similar to a “veteran partier,” a prized
label for many male students. As one male informant explained, “You just look
so much more at home at a party if you’re smoking.” Because “basically
everyone drinks” at parties, consuming alcohol was insufficient to craft one’s
identity as a veteran partier. A cigarette in hand enhanced one’s appearance,
allowing a guy to appear cool and in control. As one male explained,

When you’re drinking alcohol, you think of a sloppy drunk, you think of a
guy hanging off a girl . . . so drinking is just not as cool as smoking.
Smoking, well, it seems like you have some control, whereas you think of
alcohol you think out of control.
Smoking also helped a guy appear relaxed, signaling that “he’s a person who really knows how to kick back.” As one male informant noted, “Smoking a cigarette makes a guy look like he just doesn’t have a care . . . like you don’t really care about your health and all that. It says you’re cool and hip and that you’re not afraid to take risks.” However, if a young man was seen smoking too many cigarettes at a party, it was a signal that he was tense and that he was trying too hard to relax. One male informant noted, “When you see someone smoking one cigarette after another, you start to think, ‘Uh-oh, you know. . . . Something’s wrong here.’”

**Party Smoking is a Girl Thing**

Paradoxically, despite negative perceptions of female smoking and positive perceptions of male smoking, a common idea expressed by our informants was that more females smoked at parties when compared to males. When asked to explain this, one young woman noted, “I think girls smoke when they’re at a party because everybody else is doing it, so they feel that no one is going to judge them.” Another young woman echoed this view, “I think there’s more women who are social smokers, to be honest with you, because women are consumed with their image. . . . There’s this wanting to be accepted, a wanting to be part of a group. . . . It’s just so much more for females than for males.” Thus, despite norms dictating the inappropriateness of women smoking, parties were a context where one could let loose and behave in ways that would be considered inappropriate outside the party (Stromberg et al., in press).

As noted earlier, we were also interested in addressing the research question “Are females more likely to be party smokers than males?” through quantitative analysis. Data analyses indicated no difference in rates of party smoking among males and females. Using GEE, we modeled the probability of being a party smoker each week of the semester as a function of gender. This analysis was based on the entire UpTERN sample ($N = 912$).

More than the entire semester, 335 people met our party-smoking criteria (i.e., 66% or more of smoking took place in a party context). Limiting ourselves to the weeks when a person met the party-smoking criteria, there were no gender differences in the amount smoked on average ($F = 2.14, p = ns$). There was, however, a significant main effect for day of the week, with more smoking occurring on weekend days, than on weekdays ($F = 17.94, p < .0001$). In addition, no gender differences were noted in the rate of weekday versus weekend smoking, with males and females both smoking more on weekends than weekdays (see Figure 1).
Avoiding the Trashy Look

So how do young women avoid looking trashy when they smoke? One explicit strategy was to smoke with a group of girlfriends, a practice that helped deflect attention away from being seen as a smoker. Smoking with friends allowed one to be seen as a part of a group rather than an individual with a cigarette. One male informant referred to this as group think:

Girls operate by group think. If one of them decides that she wants to smoke tonight at the party, then the other one is, like, “Well maybe I ought to smoke with her so she doesn’t feel so bad,” and that’s just going to carry on and they’re all going to get together and make their own little, you know, one-brain decision that they’re going to smoke that night. That’s just the way girls are as far as I’m concerned. So I think girls are more likely to smoke at parties because they’ll do it in groups; they’ll do it in packs.

Another male similarly observed, “Girls who probably wouldn’t have smoked go with the rest of the girls to have a cigarette; like, they go outside
and talk or something while they smoke.” Observations at parties revealed that among groups of girlfriends, a rhythm of smoking seemed to develop, where the amount one smoked and how fast one smoked appeared to be regulated by the group.

It’s Good to Be a Little Bad

Beyond allowing one to fit in with the group, were there other benefits of smoking at parties for young women? One benefit articulated by several informants was that it enabled you to change your image. Particularly in the first few months of college, when many students are trying on new selves, changing one’s image may be particularly salient. Smoking at a party not only helped to define who you were but also who you were not. As one young woman explained, “If you don’t smoke when your friends are, then others may think you’re uptight. . . . It’s like you look like a girl who just can’t loosen up. If you smoke . . . you project a more fun and outgoing image.” Another young woman laughingly explained that “it’s good to be a little bad”—that is, that smoking at a party called attention to you as a person who was not afraid to do something others might look at with disapproval. Smoking was an expression of personal agency and a way of announcing that you were the type of person who was not afraid to take a risk. As one girl described,

There’s like a little bit of a thrill, especially if a person is really a goody two shoes or a by-the-book person. It’s like you smoke a cigarette . . . you do something you’re not supposed to be doing, you know. It’s like bad for you, but it’s also like a simple little rebellion.

One woman who smoked at low levels described how she smoked at a party to project “a mysterious dame look.” She explained, “If you’re smoking, you look so much more of a bad ass, so much more deep down inside.” Evoking this image helped a woman appear intriguing; someone a young man might want to get to know better. Having a lit cigarette in your hand projected a sensual image and said, in a subtle way, “that there was really more to you than met the eye.” This element of surprise afforded by the cigarette had the added potential of catching someone you were attracted to off guard. As one young woman explained,

When you smoke in front of someone and they don’t know you as a smoker, they’ll be, like, really surprised. It’s like I’m saying, “You don’t know me as well as you think you do. . . . There is more to me, I have another side . . . do you want to find out about it or what?”
One young woman, who described herself as an athlete and a serious student, described how she and her girlfriend sometimes smoked 2 to 3 bidi cigarettes (a small hand rolled cigarette from India with a distinct aroma) at a party. She felt that this helped her look exotic and served to dispel her image as a studious jock. Because she found the taste of bidis rather disgusting, she was clear that she was not at risk to increasing her smoking. Bidis were a valuable prop, a non-verbal communication strategy for projecting a different image of self.

Managing Public Identity: Gendered Dimensions

Narrative data on smoking and drinking indicate that females feel the need to manage their public identities more than males. Although there is explicit discourse about appropriate behavior for females from both female and male informants, there is a notable absence of overt discourse about appropriate male behavior. At parties, young women spoke of monitoring their own behavior and that of their friends to ensure that they do not consume too much alcohol or smoke too much. Although girls’ behavior was believed to reflect on the whole social group, males’ behavior did not. A popular notion was that if a girl engaged in excess publicly (e.g., multiple sex partners, drinking too much alcohol), it would stick to her reputation. Males, on the other hand, were expected to engage in excessive behaviors and were rarely stigmatized for such behavior. As a result, males did not monitor each other carefully unless a behavior was truly inappropriate. As an example, males in a focus group noted that several top athletes at their university smoke, but their friends would not comment negatively about it. One guy explained, “It’s their thing, they earned it. It’s like Michael Jordan smokes cigars after the game. . . . You don’t get in their business unless it’s real destructive.”

The following excerpt from a mixed focus group of sorority and fraternity members reflects these gender differences:

Sue: Girls are gonna go to a party and hang out with people they show up with, but they always have to make sure someone is not drinking. They’re responsible for watching over someone else.

Interviewer: And with guys?

Andrew: You just go out and party! If your guy friend gets a hook-up, good for him. If we want to leave, we’ll just go! Let him do his thing.

Tom: Yeah, if we don’t see him in, like, 20 minutes and we want to go, let’s go!

Although most of the monitoring was linked to the risks of excessive drinking, several female informants mentioned that they also told girlfriends to stop smoking as it could tarnish their images.
Rounding Up the Troops

Another context where smoking occurs on the college campus is outside the residence hall. Similar to parties where females typically smoke in groups, several females described how they would explicitly invite friends to smoke with them, a behavior referred to by one informant as “rounding up the troops.”

When girls need a smoke, it’s like we announce it to get someone else to go with us. It’s like when we go to the bathroom, you just don’t want to go alone. Guys aren’t like that—if they want a cigarette, they go smoke one. They don’t need anyone else.

A similar principle seemed to be operating with eating, as females encourage friends to join with them, particularly when engaging in a splurge. Sharing seems to assuage the sense of guilt and negative feelings that might otherwise be experienced.

Last night I wanted ice cream and I went and got two McFlurries from McDonalds and brought it back. Even though my friend didn’t want it, she didn’t want me to eat it alone, so she joined me. It’s like that with cigarettes—if I want it, I want someone to have it with me or I’ll feel weird. . . . I mean even if she just took a bite of the ice cream or a few puffs of a cigarette.

Sharing experience with friends—be it smoking or eating—was viewed as a normative behavior for females. Once outside, smoking with girlfriends was described as “a bonding experience” and a “support group.” As one woman explained, “It’s like we’re all doing the same thing, we’re all engaging and concentrating on one another and smoking our cigarettes. . . . That’s our bond.” Another woman similarly noted, “Even though we are all smoking different cigarettes, it’s as if we’re all smoking the same cigarette . . . you know what I mean?” Going outside to have a cigarette with friends was an opportunity to catch up on gossip. Not taking part in a shared smoking ritual might mean missing out on an important information exchange.

Interestingly, female informants described gendered styles in inviting friends for a smoke. Women tended to use inclusive pronouns (let’s, we’re), whereas males talked about themselves (I’m gonna). As one female explained, “Usually, the guys will say . . . ‘I’m going to go smoke a cigarette’. But it’s always I, not let’s go, or we’re going.” Another female observed, “Whenever I go to the library with guy friends, I’ll usually be the one who says ‘Let’s go smoke a cigarette’. A guy would never come up to me and say ‘Let’s go smoke a cigarette’. I think girls tend to do that.”

Smoking outside the residence hall operated differently among males. As one female observed, “You don’t really see guys herding up their friends to
outside, but girls will do that on the spot.” In interviews and from observations, however, it was clear that males did smoke with friends. However, several males noted that they did not feel compelled to find someone to go smoke with them because “you can always find a smoker outside.”

Unlike women, who were described (by men) as being able to “talk, talk, talk” without the need for any precipitating event to talk about, males were seen (by females) as needing an activity to bring them together. Being involved in a shared consumption event, such as smoking or drinking, allowed males to feel comfortable with friends who were all engaged in a similar behavior. Doing something together both facilitated and replaced the need for talk. Smoking together sometimes filled in otherwise silent spaces. Males whom we discussed this with tended to agree with this characterization.

Smoking Alone

For males as well as for females, there was a reluctance to be seen smoking outside alone as it signaled that your smoking was not a social event (an acceptable behavior) but might rather be about needing a cigarette (which rendered it unacceptable). In narratives, the positive social image of smokers surrounded by friends was contrasted to a negative image of smoking alone. As one informant noted, “It’s kind of sad looking to see someone smoking alone. I don’t know, it’s like they’re lonely, depressed; all they have is their cigarette as their friend.” On both campuses, we observed that females who were smoking alone would commonly be talking on their cell phone, a practice that helped them appear as if they were not alone.

From quantitative analyses of data compiled during the entire semester, we found that on average, both males and females smoked 20% of their cigarettes alone. In addition, GEE analysis did not show significant gender differences in the amount of cigarettes smoked alone during the course of the semester, either for low level smokers (defined here as smoking fewer than five cigarettes per week; \(N = 408\)), or higher level smokers (those smoking five or more cigarettes a week; \(N = 344\)).

Norms of Sharing

Narrative data analysis suggests that males and females did have different sharing norms with regard to cigarettes. Although it was acceptable for women to share a cigarette with both women and men, for men, it was not acceptable to share the same cigarette with other guys. In fact, the question asked in focus groups, “At parties, do guys share cigarettes with male friends?” tended to elicit laughter from males. When asked why they were
laughing, several fraternity members explained, “Sharing [cigarettes] is just not something guys do.”

Discourse about sharing among men was typically marked through a clarification of the males’ relationship with each other or the unusual circumstances that would surround a sharing event. As one male commented in a fraternity focus group,

Sharing a cigarette is just too strong a term for guys. You’re not gonna sit there and smoke half a cigarette and then share. It’s more like “Dude, I’ve been drinking and I’m on my way out, gimme a quick puff.” It’s not sharing—it’s more like walk-by smoking!

In other focus groups, males who smoked similarly explained that the only time they felt comfortable sharing a cigarette was when they were at a party and had only one or two cigarettes left.

Female informants were also quite vocal in their descriptions of how “guys don’t share.” One female informant explained, “I don’t think a guy would take one (a drag) off another guy’s cigarette unless they were like really good friends or something,” although another young woman commented, “I’ve never seen guys say ‘Hey, let me have a drag,’ unless maybe they’re gay.” In contrast, girls described themselves as sharing cigarettes the same way they did clothes or lipstick. As one young woman remarked, “It’s like sharing is caring, and that’s really important for us.”

**Empathetic Smoking**

In interviews, we explored the practice of empathetic smoking—that is, the use of smoking as a means of connecting with others at times of negative affect. When a friend is experiencing a state of negative affect, smoking may be used as a somatic mode of attention, a means of attending to and with one’s body to another person’s state of consciousness and affect such that a sense of resonance occurs (Csordas, 1993). Informants reported that smoking a cigarette with a friend when they were down or upset facilitated talking about a problem and served as a means of creating a shared space of caring.

We had initially hypothesized that empathetic smoking might be more common among females than among males, because our pilot interviews suggested that females seemed to disclose more about their feelings to one another and tended to describe smoking with friends as a bonding experience.

In quantitative analyses, we assessed gender differences in empathetic smoking by asking the following question at the end of the first semester: “A good friend who is upset and smoking offers you a cigarette when you
sit down to talk with him or her. Would you accept the cigarette and smoke with them?" Of students who described themselves as either someone “who is not a smoker but smokes every once in while” or “who smokes when I party,” males were significantly more likely than females to endorse empathetic smoking (74% of males, 54% of females; $x^2 = 14.56, p = .0001$).

Closer analysis of interview data provided some explanations for this counter intuitive gender difference. Among some males, smoking with an angry or troubled friend who was also smoking allowed one to be present without dwelling on details or probing into the problem. Smoking together was a way of showing empathy and diffusing emotion without the need for many words: “If you smoke together, you’re just there for them.” In this sense, smoking served to dissipate what one young man described as the “uncomfortable tension that might be in the air every second.”

For other males, smoking with a troubled friend conferred a different type of benefit. One young man noted, “Smoking makes conversation a little more casual. . . . It adds a little comfort. . . . Conversations just seem easier.” This issue of smoking as comforting and “loosening one up” was echoed in another male party smoker’s narrative:

It’s a question of comfort to me. Are you comfortable enough with doing this thing (conversation) labeled as feminine. . . . Are you comfortable enough expressing feelings without some other activity, like smoking?

Smoking was also viewed by male informants as an activity that could help calm a person down, while also facilitating an attitude of caring:

It just kind of brings you closer to people if you’re smoking with them. . . . If someone is really upset, then you smoke and they smoke, it usually helps it out ‘cause it calms them down a bit and makes them more likely to listen to what you’re saying. . . . It makes them believe that you really care.

Female informants were more likely to say that they would smoke a cigarette if a friend was smoking and talking about a problem as a means to “make us seem more on the same level”—that is, smoking was not believed to alter the content of the conversation or the ability to share openly. It was just another way of showing affiliation. Guys, on the other hand, tended to look at smoking as a substitute for talking or as an activity that made it less uncomfortable to talk. As one male observed, “Guys are just unwilling to share what’s going on, whereas most women do it through a direct confrontational approach such as ‘What is wrong with you right now?’” It was more of a female norm to be direct in discussing emotions, with smoking just one of the many ways of
sharing empathetically with a girlfriend and more a male norm to be indirect and talk while engaging in some other activity, smoking being one possibility.

**DISCUSSION**

College freshmen—emerging adults—find themselves in new social environments where they have the opportunity to explore their identity through various presentations of self. Emerging adulthood is a time of increased vulnerability to substance use (Arnett, 2005). In the present study, smoking plays a role in the process of self-exploration as it both conveys information about who you are and who you are not—contingent on when and where you smoke and with whom. Consumption of products has symbolic significance in the process of defining one’s identity (Pavis, Cunningham-Burley, & Amos, 1998; Gray, Amos, & Currie, 1997; Stromberg et al., in press). For example, at college parties, cigarettes function as props that signal to others that the user is not afraid to engage in risk taking and that the person is open to whatever is happening.

Among this sample of emerging adults, early experiences with smoking often occurred in the context of drinking that mitigated inhibitions even for those who had little prior experience with tobacco. Friendship plays a central role in the emotional lives of emerging adults, and it was found that groups of friends participate in similar behaviors, such as smoking and drinking. As Arnett notes, because emerging adults do not feel that they are yet adults, they may not feel that they have to commit to adult standards of behavior (Arnett, 2005). Thus, smoking—particularly while drinking—is an acceptable behavior precisely because one is “not yet in the real world.” The feeling of being in-between may assuage concerns one may have about becoming a smoker. For this reason, emerging adulthood may be viewed as a particularly vulnerable period for the uptake of smoking and for transitions to higher levels of smoking. Importantly, in interviews we conducted among upperclassmen in the Greek system, several male and female informants expressed concern that when they graduated from college and got a job, they would have to stop smoking because their current behavior was not acceptable in the real world. This led us to consider the importance of developing cessation interventions for college seniors who might be at a stage of readiness for quitting.

In the present study, smoking was described as inappropriate for college females and was considered a behavior that made one look slutty, trashy, and out of control. Nonetheless, young women did smoke at parties while drinking—in part because during “party time,” rules and normal behavior are suspended (Stromberg et al., in press). Despite the fact that nicotine is one of the most addictive substances, most of our informants seemed unconcerned
about the possibility of addiction. This may be explained in part because of the optimistic bias—that is, a belief that the negative consequences of drug use will not happen to them (Arnett, 2005; Weinstein, 1989).

Narrative data revealed gendered dimensions of smoking among college students. Young women have to manage their identities more carefully than males and use props such as cigarettes more selectively. In contrast to the negative associations of female smoking, males who smoked were described as looking masculine, manly, tough, relaxed, and in control. Males were held less accountable for their behavior, and were expected to engage in excess, as opposed to women who had to practice restraint to protect their reputations.

For college males, smoking seems to reaffirm their identity as men—their engagement with risk is an element of their identity construction (Bunton, Crawshaw, & Green, 2004). Females too speak of the positive attributes of smoking: a cigarette enhances one’s sense of mystery and complexity and makes you appear free to take risks. However, young women’s narratives reveal a multivocality—they smoke because they want to, because their friends are doing it, and because it helps improve their image, yet they articulate the need to be careful because smoking too much could be bad for their image. As in other domains of health behavior, young women’s narratives reveal a keen awareness of societal pressures to behave in particular ways (Mimi Nichter, 2000). Yet, many of these young women resist social dictates and express their personal agency through smoking.

It is noteworthy that many of the themes echoed in young women’s narratives are present in tobacco advertising that segments women by psychosocial need and age. For the demographic group aged 18 to 24, themes of peer group belonging, female camaraderie, excitement, and independence have been particularly emphasized in advertisements, mirroring themes emergent in interviews (Anderson, Glantz, & Ling, 2005).

Notably, quantitative analyses indicated no differences in mean number of cigarettes smoked by gender or differences in rates of party smoking by gender. In addition, regardless of the level of smoking, we found no gender differences in the rate of smoking by oneself. The only significant gender difference noted in the quantitative data analyses concerned empathetic smoking, with males being significantly more likely to report that they would accept a cigarette from a troubled friend than females. Male informants explained that having a cigarette with a male friend facilitated conversation and helped in moments that might otherwise be marked by an uncomfortable silence.

Although few gender differences in smoking emerged in the quantitative data analyses, gendered dimensions of male and female smoking were evident in qualitative interviews. This begs the question “Why might this be?”
Different methodologies tap into different aspects of youth behavior. In the present study, survey responses allowed us to determine the quantity of cigarettes smoked, the contexts where students smoked, and weekly patterns of smoking behavior. Such findings are important for an understanding of college smoking. Ethnographic research provided a more nuanced account of how male and female smoking was perceived in particular social spaces, how smoking contributed to identity construction, and other social reasons for smoking.

The utility of methods triangulation lies in the possibility of highlighting different dimensions of behavior and knowledge production as well as validating that data generated by one method are not artifacts of that method (Young, 1981). Anthropologists have long pointed out that what people say they do and what they actually do may vary. This is why participant observation and narrative analysis sensitive to the nuances and multivocality of language are the hallmarks of ethnography (de Concini, 1990; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). In the present study, female informants were particularly articulate about gendered dimensions of smoking, drawing attention to the fact that their behavior was under more scrutiny than males. This caused them to be more self-conscious of their smoking than males were and to monitor both their own smoking and that of their friends. Although females reported that smoking made them look slutty, observations at parties revealed that they did smoke. This disjunct was followed up in interviews where we queried the conditions under which smoking became more permissible. It was found that smoking in a group with other young women who were smoking mitigated the negative perceptions of being a smoker.

It is noteworthy that in this sample of college students, smoking was occurring at low levels; the average number of cigarettes smoked was approximately five per weekend day and three per weekday for both males and females. Although we did not see gender differences in smoking levels during freshmen year, we should not discount the possibility that gendered dimensions of smoking may affect smoking trajectories over time. For example, one might hypothesize that young men may be at greater risk to escalate into regular tobacco use as their behavior is less monitored by other male friends than is the case for females. Indeed, recent longitudinal studies among college students have shown that males are more likely to progress in their smoking behavior than women, with male gender predicting the transition from experimentation to regular cigarette use (Mayhew, Flay, & Mott, 2000; Wetter et al., 2004). Our quantitative survey of smoking behavior in the freshmen year may have been too early to detect the unfolding of similar gender differences that might emerge during the course of subsequent college years.

With respect to smoking among females, the college years appear to provide some monitoring and surveillance of drinking and smoking among
girlfriends. However, there also exists a powerful group think—that is, a need to engage in similar behaviors to one’s friends, which appears to be more salient among women. Importantly, the same friend who may put one at risk to smoking by offering a cigarette in a group setting, may also serve in a protective role by encouraging a friend not to smoke too much or to be seen smoking outside a party context. In other words, the same person can play a risk and protective role (Mimi Nichter & Mark Nichter, 2002). Nonetheless, because of the highly addictive nature of nicotine, young women who may have only intended to smoke in social contexts are at risk to transitioning to higher levels of smoking, although the patterning and timing of this escalation may be different than for males who may be less concerned about their image as smokers. One might predict that when women transition out of college and move into situations with less monitoring, social surveillance may be less and thus might increase their smoking to higher levels. On the other hand, for some females, graduation from college may signal the beginning of a new phase of their life that requires them to settle down, suggesting increased monitoring of certain behaviors, including smoking.

Smoking patterns among college students appear to be more fluid than that of adults, particularly those who enter college with little previous smoking history (Wetter et al., 2004). One of the limitations of the present study is that students were only followed through their freshmen year, a time when all were living in smoke-free residence halls and where they could not have cars. Future studies need to follow students across the college years with particular attention given to shifts in their physical environment. Although this article has focused primarily on the social environment of college freshmen, it is clear that studies of the physical environment might be equally insightful (Wechsler, Lee, & Rigotti, 2001). Residence halls are highly controlled environments that constrain smoking and it is likely that as students gain more freedom in their housing, the opportunities to smoke may also increase. Another limitation of the present study is that at both colleges, the sample was almost exclusively Anglo American, and thus, findings may not be generalizable to other populations. Future studies should be done on campuses that have more ethnic diversity.

We believe that qualitative data are urgently needed to inform the many tobacco surveys being conducted among college students. As noted in an article by Mark Nichter, Mimi Nichter, Thompson, Shiffman, and Moscicki (2002),

Tobacco surveys too often make use of standardized question sets and scales designed for adults and adapted for youth without the benefit of a contextual understanding of changing patterns of youth smoking. At present, we are using blunt instruments that have some level of utility for tasks at hand such as establishing rates of smoking prevalence. However, in order to map smoking trajectories and identify points of transition when patterns of smoking shift,
instruments need to be more responsive to the lives of youth and environmental opportunities and constraints on smoking. (p. S42)

Ideally, transdisciplinary studies can support an iterative process of research that moves fluidly between qualitative and quantitative research, where the former informs the development of survey questions sensitive to the exigencies of youths’ lives. Following survey data analysis, qualitative data can again be conducted to shed light on and clarify findings of survey research (Mark Nichter, Quintero, Mimi Nichter, Mock, & Shakib, 2004).

Tobacco control interventions are clearly warranted among college students. The findings of this study suggest a need for gender-specific tobacco cessation programs on college campuses. Smoking on campus is strongly associated with alcohol consumption, although prevention programs typically focus on these as isolated behaviors. Although many male and female informants thought there were benefits to being a social smoker, many also noted that they did not want to be seen as a smoker, a point that was captured in negative descriptions of a person who smoked alone. As students shift into more regular patterns of consumption, it is imperative that college health services design effective prevention and cessation programs that address the multiple meanings of tobacco on college campuses.

APPENDIX

PARTIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview questions pertaining to gender issues:

At a party, are there some situations when you are more likely to smoke?

What are they? Are there situations when you won’t smoke?

Why do you smoke at a party? What does it do for you?

Does the amount that you smoke depend on whether your friends are smoking?

Does it depend on how much you are drinking?

Are you more likely to smoke at a party if you are alone or with friends?

If a lot of people at a party are smoking, is it more likely that you will smoke?

If you were attracted to someone you didn’t know, would you smoke before you knew if that person smoked?

Are you more self-conscious of how much you smoke at a party when you are with someone you are attracted to?

Would you tend to pace your smoking to match theirs or just smoke as you felt like it? What if they did not smoke—would you smoke?

If you go to a party with friends, do you watch how much they drink or smoke? Would you say something to them if they were smoking too much? Drinking too much?
Do you bring your own cigarettes to a party or get them off of friends? Have you ever asked for a cigarette as a way of meeting someone? Has anyone asked you for a cigarette as a way to meet you? (Describe) What image do you think smoking a few cigarettes at a party projects for a female? How about for a guy? What image is projected by someone who smokes a lot (say a pack in an evening)? Is this image different if the smoker is male or female? Do you think some people use smoking as a way to change the way they appear? How? Have you ever done that? (If so, explain) Do you think more guys or more girls are party smokers or do you think it’s about the same? If you think there is a difference, why do you think that is?

PARTIAL FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Fraternity or sorority questions pertaining to gender issues:

Would you describe this fraternity/sorority as smoking positive, negative, or neutral?
- What leads you to think this?
- Are some levels of smoking (e.g., low levels) tolerated and other levels criticized or viewed negatively?

Tell me your best guess of what percentage of upperclassmen in this fraternity/sorority smoke at some level.
- What percentage of these are heavy smokers (a pack a day or more)?
- What percentage are moderate smokers (a half a pack a day)?
- What percentage are low level and party smokers?

What percentage of current pledges are smokers?
How many pledges smoke at parties?

How do you think smoking might change during the freshmen year?
- Seasonal changes?
- Rush or pledging?

What changes do you see happening in people’s smoking habits as they move from under to upperclassmen?

(Fraternity house) How do you feel about women smoking?
- Do guys who smoke smoke more when women are around or when they are just hanging with the guys?
- What level of smoking is okay, and what level of smoking do you feel is not okay?
- Is there a difference in how someone looks at a man or woman who smokes?
(Sorority house) How do you feel about women smoking?
• Do you think there are different standards for appropriateness of male and female smoking?
• What level of smoking is okay for women and what level do you feel is not okay? How does it differ for males?
• What do you think when a woman binge smokes (smokes a lot during a short period of time)?
• Is there a difference in how someone looks at a man or woman who smokes?

For both fraternities and sororities:
What are the rules about smoking in this house?
Are house rules the same on weekdays and weekends, party nights?
Are there different rules for upper and lower classmen? Pledges?
Are these rules strictly obeyed or just generally obeyed? How often are they broken? What happens if they are?

When would smoking become an issue?
• Can you give me an example of when smoking became an issue, and what happened?
• Have there been cases when house members talked to another pledge/member about their smoking habit? Drinking habit?
• Is it more likely that one will be approached if they drink too much than because they smoke heavily?
• Do you think it reflects negatively on the house if any of the brothers/sisters are heavy smokers?
• (Sororities) Are there rules about smoking when one is wearing sorority clothes?

Is it customary for pledges and/or underclassmen to carry cigarettes so they can offer them to upperclassmen out of respect?
• (Fraternities) How about offering cigarettes to women visiting the house when there is a party?

Is there a particular brand that members of this house smoke? If yes, which brand?
Is it common for house members to take study or other smoking breaks together?
How common is it to see members of the house share the same cigarette?

• At parties, do guys share cigarettes with male friends?

NOTE

1. The analysis was intentionally limited to these smokers, as we assumed that higher-level smokers would be more likely to accept a cigarette from a friend at any time.
REFERENCES


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